

THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

THE EVANGELISTIC PURPOSE AND MESSAGE

OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

IN RELATION TO FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

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*That You May Believe: The Evangelistic Purpose and Message
of John's Gospel in Relation to Free Grace Theology*
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This document is a revised version of a dissertation by the same title presented to the faculty of Grace Biblical Seminary in June 2017. It is made available here by their kind permission with a few revisions, including changes to some of the original formatting, the rewording of certain sections, and the addition of a chapter on the date of John's Gospel, which was previously published separately.

I am grateful to my family for their love, support, and encouragement throughout these studies. By the abundant grace and mercy of our God, may He be pleased now to use this dissertation on the Gospel of John as a helpful resource in the lives of those who choose to read it. Studying this rich and rewarding portion of God's Word, with its focus on the person, work, and provision of the Savior, has been one of the greatest joys and privileges of my life. May the Lord Jesus Christ be magnified as a result and receive the glory due His name.

The works of the LORD are great,
studied by all who have pleasure in them.
(Ps. 111:2)

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
to receive power and riches and wisdom,
and strength and honor and glory and blessing!
(Rev. 5:12)

ABSTRACT

THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE: THE EVANGELISTIC PURPOSE AND MESSAGE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL IN RELATION TO FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

This dissertation seeks to determine the primary purpose and message of John's Gospel, so that the teachings of Free Grace theology based on this Gospel may be confirmed, clarified, or corrected. The conclusion from the exegetical evidence is that John's primary purpose is evangelism of unbelievers, as the book seeks to lead its readers to fulfill the single, instantaneous condition of belief in Jesus Christ's person, work, and promise in order to receive the free gift of eternal life that cannot be lost.

Background study on the date and intended readers of John's Gospel is foundational to the study of its purpose. A survey of the evidence leads to a reasonable date range in the 60s–90s A.D. with John being the fourth Gospel published, in contrast to the claims of some Free Grace proponents that it was completed in the 30s–45 A.D. Thus, John's Gospel does not have theological priority over other New Testament books based on an alleged chronological priority.

The profile of John's intended reader is gleaned primarily from textual clues implicit within his Gospel, leading to the conclusion that John has the broadest possible application to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, having been written for the salvation of the whole world. Several lines of evidence show that John was written directly to unbelievers for the primary purpose of evangelism that promises unending, divine life, while the book's secondary purpose is the edification of those who are already believers.

Examination of John's use of πιστεύω shows that eternal life results from a single act of faith. Supposed proof texts in John's Gospel do not teach that eternal life is dependent on, or necessarily proven by, perseverance in faith and good works, which are the manifestation of abiding in dependent fellowship with Christ as His disciple. John's Gospel supports Free Grace theology's doctrine of the nature of "saving faith."

John's content or object of faith for eternal salvation in the present age is expressed through the book's consummate view of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God." While many current proponents of Free Grace theology teach that to receive regeneration John's Gospel requires belief only in Jesus' promise of eternal life, irrespective of any knowledge of, or belief in, His person and work, John's Gospel actually teaches that belief in Jesus Christ as the object of "saving faith" has requisite content that includes: the promised gift of eternal life, Jesus' identity as the unique Son of God, who is both fully God and human, who died a substitutionary death for sin and rose from the dead. This content of "saving faith" does not necessitate belief in Jesus Christ's virgin birth, burial, status as a prophet and national king, Davidic lineage, and Second Coming.

While the primary purpose of John's Gospel is evangelism, it is not the only evangelistic book in the Bible, as many Free Grace adherents claim. A comparison of John's Gospel with Romans and Luke-Acts shows that each of these books shares the same saving message. Christians today are not limited to John's Gospel alone for evangelizing the lost with the saving message of the gospel of Christ.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Tables and Figures xi

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION1

 Reasons for This Study2

 Assumptions of This Study8

 Limitations of This Study9

 Procedure of This Study10

 Overview of This Study11

2. THE DATE OF JOHN’S GOSPEL14

 Introduction14

 Johannine Priority15

 Apostolic Authorship15

 Order of Composition16

 Evidence for a Later Date (A.D. 80s–90s)18

 False Assumptions18

 Destruction of Jerusalem21

 Temple Replacement Theme22

 Absence of Sadducees23

 Sea of Tiberias25

 Death of John & the Lord’s Return25

 Evidence for an Earlier Date (Pre-A.D. 70)27

 A.D. 70 and the Destruction of the Temple28

John 5:2 and the Historical Present.....	29
Jewish Missions Document.....	31
Aramaic Original	32
Other Voices for an Early Dating of John	33
Obstacles to the Priority of John’s Gospel.....	35
John and Gentile Missions	35
No Intratestamental References to the Gospel of John	36
John’s Significant Omissions and Additions	37
Twelve Disciples Assumed in John’s Gospel.....	40
John the Baptist Assumed in John’s Gospel	40
Gospel of Mark Assumed in John’s Gospel	41
No Synoptic Literary Collaboration with John’s Gospel.....	42
Patristic Testimony on the Order of the Gospels	43
Conclusion	43
3. THE AUDIENCE OF JOHN’S GOSPEL	45
Evidence for a Jewish Audience	45
Provenance of John’s Gospel.....	45
Old Testament Background	48
Prevalence of “the Jews”	50
Jewishness of Jesus	52
Messiahship of Jesus.....	52
Omission of the Great Commission.....	55
Samaritans.....	57
Evidence for a Gentile Audience	58

	Gentiles versus Diasporic Jews.....	58
	Identification of Geography and Topography.....	59
	Interpretation of Aramaic Words.....	60
	Interpretation of Jewish Customs and Feasts.....	60
	Universal Scope of John’s Gospel.....	61
	Omission of the “Gentiles”.....	63
	Conclusion.....	64
4.	THE PURPOSE OF JOHN’S GOSPEL.....	66
	Edification of Believers.....	66
	Upper Room Discourse.....	66
	John’s Epilogue.....	68
	Developing Faith of the Disciples.....	69
	2 Timothy 3:16–17 Principle.....	73
	Evangelization of Unbelievers.....	73
	Contrast with 1 John.....	73
	Pivot of the Prologue’s Chiastic Structure.....	75
	Predominant Usage of Πιστεύω.....	76
	Pronoun Identifiers.....	78
	Possession of Everlasting Life.....	83
	Conclusion.....	90
5.	THE MEANING AND NATURE OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ IN JOHN’S EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE.....	92
	Text, Syntax, and Semantics of Πιστεύω in John 20:31.....	92
	Instantaneous versus Persevering Belief.....	98

Present, Substantival Participle of Πιστεύω	101
Believing Illustrated by Looking (3:14–15)	109
Believing Illustrated by Drinking (4:13–15).....	112
Believing Illustrated by Eating (6:31–35).....	112
Πιστεύ[σ]ητε and Πιστεύοντες in John 20:31	114
Believing and Volition	115
Believing, Works, and Grace	117
Believing and Assurance.....	124
Perseverance & Performance Proof Texts	130
Untrustworthy Believers (2:23–25)	131
Believers Who Do the Truth (3:19–21)	132
Disobedience of Unbelief (3:36).....	141
Resurrection Rewards for Good and Evil (5:28–29)	144
Believers Who Abide for Discipleship (8:30–32)	146
Believers Who Abide as Fruitful Disciples (15:1–6).....	148
Conclusion	156
6. THE OBJECT AND CONTENT OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ IN JOHN’S EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE	157
Placement & Perspective of John 20:30–31	157
Immediate Context of John 20:30–31	159
“Signs” in John 20:30–31	161
“The Christ, the Son of God” in John 20:30–31	169
Deity of Jesus the Christ	184
Humanity & Death of Jesus the Christ	194

	Resurrection of Jesus the Christ.....	209
	Words, Works, and Person of Christ	213
	Works, the Father, and Scripture	215
	Jesus’ “Name” in John 20:31	217
	Syntax and Translation of 20:31b.....	218
	Meaning of “Name”	219
	Life in/by His Name.....	222
	Conclusion	225
7.	THE CONTENT OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ NOT INCLUDED IN JOHN’S EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE	228
	Jesus’ Virgin Birth	228
	Jesus’ Burial.....	231
	Jesus as Prophet	234
	Prophet Passages in John’s Gospel.....	234
	Samaritan Concept of Messiah (John 4)	237
	Jesus’ Davidic Lineage	242
	Davidic Lineage in John’s Gospel	242
	Jewish Expectations of Davidic Messiah.....	243
	Additional Reasons Excluding Davidic Lineage	245
	Jesus as National King	247
	Unique Concept of Christ’s Kingship.....	247
	Kingship Passages in John’s Gospel.....	249
	Lordship Salvation Concept of Kingship.....	256
	Jesus’ Second Coming	258

Conclusion	260
8. THE EVANGELISTIC PURPOSE OF OTHER BIBLICAL BOOKS RELATIVE TO JOHN'S GOSPEL.....	262
Claims for the Exclusiveness of John's Gospel.....	262
Gospel of John and Epistle of Romans	264
Purpose of Romans	265
Problems with Pitting John against Romans.....	268
Parallels between John and Romans	270
Gospel of John and Gospel of Luke.....	275
Prologue of Luke-Acts.....	277
Theophilus: Believer or Unbeliever?	283
Certainty and Assurance	286
Catechized or Evangelized?.....	289
Content of Luke-Acts.....	292
Luke-Acts: A Unit.....	293
Theme and Purpose of Fulfillment	294
Theme and Purpose of Salvation in Christ	296
Person of Christ.....	298
Gracious Savior.....	299
Thief on the Cross	302
Political Purpose	304
Ecclesiastical Purpose	307
Evangelism, Edification, or Both?	308
Conclusion	309

9.	CONCLUSION.....	310
	Date, Audience, and Purpose	310
	Meaning and Nature of Πιστεύω.....	312
	Object and Content of Πιστεύω.....	313
	APPENDIX: Born of Water and Spirit (3:5)	320
	WORKS CITED	329

TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

1.	Inceptive versus Developing Faith in John's Gospel.....	77
2.	Πιστεύω Constructions in John's Gospel.....	123
3.	Jesus' Burial and Scriptural Fulfillment Pattern in John 19–20	232
4.	Jesus' Burial and Scriptural Fulfillment Pattern in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5....	233
5.	Jesus' Burial and Scriptural Fulfillment Pattern in Acts 13	234

Figures

1.	The Pivot of the Prologue's Chiastic Structure.....	76
2.	John's Consummate View of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God	255
3.	The Flow of Thought in John 3:3–6	323

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every book of the Bible is equally inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16), but certain books within the canon of Scripture seem to play a larger role in the plan of God. This is certainly true with the Gospel of John, which is widely regarded as one of the most influential, popular, and widely read books in the Bible. The large number and the high percentage of extant Greek manuscripts of John attest to the fact that it was one of the most frequently copied books by the early church.¹

John's Gospel has also proven to be one of the most useful books of the Bible for personal evangelism over the centuries. Many believers in Jesus Christ today, including this writer, can recall with deep gratitude specific passages from John that the Lord used to assure them of Christ's finished work, the simplicity of faith in Him as the sole condition for salvation, and the personal² possession of everlasting life.

The Gospel of John not only plays a central role in God's purpose of evangelism toward the lost but also theologically for the doctrines of soteriology and Christology.³ John's simple language not only allows unbelieving, first-time readers and newborn Christians to easily understand its message, but this Gospel also contains some of the deepest, richest, and most profound theology of any book in the Bible. The significant role that John's Gospel has had in Christianity is beyond dispute. But since so many books and studies on the Gospel of John exist already, why is there a need for another?

¹ Currently there are over sixty extant papyrus and uncial manuscripts containing portions or all of the Greek New Testament that date to the second and third centuries. The Gospel of John is the most attested book of the New Testament among this group with eighteen manuscripts. The Gospel of Matthew is next with twelve manuscripts. This general pattern of attestation continues over the centuries as one considers the remaining copies of minuscule manuscripts and versions. See Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and the to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, rev. ed., trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 85; Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 20; Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 234-35.

² Readers of John's Gospel often note its highly personal nature, but few studies have been devoted to this subject. For a recent exception, see the chapter on "Individualism" in Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 1-19. See also, C. F. D. Moule, "The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 5 (July 1962): 171-90.

³ Michael D. Halsey, *The Gospel of Grace and Truth: A Theology of Grace from the Gospel of John* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015), 85; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 316.

REASONS FOR THIS STUDY

There exists a need for an in-depth study of the date, audience, purpose, and saving message of John's Gospel because of the sharp disagreement today between segments of Reformed and Free Grace evangelicalism over John's teaching on the reception of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. From the Reformed theological perspective, the purpose and message of John's Gospel is often regarded as evangelistic but only through the theological prism of perseverance theology with its requirement of a productive and enduring faith as the necessary result of regeneration and genuine initial belief in Christ.⁴ Consequently, there is a need to reexamine John's evangelistic purpose and message with special attention given to the nature of belief in Christ for eternal salvation. Does John's evangelistic message teach that not only does belief in Jesus Christ result in eternal life, but true "saving faith"⁵ will always persevere and be productive to the end of one's life?

Conversely, many who reject the lordship salvation of Reformed theology and espouse Free Grace theology hold that John's Gospel has theological priority as the only evangelistic book in the Bible⁶ and that John's "saving message"⁷ states that the lost may

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 194-95; John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 37-58; Ernest C. Reisinger, *Lord & Christ: The Implications of Lordship for Faith and Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 4, 40; Robert L. Reymond, *John, Beloved Disciple: A Survey of His Theology* (Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2001), 86-88, 127-34. For an in-depth response to perseverance theology and how it has changed the nature of the gospel from grace to works, see Thomas L. Stegall, *Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure? A Biblical Study of the Perseverance Versus Preservation of the Saints* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016).

⁵ As used throughout this dissertation, the expression "saving faith" does not mean a special *quality* of faith, such as working faith, obedient faith, persevering faith, heart faith versus head faith, and so forth. Though many adherents of Lordship Salvation use "saving faith" with this meaning, nowhere in Scripture does God require a special *quality* or *kind* of faith to be eternally saved. Biblically, salvation is a matter of having the right *content* or *object* of one's faith (Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, GraceLife ed. [Burleson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992], 57). Robert Lightner explains: "Sometimes people speak of 'saving faith.' By this they imply faith for salvation is different from faith exercised for other things. But God does not require some special kind of faith for salvation different from ordinary faith. . . . It is not, however, the person's faith which saves. The New Testament teaches that Christ and Christ alone saves. No one can be saved without faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His death in the sinner's place. But it is not the kind nor the amount of faith that brings life to the one dead in trespasses and sin" (Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991], 240). Thus, to have faith in one's works *plus* Jesus means that one's faith is misplaced and will not result in salvation—it is not "saving" (Rom. 4:5). To have faith in Jesus Christ alone is to have a faith that will save, hence a "saving faith." The real question regarding salvation is not, "What *kind* of faith do I have?" but "Who or what am I trusting to be saved?" Though the phrase "saving faith" never occurs in the Bible and can be easily misconstrued, it is used here with these qualifications because it is still common theological language pertaining to both the nature and content of faith for eternal life.

⁶ Bob Bryant, "The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John," Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 6, 2008; John Niemelä, "Greetings," Message of Life Ministries. www.mol316.org/pages/greetings.html (accessed February 9, 2009); Robert N. Wilkin, "The Gospel According to Evangelical Postmodernism," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 20 (Spring 2007): 11.

⁷ The phrase "saving message" must also be clarified. My own view expressed throughout this dissertation is that the "saving message" is synonymous with "the gospel of Christ," which is the message God requires the lost to believe in order to have eternal life. However, "saving message" has become a

be regenerated simply by believing Jesus guarantees everlasting life, regardless of what other knowledge they may have or what misconceptions they may hold about Him.⁸ According to this recent theological view, John's Gospel does not require belief in Jesus Christ's deity, substitutionary death, or bodily resurrection in order to receive eternal life.⁹ Those Free Grace proponents who hold to this "promise of life" or "promise-only" view of the saving message¹⁰ consider it to be "theological legalism"¹¹ or "doctrinal legalism"¹² to interpret John's Gospel as requiring belief in Jesus' deity, death for sin, and resurrection for eternal life. This stands in contrast to the classical Free Grace view of the contents of "saving faith," in which these elements have been considered necessary to believe for eternal life.¹³ To date, no substantive written work has appeared that directly

technical expression for many within the Free Grace community who view it as a narrower message than "the gospel," which God supposedly does not require the lost to believe for eternal life (Bryant, "The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John"; Robert N. Wilkin, "Gospel Means Good News," Grace Evangelical Society Southern California Regional Conference, August 24, 2007; idem, "Is Ignorance Eternal Bliss?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 16 [Spring 2003]: 13). This study distinguishes Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as *Gospels* (capitalized), which contain good news about Jesus Christ, from *the gospel* (lowercase), which is the particular "saving message" the lost must believe to receive eternal life. Support for this distinction can be found in Thomas L. Stegall, "Is the Gospel a Broad, Non-Soteriological Message?" in *The Gospel of the Christ: A Biblical Response to the Crossless Gospel Regarding the Contents of Saving Faith* (Milwaukee: Grace Gospel Press, 2009), 213-70.

⁸ Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 9; idem, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 2: Our Invitation to Respond," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Spring 2001): 12; Robert N. Wilkin, *Secure and Sure* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2005), 74-75.

⁹ Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1," 6-7; René A. López, *Romans Unlocked* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 212; John Niemelä, "The Message of Life in the Gospel of John," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (July-September 2001): 18; Robert N. Wilkin, *Grace Evangelical Society News* (June 1990): 4.

¹⁰ "Promise-only" is an apt description of this view of the saving message or content of faith for eternal life. Though advocates of this view generally eschew this label, along with others such as "crossless gospel," they nevertheless teach that God requires only the promise of eternal life to be believed for regeneration, rather than belief in the promise, person (deity, humanity), and work (substitutionary death, resurrection) of Christ. John Niemelä espouses the "promise-only" view and writes: "John often records Jesus telling groups of unbelievers how to receive everlasting life. His message of life to unbelievers is a one-step pronouncement: The promise of life for the believer. It is not a two-step message: First explaining why He is able to give life [i.e., because of His deity, humanity, death, and resurrection] and second explaining the promise" ("Who Is Able to Guarantee Everlasting Life?" *Grace in Focus* 23 [November-December 2008], 3).

¹¹ Zane C. Hodges, "The Hydra's Other Head: Theological Legalism," *Grace in Focus* 23 (September/October 2008): 2.

¹² Bob Wilkin, "Essential Truths About Our Savior," *Grace in Focus* 23 (November-December 2008): 2; idem, "Scavenger Hunt Salvation Without a List," *Grace in Focus* 23 (May-June 2008): 1.

¹³ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 57; Lewis Sperry Chafer and John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 60; Fred Chay, *The Glorious Grace of God: Understanding Free Grace Theology* (n.p.: Grace Line, 2009), 14; G. Michael Cocoris, *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 61, 74; idem, *The Salvation Controversy* (Santa Monica, CA: Insights from the Word, 2008), 19-25; Thomas L. Constable, "The Gospel Message," in *Walvoord: A Tribute* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 202-3, 206, 211; John R. Cross, *The Stranger on the Road to Emmaus*, 5th ed. (Olds, Alberta: GoodSeed, 2010), 255-57; M. R. DeHaan, *Studies in First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 167; Thomas R. Edgar, "What Is the Gospel?" in *Basic Theology: Applied*, ed.

addresses this recent form of Free Grace theology by focusing on its claims specifically from the Gospel of John.¹⁴

Unbiblical views on John's Gospel by many in Free Grace and Reformed evangelicalism should not be considered insignificant or mere academic hairsplitting, as if John's teaching on the nature and content of faith has little practical impact on Christians today. This subject affects how the Gospel of John will be used by Christians in everyday evangelism. What evangelistic message will believers proclaim to the lost from John's Gospel? Will it require belief in a Jesus who is truly God, truly human, who truly died as a substitutionary payment for each person's sin, and who is no longer dead? Or will it require belief only in the fact that an undefined "Jesus" guarantees eternal life to all who believe in Him for it? Similarly, with respect to Reformed, Lordship Salvation, does John's evangelistic message require a persevering, working faith to guarantee everlasting life? Are both Jesus' finished work and the believer's lifetime of faithful obedience necessary to obtain final salvation? Whichever message Christians teach and proclaim from John's Gospel will certainly affect the eternal destinies of countless souls worldwide. For these reasons, the Gospel of John merits fresh study in order to clarify and verify its purpose and message so that it is used in the manner God intended.

In addition, an in-depth study of John's purpose and message is needed because there is widespread disagreement today among a broad spectrum of commentators and expositors concerning the book's intended purpose and audience, leading to misapplication of its message. Johannine scholars are divided in their opinions about the book's purpose, ranging broadly¹⁵ from the book being written: (1) primarily to

Wesley and Elaine Willis & John and Janet Master (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), 158; Michael D. Halsey, "What Is Free Grace Theology," in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 12-13 n. 23; J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, rev. ed. (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 60-77, 241-53; idem, *The Gospel Unplugged: The Good News Plain and Simple* (Brenham, TX: Lucid, 2011), 54-70; Lance B. Latham, *The Two Gospels* (Streamwood, IL: Awana Clubs International, 1984), 31-32, 61, 99; Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation*, 160-61; Fred R. Lybrand, "GES Gospel: Lybrand Open Letter," 14 April 2009; George E. Meisinger, "A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content," in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 75-76; Dennis M. Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever: Is Salvation Forever or Can It Be Lost?* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 138 n. 12; Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 340; idem, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 118-19; *The Scofield Study Bible, New King James Version*, ed. C. I. Scofield, E. Schuyler English, et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1591-92; C. I. Scofield, *Where Faith Sees Christ* (Reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 14-15; Richard A. Seymour, *The Gift of God* (LaGrange, WY: Integrity, 1985), 69-70, 108-109; A. Ray Stanford, *Handbook of Personal Evangelism* (n.p.: Wally Morillo, 1991), 236; idem, "Heaven or Hell? That 'Is' the Question," Gospel Tract, www.eph289.com/ (accessed 12 May 2017); W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1974), 143-44; Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 493; Rick Whitmire, Preface to *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), xiii-xiv.

¹⁴ In a previous book, *The Gospel of the Christ*, I dealt broadly with the contents of faith for eternal life in all of Scripture. The sections dealing with John's Gospel were intentionally limited (ibid., 81-98, 288-97) in anticipation of this forthcoming, separate study, as stated in the introduction (ibid., 19 n. 2).

¹⁵ Upwards of ten different purposes for the book have been proposed, most of which are rather obscure, speculative, and have little exegetical support. Consequently, these theories are not

unbelievers or non-Christians with an evangelistic intent;¹⁶ (2) primarily to believers in Christ for the purpose of edification rather than evangelism;¹⁷ or (3) to both unbelievers and believers with the dual purpose of evangelism and edification.¹⁸

addressed here but are documented and dealt with adequately in the standard New Testament introductions. See D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 268-73; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 283-97; D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1993), 1:213-19. See especially Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 122-40.

¹⁶ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 2:685-86; Charles C. Bing, "The Condition for Salvation in John's Gospel," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9 (Spring 1996): 26-28; Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 2:268; J. Bryan Born, "Literary Features in the Gospel of John," *Direction* 17 (Fall 1988): 17; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 90-92, 661-62; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 130; Robert L. Deffinbaugh, *That You Might Believe: A Study of the Gospel of John* (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 1998), 786; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 8-9 (Dodd says John was primarily for unbelievers but also for converts to read and reread); Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 284; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 45-46; J. Carl Laney, *John*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 371; Leon Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 855-56; idem, *Jesus Is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 129; John Niemelä, "How Does the Upper Room Discourse Fit Into John's Evangel?" Grace Evangelical Society Southern California Regional Conference, August, 24, 2007; Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 121-22, 127; Robert L. Reymond, *John Beloved Disciple: A Survey of His Theology* (Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2001), 17; John A. T. Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962), 124-25; idem, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 290; George Allen Turner and Julius R. Mantey, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 18; W. C. van Unnik, "The Purpose of John's Gospel," in *Studia Evangelica* (Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 382-411.

¹⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1056; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 224-27; Margaret Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 349-75; Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* (Salem, OR: Charis Press, 2001), 14, 24-27, 345; Gordon D. Fee, "On the Text and Meaning of John 20:30-31," in *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 41-42; Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 227, 995; Loren L. Johns and Douglas B. Miller, "The Signs as Witnesses in the Fourth Gospel: Reexamining the Evidence," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994): 521 n. 9; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1212-16; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 87-88, 506; G. Theodore Martinez, "The Purpose of the Gospel of John" (Th.M. thesis, Talbot School of Theology, 1990), 112; J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 16; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 62, 650-52; W. H. Griffith Thomas, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part I," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (July 1968): 257.

¹⁸ David M. Ball, 'I Am' in *John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 276; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 26; Stephen C. Barton, "Can We Identify the Gospel Audiences?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, Richard Bauckham, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 193-94; Richard Bauckham, "The Audience of the Gospel of John" in

Determining the purpose for which a biblical book was written is a crucial preliminary step in the process of accurate interpretation and faithful application. Only when the overarching purpose of a book is known can the individual verses within that book be properly correlated, interpreted, and applied.¹⁹ The importance of this preliminary step of determining a book's purpose is nowhere more apparent with respect to salvation than in the Gospel of John, though the purposes of Romans, Hebrews, and 1 John are also highly consequential with respect to soteriology.

The view that John is evangelistic is widely assumed, but it is an opinion that must be tested and confirmed by the evidence of Scripture. The same is true with respect to John's central theme of belief in Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God." Does this descriptive title refer to Jesus being God the Son, God-incarnate, who died a substitutionary death for man's sin and rose from the dead to guarantee eternal life to all who believe in Him? This definition of "the Christ, the Son of God" also must be demonstrated from the text of Scripture and not merely assumed.

For a few books in Scripture, God has placed an interpretative "key" for the reader right at the front door (Prov. 1:1–3; Luke 1:1–4; 1 John 1:4; Jude 3).²⁰ There, we are told the purpose for which these books were written. With the Gospel of John, the Lord has hung the key by the back door.²¹ Continuing the house and key metaphor, when the "key" or purpose statement of John 20:30–31 is applied to the whole "house" of John's Gospel, what do we find when the door opens? A single spacious room with a banner overhead to greet us, saying, "Welcome all unbelievers"? No. Not quite.

A more accurate analogy for the fourth Gospel encompasses its dual purpose, with one purpose being primary and the other secondary. John's Gospel is more like a large house with a split-level entry designed for both believers and unbelievers. The

The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 121-22; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1987), lxxxviii-lxxxix, 387-88; James V. Brownson, "John 20:31 and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel," *Reformed Review* 48 (1995): 215; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 395; Saeed Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ: A Theological Inquiry into the Elusive Language of the Fourth Gospel*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 228-29; D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1993), 1:214; Anthony D. Hopkins, "A Narratological Approach to the Development of Faith in the Gospel of John" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992), 226 n. 79; Won-Ha Hwang and Jan G. Van der Watt, "The Identity of the Recipients of the Fourth Gospel in the Light of the Purpose of the Gospel," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 63.2 (2007): 695 (Hwang and Van der Watt say that John's main aim was to instruct believers and secondarily to evangelize unbelievers); Edward W. Klink, III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 152-84; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 582; The *NET Bible*, First Beta Edition (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), 2012 n. 3; R. Larry Overstreet, "The Gospel of John: Outlined by Purpose," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 9.2 (1993): 44-48; W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Four Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 401; Moisés Silva, "Approaching the Fourth Gospel," *Criswell Theological Review* 3.1 (1988): 22-23; Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 140-48; A. Wind, "Destination and Purpose of the Gospel of John," *Novum Testamentum* 14.2 (1972): 65, 69.

¹⁹ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 20-22.

²⁰ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 37.

²¹ Merrill C. Tenney, "Topics from the Gospel of John: Part II: The Meaning of the Signs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (April 1975): 145.

entrance to this Gospel is conveniently placed right at ground level so as to make its message of eternal life in Christ directly accessible to all unbelievers who may be reading it for the first time. In this sense, the Holy Spirit, the architectural genius who inspired the book, created it so as to make it immediately applicable for evangelizing the lost. But for the church-age reader who is already a believer in Christ, he or she immediately discovers upon entering the “house” that it also contains a staircase leading to an upper level that is ideally suited for those who are already children of God, where rooms containing rich treasures of revelation await to fortify each believer in his or her spiritual growth throughout the course of the church age until Christ returns.²²

This study concludes that John’s Gospel has a dual purpose, with one primary (evangelism of the world) and the other secondary (edification of the church). This conclusion takes into consideration John’s readers, for integrally connected to the question of John’s purpose is the identity of his audience. Therefore, this dissertation also explores the question of whether this Gospel was written: (1) primarily for a Jewish audience;²³ (2) primarily for a Gentile audience;²⁴ or (3) for a universal, mixed audience of both Jews and Gentiles.²⁵ The conclusion drawn is that John’s Gospel was written with both Jews and Gentiles in mind since it was intended for the whole world.

As the dissertation will demonstrate, the Gospel of John has been approached too often from a mutually exclusive, either/or posture.²⁶ This has resulted in the tendency to interpret John from a theologically imbalanced perspective and not to let the book speak for itself or to “let John be John.”²⁷ Specifically, when John is interpreted as having been written solely, or even primarily, to people who are already believers, this often leads to the false conclusion that John requires persevering, productive belief in order to guarantee everlasting life. This is especially true of those who approach John’s Gospel from a Reformed, Arminian, or Catholic theological frame of reference. Traditionally, it has been thought that if John’s intended readers were comprised mostly of believers, and John’s Gospel contains evangelistic appeals for these readers to believe, then John must be requiring those who are already believers to persevere in faith in order to maintain or regain eternal life. To confuse the two levels of purpose in the book (evangelism and edification) leads to a mixed message that misapplies Christian-life truth to unbelievers (leading them to work for their salvation) and continually treats already existing believers as though they might still be unbelievers without genuine faith (robbing them of

²² W. H. Griffith Thomas, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part II,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (October 1968): 322.

²³ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 91; idem, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 639-51; A. S. Geysler, “Israel in the Fourth Gospel,” *Neotestamentica* 20 (1986): 13-20; Zane C. Hodges, “In the Upper Room (John 13–17) with Jesus the Christ,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 4, 2008; Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 5-7; Robinson, “The Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel,” 107-25; Van Unnik, “The Purpose of John’s Gospel,” 382-411.

²⁴ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 22-24.

²⁵ Turner and Mantey, *Gospel According to John*, 18; Wind, “Destination and Purpose of the Gospel of John,” 39-42, 69.

²⁶ Carson, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” 650.

²⁷ James D. G. Dunn, “Let John Be John: A Gospel for Its Time,” in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 293-322.

assurance of salvation). The message of John's Gospel cannot be correctly understood and applied without knowing its divinely intended purpose or purposes.

Adherents of true, biblical, grace theology should not overreact to Reformed, Arminian, and Catholic theology and become theologically imbalanced in another direction. For example, it would be erroneous to conclude that since this Gospel directly addresses unbelievers (John 19:35; 20:31) and only indirectly addresses believers, then its "exclusive" purpose must be evangelism since even "the discipleship truth in John's Gospel was used by John to lead unbelievers to faith in Christ."²⁸ This exclusively evangelistic view of John's purpose interprets sections like the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–17) and the Epilogue (John 21) as being evangelistic when they clearly are not. One scholar goes so far as to teach that John 13–17 is "an encomium whose aim is evangelistic."²⁹ But to view these chapters as being exclusively, or even primarily, evangelistic is unnecessary and forced. The Upper Room Discourse and Epilogue are better viewed as being written primarily for the edification of believers with the caveat that they are also complementary to John's larger purpose of evangelism since these sections do contain some evangelistic content (John 14:6; 16:9–11; 17:3).³⁰

When the interpreter of John's Gospel is unshackled from the tendency to view its purpose and audience in mutually exclusive categories, a more coherent picture emerges of why the book was written. The positive, internal evidence from this Gospel reveals that it was written directly to unbelievers, whether Jewish or Gentile, for the principal purpose of evangelizing them with the saving message of Jesus Christ's person, work, and promise of eternal life, so as to lead them to believe this good-news message and possess everlasting life that cannot be lost. But implicit evidence contained in this Gospel also suggests that it is intended on a secondary level for the edification of those who are already believers in Christ.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THIS STUDY

Throughout this study, John the apostle, the son of Zebedee (21:2), is assumed to be the human author of the Gospel that bears his name. Conservative scholarship has already demonstrated convincingly that apostolic authorship of the fourth Gospel is not only plausible but is the most reasonable conclusion based on internal and external evidence.³¹ Consequently, no attempt will be made to prove Johannine authorship of the book.

²⁸ Robert N. Wilkin, "Why Is Discipleship Material in John?" Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 26, 2016.

²⁹ Zane C. Hodges, "Miraculous Signs and Literary Structure in the Fourth Gospel," Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 5, 2008. An encomium is "a speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something highly" (en.oxforddictionaries.com).

³⁰ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947–48. Reprinted, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 5:143.

³¹ Ezra Abbot, *The Authorship of the Fourth Gospel and Other Critical Essays* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1888), 9-112; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 22-41; E. Earle Ellis, "Background and Christology of John's Gospel: Selected Motifs," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 31 (1988): 24-31; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 17-24; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:81-139; Andreas J. Köstenberger, "'I Suppose' (οἶμα): The Conclusion of John's Gospel in Its Literary and Historical Context," in *The New Testament in Its First Century Setting: Essays on Context and Background in Honour of B. W. Winter on His 65th Birthday*, ed. P.

However, it is noteworthy that among all extant papyri and uncial manuscripts that have preserved the superscription at the beginning of the fourth Gospel or a subscription at the end, the name of John appears every time as part of the book's title (ΚΑΤΑ ΙΩΑΝΝΗΝ). This fact seems inexplicable if the title bearing his name is not original. Some scholars are suspicious of such uniformity and view this as a mark of inauthenticity and collusion. Critics suggest that such uniformity indicates a centralized process of editorial revision by the institutionalized church. But if standardization of the Gospels, including their titles, did occur very early in church history, this raises other problems. For instance, though it was more common in the first two centuries than it is today for books to exist without titles,³² when titleless books did exist, they were normally assigned a title whenever they were placed in a particular ancient library. This resulted in multiple titles being assigned to the same literary work by different copyists and libraries.³³ The existence of a widely varying title for a book in the ancient world was a sure sign of that title's inauthenticity.³⁴ Yet, there is a remarkable degree of uniformity for the Gospel titles in the first five centuries. This uniformity and the consistent inclusion of John's name in the superscriptions and subscriptions of the fourth Gospel provides firm evidence for Johannine authorship.³⁵

LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

All theological studies have a unique focus, whether it is apologetics, historical theology, systematic theology, or biblical theology. This study leans toward the latter category as it consciously limits its scope to particular soteriological aspects of John's Gospel. No pretense is made for this study to be a systematic theology of all scriptural teaching on the nature and content of "saving faith." Nor does this dissertation attempt to cast its net

J. Williams, Andrew D. Clarke, Peter M. Head, and David Instone-Brewer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 72-88; idem, "The Disciple Jesus Loved: Witness, Author, Apostle: A Response to Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 18 (2008): 209-32; idem, "Early Doubts of the Apostolic Authorship of the Fourth Gospel in the History of Modern Biblical Criticism," in *Studies in John and Gender: A Decade of Scholarship* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 17-47; idem, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 72-79; Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 139-292; John Ashley Nixon, "Who Wrote the Fourth Gospel? The Authorship and Occasion of the Fourth Gospel According to Patristic Evidence from the First Three Centuries," *Faith and Mission* 20 (Summer 2003): 81-92; Vern S. Poythress, "Testing for Johannine Authorship by Examining the Use of Conjunctions," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (Fall 1984): 350-69; idem, "The Use of the Intersentence Conjunctions *De*, *Oun*, *Kai*, and *Asyndeton* in the Gospel of John," *Novum Testamentum* 26.4 (1984): 312-40; David Wenham, "A Historical View of John's Gospel," *Themelios* 23 (February 1998): 5-21; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), v-xxxiv; Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. from 3rd German ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909), 3:174-232.

³² Johannes Munck, "Evangelium Veritatis and Greek Usage as to Book Titles," *Studia Theologica* 17.2 (1963): 133-38.

³³ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 48, 239 n. 198.

³⁴ Munck, "Evangelium Veritatis," 136.

³⁵ For further information about the original form of the titles for the four canonical Gospels, including the evidence for εὐαγγέλιον in the title as an original part of the book, see Stegall, *Gospel of the Christ*, 240-60.

around the soteriology of all Johannine literature, or even the entire soteriology of John's Gospel. Instead, it focuses more narrowly on the purpose and message of John's Gospel in relation to the nature, object, and content of faith in Free Grace theology. In addition, while other theological viewpoints are addressed such as Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Reformed theology, the focus remains the text of John's Gospel with application to Free Grace theology.

PROCEDURE OF THIS STUDY

All sound theology must have an exegetical foundation; but biblical theology in particular stands in closest relationship to the exegetical process.³⁶ If we were to liken this study to farming, we should be prepared to spend considerable time close to the land tilling the soil. The theological conclusions reached in this dissertation are formulated from the ground level up by using an exegetical process that begins by considering the textual basis of key passages in John's Gospel, then analyzing the context, syntax, semantics, and linguistic features of a text. To accomplish this, this dissertation will consistently employ the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation (customary in the early church and in evangelical hermeneutics the last few centuries until recent years) rather than the historical-critical method prevalent in biblical studies today.

Historical and redaction criticism normally go hand in hand with doubt and denial of the Bible as God's inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and trustworthy Word. These methods openly question the validity of a text or passage in light of its presumed background, origin, and history. The supposed background history becomes the starting point and controlling framework in the process of interpretation and it practically carries more weight and credibility for the interpreter than the text of Scripture itself. Thus, the purported history becomes the interpretative grid or lens through which the text or passage must be interpreted, effectively placing the critic over the Bible rather than in reverent submission to it. This process involves a lack of humility and faith, without which, God is not pleased (Heb. 11:6).³⁷

Writers who subscribe to the historical-critical method are cited in this study, sometimes for support and sometimes to dispute their views. But when they are cited for support, this should not be considered an endorsement either of their method or the rest of their theology, but only that their interpretation is regarded as valid and biblically correct on that particular point for which they are being cited.

As opposed to the historical-critical method of interpretation, this dissertation will utilize the literal, grammatical, historical method in the process of exegesis to reach

³⁶ Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 16.

³⁷ See F. David Farnell, "Grammatical-Historical Versus Historical-Critical," in *Basics of Biblical Criticism: Helpful or Harmful?* 2nd ed. (n.p.: Christian Publishing House, 2016), 27-36; idem, "Historical Criticism vs. Grammatico-Historical: *Quo Vadis* Evangelicals?" in *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate*, ed. F. David Farnell (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 516-27; Eta Linnemann, *Biblical Criticism on Trial: How Scientific is "Scientific Theology"?*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); idem, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

theological conclusions. But a compilation of exegetical observations does not by itself amount to biblical theology; careful synthesis of the information is also necessary³⁸ to draw accurate conclusions about John's evangelistic purpose and message. This, of necessity, involves comparison and correlation with other Johannine literature (1, 2, 3 John, and Revelation) and then the rest of Scripture. For any interpretation of John's Gospel to be correct, it cannot contradict another portion of Scripture. The "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) must be taken into account since all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for doctrine and application (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Though this study recognizes that John's Gospel must first be interpreted within its own context, it also recognizes that "God has not limited soteriological truth to the Gospel of John. The totality of Scripture must be considered for the full expression of the doctrine of salvation."³⁹

Additionally, though the testimony of Scripture is regarded as the ultimate and final authority for all theological conclusions made in this study, this does not mean that historical background study and the studied opinions of others in systematic and historical theology should be disregarded. These sources are utilized, but they are viewed as secondary opinions and used to corroborate and confirm the correct interpretation of the biblical text, not as being ultimately decisive for correct interpretation like the voice of God-breathed Scripture itself.

OVERVIEW OF THIS STUDY

Proceeding with an exegetical-theological emphasis for this study, chapter two explores the date or possible range of dates when the Gospel of John was written and first published. This has theological significance since (1) some Free Grace proponents claim an early date in the 30s–45 A.D. that ostensibly gives John's Gospel theological priority, and (2) critical, unbelieving scholarship often claims that the fourth Gospel was composed very late, after the death of the apostle John, by the supposed Johannine community as group project, anywhere from the end of the first century to early second century, thereby undermining its credibility as a historically accurate book. The evidence for the most commonly accepted date range in the 80s–90s A.D. is evaluated first, demonstrating that this view is built on numerous assumptions rather than concrete evidence. Next, an early date of composition and publication before A.D. 70 is considered. The collective weight of the evidence shows that a range of dates from the 60s–90s is reasonable, with a date just before A.D. 70 being a slightly stronger possibility. The evidence for this reasonable range of dates shows that the extreme dates of both liberal, critical scholarship and some Free Grace proponents are untenable.

Chapter three seeks to determine the profile of John's intended readers. This chapter demonstrates that John's prospective readers include Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. The conclusion reached is that the Gospel of John has the broadest possible

³⁸ Christopher Cone, "Processes in Biblical Theology," in *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 2nd ed. (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2012), 267-341; Mike Stallard, "A Proposal for Theological Method: Systematic Theology as Model Building," unpublished paper, 13-17.

³⁹ Gregory P. Sapaugh, "A Response to Hodges: How to Lead a Person to Christ, Parts 1 and 2," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Autumn 2001): 23.

appeal to different racial, ethnic, and religious groups, having been written purposefully for the whole world—for whom Christ died (John 3:16)—quite possibly from the city of Ephesus.

The profile of John’s prospective reader continues in chapter four, showing that the purpose of John’s Gospel is primarily the evangelism of unbelievers. This conclusion is based on the fact that: (1) the majority of uses of “believe” (πιστεύω) in the Gospel occur in contexts of new or inceptive belief in Jesus Christ,⁴⁰ rather than the development of faith among those who are already believers; (2) the purpose statement in 20:30–31 speaks of having or possessing eternal life when someone believes that Jesus is the Christ, not of the present experiential enjoyment of that life or abiding in that life (10:10); and (3) the chiasmic center of the book’s prologue (1:12–13) speaks of regeneration resulting from initial belief in Jesus Christ.

Chapter five begins an in-depth analysis of each major term or component of John’s purpose statement in 20:30–31, starting with “believe” (πιστεύω). The form and syntax of πιστεύω in John 20:31 does not prove whether John is speaking primarily of new or recurring belief in Christ. Likewise, the claim that the present tense-form of πιστεύω requires continual, productive faith for eternal life is not supported by a study of Greek verbal aspect and *Aktionsart*. However, three Johannine metaphors for believing (looking, drinking, eating) in evangelistic contexts show that momentary, instantaneous faith is all that is required for the possession of eternal life, rather than a persevering and works-producing faith. Even passages that are commonly cited by adherents of Reformed theology or Lordship Salvation (2:23–25; 3:19–21, 36; 5:29; 8:30–32; 15:1–6) are shown to be consistent with a single step of faith as the requirement for eternal life. In terms of the nature of “saving faith,” John’s Gospel requires a volitional response of man’s will to believe in the person and finished work of Christ and God’s immutable promise of eternal life, which provides every believer with the personal assurance of salvation, rather than one’s own works.

Chapter six addresses the object and content of belief for eternal life. Key terms and concepts from John’s purpose statement, such as “signs,” “the Christ, the Son of God,” and Jesus’ “name” are interpreted in relation to the immediate context of John 20 and their use and development within John’s narrative leading up to the purpose statement in 20:30–31. Receiving eternal life is conditioned on a belief that rests upon the worthiness of its object—the person, work, and promise of Jesus Christ. John’s content of faith for eternal life consists of Jesus Christ alone as the Savior from sin and its wages. This consummate perspective of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God” in John’s evangelistic book necessitates belief in His deity and humanity as God’s incarnate Son, as well as the finished work of His satisfactory death for sin and bodily resurrection from the dead, which guarantee eternal life as a free gift to the believing recipient.

Having specified John’s content of faith for eternal life, chapter seven clarifies what is *not* included in this content. Nowhere does John state that any of the following are necessary to believe in order to possess eternal life: Jesus’ virgin birth, burial, status as a prophet, Davidic lineage, national kingship, or Second Coming. Though each of these biblical truths is important for a variety of reasons, John does not present them as

⁴⁰ Halsey concludes that three-quarters of occurrences of “believe” in John refer to first-time faith (*Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 43).

integral to the saving message of the gospel or his evangelistic meaning of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God.”

Chapter eight examines the claim by many Free Grace proponents that John is the “only” evangelistic book in the Bible and therefore it has soteriological priority over all other books of the Bible. This claim is tested by comparing John’s purpose with that of Romans and Luke-Acts. This comparison shows that each of these New Testament books shares the same saving message in terms of the nature, object, and content of “saving faith.” In addition, Paul’s articulation of his missionary purpose and message in Romans makes it suitable for use in evangelism, while Luke’s evangelistic purpose is stated in his brief prologue of Luke 1:1–4 and is reflected in the rest of Luke-Acts. Therefore, Christians today may effectively use each of these books for evangelism rather than being restricted to John’s Gospel alone.

Chapter nine concludes with the consequences of correctly interpreting and applying the evangelistic purpose and message of John’s Gospel. What is at stake is nothing less than people’s eternal destinies. Misinterpreting John’s evangelistic message with respect to the *nature* of “saving faith” leads to another gospel, like the Galatians—a gospel that requires works for eternal salvation rather than faith in Christ alone. But misinterpreting John’s evangelistic message with respect to the *object* and *content* of faith also affects one’s eternal salvation. Belief in “another Jesus”—the “Jesus” of many cults and religions—is not belief in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God,” as set forth so clearly and convincingly in John’s Gospel.

CHAPTER 2

THE DATE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

INTRODUCTION

The date when the Gospel of John was completed is normally considered to be of little theological consequence or concern to most Christians. However, this subject merits a fresh survey of the evidence in order to address the lingering theories of liberal scholarship in addition to the recent claims of some Free Grace evangelicals that John is the only evangelistic book in the Bible and that it was written extremely early in church history.¹ In addition, if a second-century date is assigned for the composition of John in its final form, as is claimed by some critical, non-evangelical scholars,² then the historical reliability and divine authority of the book is automatically impugned. On the opposite end of the spectrum, if a timeframe as early as the 30s–45 A.D. is accepted for the completion of John, it may lend support to the view that this book has theological-evangelistic priority and preeminence within the New Testament canon.

Therefore, this chapter will investigate the question of John's date by first reviewing the rationale of critical, unbelieving scholarship for a very late date that extends into the second century. The bulk of the chapter will then weigh the evidence for

¹ Robert N. Wilkin states, "I take the view that John's Gospel was written in 45, before 1 Corinthians, and I think the first book was James in 34 and then I think John was 45" ("The Bible Answer Men," Grace Evangelical Society Seattle Regional Conference, September 29, 2007). Elsewhere, Wilkin writes that "the Gospel of John was written at least ten years after Jesus rose from the dead and it says that the way Jesus evangelized is still effective today" (Bob Wilkin, "Scavenger Hunt Salvation without a List," *Grace in Focus* 23 [May/June 2008]: 4). John Niemelä, on the other hand, views A.D. 45 as possibly too late for the completion of John's Gospel, seeing "no reason why it couldn't have been written in the 30s" ("The Bible Answer Men," Grace Evangelical Society Seattle Regional Conference, September 29, 2007). Niemelä elsewhere states that both John and Matthew were written before A.D. 44 because neither book contains an explicit reference to the church's mission to the Gentiles. ("Luke 1 Is the Edifying Introduction to Both Luke and Acts," Grace Evangelical Society National Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 2011).

² Barrett sees A.D. 90 as the earliest possible date (*terminus post quem*) and A.D. 140 as the latest (*terminus ante quem*), asserting that "none of the attempts to shift either date is successful" (C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], 127-28). Bultmann held to a date range from A.D. 80–120 for the entire process of redaction leading to the final, completed form of John's Gospel (Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 12). Similarly, Haenchen implies that the redaction process did not cease until sometime in the early second century (Ernst Haenchen, *John 1*, Hermeneia, trans. Robert W. Funk [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 6-7, 75). And though Van der Watt permits a possible completion date as low as the 70s, he extends the latest possible completion date up to A.D. 125 (Jan van der Watt, *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters* [London: T & T Clark, 2007], 123).

the two main views held by current New Testament scholarship—the more popular later-date view of the 80s–90s and the less common pre-70 view. This will be followed by an assessment of the extremely early 30s–45 view. A reexamination of the evidence demonstrates that a reasonable range of dates may be maintained anywhere from the 60s–90s, with the weight of the evidence tipping slightly in favor of a pre-70 date. But there are many insurmountable obstacles accompanying a date of composition as early as the 30s–45 A.D. or as late as the early second century. While Scripture nowhere provides a specific “born-on” date for John’s Gospel, or even explicit statements about its order of completion in relation to the rest of the New Testament canon, enough implicit biblical and historical evidence exists to conclude that both the 30s–40s and second-century extremes lie outside the bounds of credibility. Before proceeding, three matters require clarification.

Johannine Priority

First, the terms “priority” and “precedence” need proper definition. When these terms are used in this chapter, they refer either to the theological priority of John’s Gospel over other New Testament books, or to John’s chronological priority to other New Testament books, or sometimes to both. The phrase “the priority of John” has taken on a near technical status since the publication of John A. T. Robinson’s book by the same title. There, he defends an early, pre-A.D. 70 date for the writing of John’s Gospel—a date regarded to be decades *prior* to the timeframe traditionally attributed to John by conventional scholarly opinion. Thus, Robinson uses the term “priority” with a chronological, rather than a theological, emphasis. However, with recent claims being made by some Free Grace adherents that John’s Gospel alone possesses an evangelistic purpose, the phrase “Johannine priority” is sometimes used in this chapter to indicate a theological-evangelistic preeminence for John, in addition to its chronological priority. Context will determine which sense is intended.

Apostolic Authorship

Second, the question of authorship naturally coincides with the date of composition for the Gospel of John. As stated in the introductory chapter, this study accepts the conservative conclusion that John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, was the human author of the fourth Gospel.³ Critical, unbelieving scholarship generally regards the apostle John

³ While many critical scholars prefer the label “Fourth Gospel” over the traditional title “Gospel of John” because they do not believe that the apostle John wrote this book, no such implication is intended here. Instead, the phrase “fourth Gospel” (lowercase “fourth”) is used as an alternative expression because: (1) it reflects my own conviction that John wrote his Gospel chronologically after Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and (2) it reflects the traditional canonical order of the New Testament. I recognize that John’s Gospel has not always stood fourth throughout the manuscript history since certain manuscripts such as \mathfrak{P}^{45} and Codices Bezae and Washingtonianus have the so-called Western order of Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark (*The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts*, ed. Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001], 160; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 3rd ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 56; Frederick

to have had little or no oversight of the Gospel's final composition. It maintains instead that the book evolved as it progressed through several "stages,"⁴ thus revealing several "layers" or "strata" of varying ages⁵ since it was redacted by the "Johannine community"⁶ that was two to three generations removed from John himself. However, this evolutionary theory of the fourth Gospel's composition is built on multiple presuppositions rather than verifiable evidence. Current source and redaction criticism of John's Gospel has become a highly speculative enterprise to say the least.⁷

Order of Composition

A third introductory issue requiring clarification is that of order. The matter of *date* for the Gospel of John must be properly distinguished from that of its *order* of composition relative to other New Testament books. Even if John could be dated very early, this would not necessarily make it the first book of the New Testament to be written. Thus, some who hold to the Johannine priority view concede that at least one book was written before John's Gospel, namely, the Epistle of James in A.D. 34.⁸ However, the subject of

H. Scrivener, *Bezae Codex Cantabrigiensis* [1861, reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, n.d.]. But this order is atypical; John is normally fourth.

⁴ Ashton represents an extreme example, seeing eight such stages in the development of John's Gospel. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 163-66. Brown, on the other hand, originally held to five stages (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966], 1:xxiv-xxxviii) but later condensed these to three (idem, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2003], 40-89). See also, Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 10-81; Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 1:59-74; Stephen S. Smalley, "Keeping up with Recent Studies: XII. St. John's Gospel," *Expository Times* 97 (1986): 102-8; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Earliest Version of John's Gospel: Recovering the Gospel of Signs* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989).

⁵ Van der Watt, *Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters*, 93-121.

⁶ See especially, Barnabas Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1971); J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

⁷ This point is demonstrated well by Carson. See D. A. Carson, "Current Source Criticism of the Fourth Gospel: Some Methodological Questions," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97.3 (1978): 411-29; idem, "Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?" in *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 83-145.

⁸ Wilkin, "The Bible Answer Men." This is also the date advocated by Hodges (see Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* [Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994], 12). But even a date of A.D. 34 for the Epistle of James seems too early since there is no evidence that James was a prominent figure within only one year of Christ's resurrection and ascension. Though there is a general reference to the Lord's "brothers" as early as Acts 1:14, none of them are mentioned by name. James is not mentioned by name until 12:17 where he appears to have gained some prominence. But even allowing for a gradual rise to prominence throughout the 30s and the fact that James would have been immediately credited with an influential status among early Christians by virtue of being the Lord's half-brother, this does not adequately account for the silence about him in the record of Acts that spans the 30s-early 40s. For him to write an authoritative epistle "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" using the unqualified name "James" (Jam. 1:1) meant that he had already become well-known and respected by the time that he wrote his epistle. This necessitates more than a year. In addition, the use of the singular and unmodified name "James" in the opening salutation of the epistle indicates that there were no other

John's date cannot be entirely divorced from the question of order relative to the other New Testament books. The claim that John came very early, in the 30s–45, carries with it the implied assertion that John preceded the remainder of the New Testament since other New Testament books could not have been written even contemporaneously with John if indeed John was composed in the 30s–45. For example, to maintain that the Book of Acts and the Epistles were written in the 30s would present glaring historical anachronisms since these books could not have been written earlier than the events they describe.

Regarding the Synoptic Gospels, could these have been written contemporaneously with John's Gospel sometime in the 30s? Putting aside the thorny and complicated issue of possible Markan priority, which lies beyond the scope of this chapter, we must ask whether Matthew or Luke could have written their Gospels at least as early as the 30s–45. In the case of Luke, he does not even appear as part of the Christian community in the 30s since he does not show up in the biblical record until Paul's second missionary journey in the early 50s (Acts 16). Though we cannot be sure exactly when Luke became a believer in Christ, this much is certain, he was saved before accompanying Paul on the second journey. Furthermore, it is doubtful that Luke would write an authoritative and well-researched Gospel prior to making Paul's acquaintance. Lastly, if Luke was a Gentile rather than a Jew as some suppose based on Colossians 4:11 and 14, then this decreases even further the likelihood of Luke's writing in the 30s since the Gentiles do not even *begin* to enter the church until Acts 10.

Regarding the Gospel of Matthew, it is also quite doubtful that Matthew could have been written in the 30s. This would not fit with the time lapse implied by Matthew 28:11–15. There, it says that the guards from Christ's tomb were given "hush money" by the religious authorities and told to lie in order to cover up the fact of the Lord's resurrection. They were instructed to say, "His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept" (v. 13). Matthew 28:15 says, "So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day." The phrase "until this day" at the end of verse 15 implies that some time had elapsed between the Resurrection in A.D. 33⁹ and the writing of Matthew. If one were to maintain that Matthew was written in the 30s, then "until this day" hardly seems fitting for a timeframe of 1–6 years between A.D. 34 and 39. Even John Wenham in his bold assessment of the Synoptics ventured to go only as low as A.D. 42 for Matthew.¹⁰ It does not appear viable, therefore, that the other New Testament books could be written as early as the 30s. If John wrote in the 30s, he clearly was without peer and his Gospel ought to have pride of place at the head of the New Testament canon. It is only logical, therefore, that a claim for an early date of John's Gospel carries with it an implicit and corollary claim for the theological and evangelistic priority of the book.

prominent early Church leaders bearing the same name. This places the writing of this epistle after the death of the apostle James and brother of John (Acts 12:2). This also harmonizes well with the profile of the prominent elder and overseer in the Jerusalem church that we see recorded in Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18 and Galatians 1:19; 2:9. These considerations reasonably place the Epistle of James outside the 30s and into the early-mid 40s.

⁹ For confirmation of the year A.D. 33, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 95-113.

¹⁰ John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark, & Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 223.

But this leads us back to the question of when John actually composed his Gospel. Is a span ranging broadly from the 30s to the early second century possible? To answer this, we must begin by weighing the evidence normally adduced by New Testament scholarship for the two main positions of an 80s–90s date and a pre-70 date, followed by an evaluation of the evidence for the drastically early date in the 30s–45.

EVIDENCE FOR A LATER DATE (A.D. 80s–90s)

The view that John's Gospel was written towards the end of the first century is currently the majority opinion among New Testament scholarship, whether liberal or conservative. However, the reasons for maintaining this position vary, and they are by no means unassailable. In fact, this position is more often assumed than proven. As the evidence for the late date position of the 80s–90s is weighed, one begins to wonder whether its popularity is due to compelling evidence or whether it is merely a carryover from radical, nineteenth century liberalism's stretching of dates from the late first century into the mid-late second century. Have scholars today simply settled on the "conservative" end of dates previously set by theological liberals? Have we simply accepted what was previously considered the bottom end of the range of possible dates for John? Before evaluating the evidence normally marshaled for the 80s–90s view, a few false assumptions that have undergirded the late date view must be dispelled.

False Assumptions

There was once a time in the nineteenth century when a "late" view of the 80s–90s for the publication of the Gospel of John would have been considered "early." The unbelieving position espoused by German critic F. C. Baur proposed a date for John extending all the way to the latter half of the second century.¹¹ Of course, such a proposal automatically implied that the apostle John could not have written this Gospel. Consequently, whoever its author may have been certainly was not an eyewitness to the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, which flatly contradicts the testimony of John 1:14 and 19:35. According to this view, the fourth Gospel does not contain the authentic words and works of Jesus of Nazareth but only the biased theological opinions of His faith-driven followers, who were generations removed from the actual "historical" Jesus.

Baur proposed that the Gospel of John was the product of the Gnosticism current in the middle to late second century since the fourth Gospel supposedly contained dualistic thought forms shared by Gnosticism. However, Baur's view was dealt a fatal blow by two factors from the first half of the twentieth century. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that the dualistic themes of light and darkness, life and death, and flesh and spirit were not unique to later Gnosticism but were prevalent as early as the

¹¹ Baur claimed that John's Gospel evidenced a theology that was too highly developed to reflect the early state of Christianity, and that it evidenced a Greek, rather than Jewish, background, and that it was dependent on the Synoptic Gospels (Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Kritische Untersuchungen über die kanonischen Evangelien* [Tübingen: Verlag und Druck, 1847], 239). Each of these points subsequently has been proven false.

Jewish Qumran community that predated the apostle John.¹² The extra-biblical writings discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed that this stylistic feature of John's Gospel was thoroughly reflective of first-century Jewish thought forms and not "Gnostic" after all.

Second, the discovery and publication of an Egyptian papyrus fragment containing a small portion of John's Gospel (18:31–33, 37–38) effectively swung the pendulum of scholarly opinion on the date of the book back to a late first century position. The majority of paleographers since the discovery of the Rylands Papyrus fragment (P⁵²) have dated it to the early second century, approximately A.D. 120–130.¹³ Such an early second century date for a copy of John required that the writing of the original autograph of this Gospel be approximately 20–30 years earlier; hence, a *terminus ante quem* of the late first century. However, a few modern papyrologists are now reevaluating this date for P⁵² and are once again proposing a broader range of dates, possibly extending all the way to the early third century.¹⁴ But this has not overturned the general consensus of opinion that the fourth Gospel dates to the late first century.

¹² David E. Aune, "Dualism in the Fourth Gospel and the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Reassessment of the Problem," in *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honour of Peder Borgen*, ed. David E. Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl Henning Ulrichsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 281-303; Richard Bauckham, "Qumran and the Fourth Gospel: Is There a Connection?" in *The Scrolls and the Scriptures: Qumran Fifty Years After*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 267-79; idem, "The Qumran Community and the Gospel of John," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after Their Discovery, 1947–1997*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, and James C. VanderKam (Jerusalem: Israel Explorations Society and the Shrine of the Book, 2000), 105-15; James H. Charlesworth, "A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS 3:13-4:26 and the 'Dualism' Contained in the Gospel of John," in *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 76-107; idem, "The Priority of John? Reflections on the Essenes and the First Edition of John," in *Für und wider die Priorität des Johannesevangeliums*, ed. Peter L. Hofrichter (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2002), 73-114; idem, "Reinterpreting John: How the Dead Sea Scrolls Have Revolutionized Our Understanding of the Gospel of John," *Bible Review* 9 (February 1993): 18-25, 54; Jörg Frey, "Licht aus den Höhlen? Der 'johanneische Dualismus' und die Texte von Qumran," in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditions-geschichtlicher Perspektive*, ed. Jörg Frey und Udo Schnelle (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 117-203; *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, ed. Mary L. Coloe and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011); Leon Morris, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and St. John's Gospel," in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 321-358; James L. Price, "Light from Qumran upon Some Aspects of Johannine Theology," in *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 9-37; John A. T. Robinson, "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962), 94-106.

¹³ Kurt Aland, "Neue Neutestamentliche Papyri II," *New Testament Studies* 9 (1962–63): 307; idem, "Der Text des Johannesevangeliums im 2. Jahrhundert," in *Studien zum Text und zur Ethik des Neuen Testaments: Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Heinrich Greeven*, ed. W. Schrage (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), 1-10; Philip W. Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 143; Charlesworth, "Reinterpreting John," 20; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 39.

¹⁴ Brent Nongbri, "The Use and Abuse of P⁵²: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *Harvard Theological Review* 98.1 (2005): 48; Andreas Schmidt, "Zwei Anmerkungen zu P. Ryl. III 457," *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 35 (1989): 11-12. For a conservative response to Nongbri and Schmidt, see Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 25-36.

Even among those scholars who hold to a late first century to early second century date and who are theologically liberal, there is frequently the prejudiced assumption that the fourth Gospel must be late because it contains a high view of Christ or a deeper, more reflective Christology. They say that in comparison to the Synoptic Gospels, the portrait of Jesus contained in the fourth Gospel reflects a later stage in the church's history in which the doctrine of Christ had time to evolve¹⁵ from the primitive apostolic era described in Acts. They claim that the fourth Gospel's account of Jesus' words and works is simply too advanced theologically to be considered truly authentic. Therefore, they say, even though its "spiritual" content may be edifying, it should not be viewed as historically credible or reliable. What is attributed to Jesus is really just the creation of the human author (possibly not even John) and his religious community's opinions about Jesus. This unbelieving, critical perspective is displayed in James D. G. Dunn's book, *Christology in the Making*, where Dunn claims that New Testament Christology evolved:

The christology of a pre-existent Son of God becoming man only began to emerge in the last decades of the first century, and only appears in a clear form within the NT in its latest writings. Certainly such a christology cannot be traced back to Jesus himself with any degree of conviction, and when we pay proper attention to the first-century context of meaning it is less likely that we can find such a christology in Paul or Mark or Luke or Matthew, not to mention those writings which make nothing of Jesus' sonship.¹⁶

But Dunn's statement, besides denying the testimony of the biblical witnesses and the divine inspiration of Scripture, is also a *non sequitur*.¹⁷ Even if John's Gospel reveals a deeper, more reflective doctrine of Christ than the Synoptics, this fact by itself would not necessarily prove a later date for John, as Cribbs explains, "John does manifest a greater theological depth than does Mark, but this does not necessarily imply a later date, as a comparison of Galatians or Romans with James or II Peter would demonstrate."¹⁸

Dunn's claim is flatly contradicted by the early and rich Christological passages found in several epistles, such as Romans, Philippians, Colossians, and Hebrews. One will not find a deeper Christology expressed in the New Testament than that revealed in Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1. There, Jesus is not only "preexistent" as the Son of God but is seen to be the Creator of all things (Col. 1:15–17; Heb. 1:2). And these

¹⁵ John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 124-26.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 64.

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 148 n. 2.

¹⁸ F. Lamar Cribbs, "A Reassessment of the Date of Origin and the Destination of the Gospel of John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 41.

books are demonstrably early, dating to approximately A.D. 56–68.¹⁹ Therefore, any support for the late date of John’s Gospel in the 80s–90s as held by theological conservatives should not be based on the notion of a more highly evolved Christology.²⁰

Another false assumption on which a later date for the publication of John is based comes from the supposed testimony of the early church fathers. It is sometimes claimed that they support the idea that John wrote his Gospel late in his life.²¹ But this is based on a misinterpretation of Irenaeus’s statements. Irenaeus claimed that John lived into the reign of Emperor Trajan, which began in A.D. 98.²² Patristic testimony is also unanimous in support of the fact that John wrote his Gospel last, *after* Matthew, Mark, and Luke.²³ But none of this means that John wrote his Gospel *late* in his life.²⁴ He could have written his Gospel last while still writing it as early as the 60s. But since liberal scholarship presupposes that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were also written late, the patristic testimony that John wrote last is immediately assumed to indicate a later date for John in the 80s–90s, if not even in the early second century. The testimony of the early church “fathers” will be revisited later in this chapter.

Destruction of Jerusalem

In terms of tangible evidence to support the late-date view for the completion of John, we must begin with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. This event is the historical fulcrum upon which the two major views on the dating of John tip in their respective directions. Viewed from the standpoint of the late-date position in the 80s–90s, the destruction of Jerusalem would be considered such a significant event in terms of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, along with having such profoundly favorable apologetic value for early Christians in dealing with the Jews,²⁵ that surely John would contain some reference to this event if it occurred in the years immediately preceding his writing. But since the Gospel of John never mentions the fall of Jerusalem, this must mean that John wrote sometime after the initial shock of the event wore off. This would reasonably require adding ten to twenty years to the A.D. 70 date, putting

¹⁹ David A. Croteau, “An Analysis of the Arguments for the Dating of the Fourth Gospel,” *Faith and Mission* 20 (Summer 2003): 57; John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, ed. J. F. Coakley (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone, 1987), 91.

²⁰ For evidence of the early church’s already developed Christology, see Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), esp. 349–426 (about early Johannine Christology); Werner R. Kramer, *Christ, Lord, Son of God*, trans. Brian Hardy (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1966); Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), esp. 69–107 (about early Johannine Christological confessions).

²¹ Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 84.

²² *Against Heresies*, 2.22.5; 3.3.4.

²³ Robert Morgan, “Which was the Fourth Gospel? The Order of the Gospels and the Unity of Scripture,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 54 (1994): 10; John Ashley Nixon, “Who Wrote the Fourth Gospel? The Authorship and Occasion of the Fourth Gospel According to Patristic Evidence from the First Three Centuries,” *Faith and Mission* 20 (Summer 2003): 87–92.

²⁴ Robinson, *Priority of John*, 67–68.

²⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal* 26 (2005): 216–20.

John sometime in the 80s–90s.²⁶ But such reasoning exhibits at least two problems. First, taken by itself, this merely amounts to an argument from silence. This reasoning presupposes what John *must have* done and it assumes that John should have recorded the A.D. 70 destruction if it occurred previously. Second, this line of reasoning can just as easily be reversed and argued in the opposite direction for an early date of John since John’s silence about the destruction of Jerusalem may just as easily reveal that this historic event had not yet occurred by the time of his writing.

Temple Replacement Theme

Another evidence for a late date of John that is sometimes proposed is the presence within this Gospel of the theme of Jesus as a replacement for the Jerusalem temple.²⁷ It cannot be denied that there is in John a theme of Jesus being the fulfillment of several Jewish tabernacle symbols and feasts (e.g., Light of the world, Bread of life, Passover). It also appears that John deliberately selected portions of Christ’s life that revolved around the feasts in Jerusalem and His ministry in the region of Judea rather than Galilee as reported in the Synoptics. Therefore, it is argued that the existence of Jesus being the “replacement” for the Temple and tabernacle system of worship must point to the prior destruction of the Temple.

But a theme of Christ being a replacement for the Temple does not necessarily indicate a post-70 composition of John’s Gospel. The internal evidence from the Epistle of Hebrews indicates that it was written prior to A.D. 70 while the priestly, sacrificial system was still functioning. Yet Hebrews has the most explicit “replacement” or “fulfillment” theme for Jesus Christ of any book in the Bible, including John.²⁸

Those who raise the Temple-replacement theme argument for a later dating of John also point out that there is an ironic reference in John 11:48–52 to the destruction of the Temple.²⁹ There it says, “Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, ‘What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation’” (vv. 47–48). But Robinson, a pre-70 proponent, makes a valid point regarding this passage, a point not adequately addressed by Köstenberger and other late-date proponents. Robinson says that the chief priests and Pharisees did *not* leave Jesus “alone” to continue doing His sign-miracles for in fact they crucified Him. Yet the Romans came anyway, contrary to what the Jewish leaders predicted in verse 48. Thus, Caiaphas’s prophecy that follows about one dying on behalf of the nation (vv. 49–52) is

²⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 85; Croteau, “An Analysis of the Arguments,” 58.

²⁷ Mary L. Coloe, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001); Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus’ Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 19-25, 275-76; Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple,” 228-42.

²⁸ Köstenberger briefly acknowledges the parallel example of Hebrews; but he does not directly address the problem of why Hebrews can have a stronger replacement theme than John and yet still be written before A.D. 70 while John’s replacement theme *cannot* permit a pre-70 date of composition. Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple,” 216.

²⁹ Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple,” 239.

the main point of the passage. As Robinson puts it, John's point "is not that the temple and nation would be swept away but that Jesus should die for the people *rather than* the whole nation be destroyed."³⁰

But even if we grant that the statement by the Jewish leaders is an ironic reference to the coming destruction of A.D. 70, we still must ask, why could John not have written this *before* 70? Could the Holy Spirit have so superintended the writing of John that this episode served as a prophetic allusion to a coming event? Why must John have chosen to incorporate this account of Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders in his Gospel only *after* the fact of Jerusalem's destruction? Nothing in the passage demands that John documented this episode *after* the fateful events of A.D. 70.

The unbelieving tendency of critical scholarship is to view the prophecies of Scripture as recorded only *ex eventu*—after the fact. This tendency appears with other key portions of the prophetic Word, such as rationalizing that the exactitude with which Daniel prophesied the four successive world empires (Dan. 2:36–43; 7:1–8) was simply because the book was written very late, towards the middle of the second century B.C., after the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires, when it would have been humanly predictable that the then current third world empire of Greece would dissolve and a Roman empire would arise. But all of this is a patent rejection of the supernatural character of Scripture. If the Holy Spirit could superintend the prediction of Jerusalem's destruction in Luke 21:20–24, with the Gospel of Luke being written demonstrably a decade or so *before* the fall of Jerusalem,³¹ then why could the Spirit of God not have done the same with the Gospel of John? An ironic allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in John 11:48 does not necessarily favor a later date for John. From the standpoint of belief in Scripture's inspiration and prophetic fulfillment, an ironic statement of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans in John 11:48 would be perfectly consistent with a pre-70 date.³²

Absence of Sadducees

Another evidence sometimes suggested for a late date of composition for John is that there are no occurrences in the fourth Gospel to the term Σαδδουκαῖος, referring to the religious and political sect of the Sadducees.³³ Proponents of the late-date view see this as consistent with the cessation of the Sadducees' great power and influence in the daily operation of the Temple and its sacrificial system. It is argued that within a decade or two

³⁰ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 276-77.

³¹ For a compelling defense of Acts being written in the early 60s, and thus Luke being written prior to this date, see Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 365-414.

³² John Wenham makes an additional significant point. Though Luke records Christ's prediction of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans in Luke 21:20–24, he conspicuously never tells us of its fulfillment anywhere in Luke-Acts. This would point to Luke-Acts being written before A.D. 70. Thus, Wenham writes, "Luke tells us of the fulfillment of Agabus' prophecy of worldwide famine (Acts 11:28), but of the fulfillment of this disaster [the fall of Jerusalem], which to the Jews was incomparably greater, he says not a word" (Wenham, *Redating*, 224). It could very well be that John likewise "says not a word" about the fulfillment of Jerusalem's destruction because it had not yet occurred at the time of his writing.

³³ Croteau, "An Analysis of the Arguments," 59.

from the fall of Jerusalem, it would not have been necessary for John to mention the Sadducees to his readers since this religious group was now “obscure” and no longer in existence.³⁴ But once again, this argument is speculative and inconclusive.

In reply to this late-date argument, it should be noted that the “chief priests” are mentioned frequently in John.³⁵ The Sadducees, being aristocratic priests possibly of the Hasmonean line, formed a significant subset of the “priests” in that day. The Gospel of John frequently mentions the terms for “high priest” (ἀρχιερεὺς; 11:49, 51; 18:10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 22, 24, 26) and “chief priests” (ἀρχιερεῖς; 7:32, 45; 11:47, 57; 12:10; 18:35; 19:6, 15, 21), and even once the broader term for “priests” (ιερεῖς; 1:19). It is clear from such references that a sacrificial priesthood serving at the temple in Jerusalem is not absent from John’s Gospel.

Furthermore, when the “chief priests” appear in John’s Gospel in opposition to Christ, they are often associated with their counterparts, the Pharisees (7:32, 45; 11:47, 57; 18:3). This follows the same pattern found throughout Matthew’s Gospel where the Pharisees and Sadducees are coupled together. In addition, Acts 5:17–24 indicates that the “Sadducees” were associated with the high priest and appear to be spoken of interchangeably with the “chief priests” of that day. Thus, even though John does not use the term for “Sadducee” (Σαδδουκαῖος), this group is still represented in the fourth Gospel by the terms “priests” and “chief priests.”

A failure to use the specific term “Sadducees” does not prove that John wrote his Gospel at a time when this religious-political group had faded into oblivion. The lack of the term “Sadducees” is another argument from silence; and we must be careful not to build too much on the silence of Scripture. Furthermore, the same argument could *almost* be made for the Gospels of Mark and Luke where the Sadducees are mentioned only once by name in each Gospel (Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27). Though Mark and Luke refer to the Sadducees just once, they also refer frequently to the “chief priests.” Second, it must be noted that another significant group besides the Sadducees existed in the time of Christ, namely, the “scribes.” Like the Sadducees, this group is also not mentioned by John.³⁶ But this is problematic since, unlike the Sadducees, the scribes actually *flourished* after A.D. 70. So, nothing should be deduced from John’s omission of the term “Sadducees.”

Finally, in regard to the absence of the term “Sadducees” in John’s Gospel, we should not forget that with respect to key New Testament theological *terms*, John often chooses to leave out several that the Synoptic writers use, such as faith (πίστις), repent (μετανοέω), repentance (μετάνοια), regeneration (παλιγγενεσία), redeem (λυτρόω), redemption (λύτρωσις), justify (δικαιώω), evangelize (εὐαγγελίζω), or gospel (εὐαγγελίον). But this in no way indicates that John’s Gospel precludes the *concepts* of faith, repent, repentance, regeneration, redeem, redemption, justify, evangelize, and the gospel. John simply chooses to use other terminology when referring to the same theological concepts; and he may have done the same for the term “Sadducees.”

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Robinson, *Redating*, 275.

³⁶ The term “scribes” (γραμματεῖς) occurs only in John 8:3; but the text of the *pericope adulterae* in John 7:53–8:11 is a highly disputed textual variant. While it surely represents a real historical account from the life and earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, being entirely consistent with His character and teaching, its authenticity as an original part of John’s text is questionable on text-critical grounds.

Sea of Tiberias

Another argument for the dating of John in the 80s–90s is based on the alternate name given to the Sea of Galilee in John 6:1 and 21:1—the “Sea of Tiberias.” Herod Antipas built a city on the western coast of Galilee and named it after Tiberias Caesar in A.D. 17–18.³⁷ The name of the city of Tiberias that was situated on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee was eventually transferred to the sea itself in popular usage. This transition took place sometime within the first century. It is argued by late-date proponents that since the name “Sea of Tiberias” appears to have eclipsed the name “Sea of Galilee” in popular usage by the end of the first century, this proves that John must have written his Gospel in the 80s–90s as well.

Initially, this argument appears to provide a fixed historical marker to objectively date the Gospel of John. But on closer inspection, it is shown to be based on assumptions that do not warrant such certainty. In John 6:1, for example, John gives both names to the reader, the “Sea of Galilee” and the “Sea of Tiberias.” This may indicate that both names were current when John wrote. Second, the years between A.D. 17–18 and A.D. 70 would have provided ample time for a fisherman in Galilee, such as John, the son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21; Luke 5:10), to become familiar with this official new terminology and then later employ it when writing his Gospel in the 60s, by which time the name “Sea of Tiberias” would have increased in popular usage.

In addition, the point at which the transition from “Sea of Galilee” to “Sea of Tiberias” became fixed in popular usage is far from certain. While admittedly this terminology was in place by the end of the first century as the reference by Josephus indicates,³⁸ this still does not pinpoint the timeframe when the name “Sea of Tiberias” prevailed in popular usage. Consequently, the *terminus post quem* is simply unknown and there is no reason to think that it could not have been *before* A.D. 70. Proponents of the late-date position must acknowledge that assigning a starting point to a term’s prevailing usage in an ancient locale’s ever-evolving vernacular is like trying to hit a moving target. It is difficult to precisely ascertain. Thus, even tentative late-date proponent D. A. Carson speaks of the transition to the name “Sea of Tiberias” only cautiously, saying, “Probably the change was not common in popular parlance until much later in the century.”³⁹ This does not exactly have a ring of certainty or confidence.

Death of John & the Lord’s Return

A final evidence to be considered for dating John towards the end of the first century comes from the prediction of Peter’s martyrdom in the epilogue of the Gospel (21:18–23). There, the clarification is provided for John’s readers that the apostle John was *not* promised that he would live until the Lord’s return, but only that the Lord’s plan for John should not be of concern to Peter. For those who use this passage to establish a late date for the fourth Gospel, it is often assumed that John is writing his Gospel and this portion

³⁷ Croteau, “An Analysis of the Arguments,” 55; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 199.

³⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.2.3.

³⁹ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 268.

of the epilogue at a very advanced age in order to correct a mistaken notion that had entrenched itself in the church by the end of the first century, namely, that Christ promised John that he would not die before His return (v. 23). If this interpretation is accurate, and John is indeed correcting a false assumption in the early church, then 21:18–23 was written to teach the church not to fix its expectant gaze on the last remaining apostle but on the Lord Jesus as its blessed hope.

There is good theology in this interpretation of 21:18–23, but unfortunately it is based on another assumption. It assumes that the early church's fixation on John outliving Peter must be a situation that developed long after Peter died. Why must we assume that John waited 20–30 years from the time of Peter's martyrdom in A.D. 64–65⁴⁰ before issuing this clarification for the church? With the death of Peter, one of the early church's premier leaders, would there not have been a heightened sense of expectancy about the Lord's coming? Robinson raises this valid objection, explaining, "When therefore all the other 'pillars' (Gal. 2:9) had been removed by death (James in 62, Peter and Paul in 65+) and John only 'remained,' a supposed promise of Jesus that he would not die, but that the end would come first, must have fed fervid expectations of an imminent consummation. There is no reason to think that the correction of the error would have waited another thirty years."⁴¹

Thus, it is equally viable to interpret John 21:18–23 as emphasizing *Peter's* death, not John's.⁴² If John wrote his Gospel between A.D. 65–70, then this passage may have served as a spiritual stimulus in light of Peter's recent martyrdom rather than as a response to John's advancing age. The apostle John may have included this account in his Gospel simply to show the early church shortly after Peter's death that Christ had predicted Peter's martyrdom over 30 years beforehand; and therefore Jesus Christ was truly sovereign, and the promise of His coming had not failed in spite of the decease of Peter, Paul, and James, all eminent leaders of the early church. In such a case, the Lord's instructions to Peter in 21:22, where He said to "follow Me" irrespective of John's situation, became instructions applicable to the rest of the church to remain steadfast in service for Christ while looking for His imminent return. This interpretation fits quite naturally with a date for John after Peter's martyrdom in A.D. 64–65 but before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

This interpretation would also fit the emphasis given to Peter in the Gospel of John where he is developed as one of its main characters (1:40–44; 6:68–69; 13:6–9, 36–38; 18:10–11, 15–27; 20:2–10; 21:2–22). Some testimony regarding Peter's fate would only be fitting at the conclusion of this Gospel. Indeed, it would seem strange, even inappropriate, for John to introduce Peter as a main character in the opening chapter of his Gospel, and then develop his character throughout the narrative, only to leave the reader uninformed about Peter's end. Therefore, the Epilogue does not focus on John or his advancing age. It is about the destinies of both Peter and John in view of the Lord's coming.

⁴⁰ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 264.

⁴¹ Robinson, *Redating*, 281.

⁴² Hans-Joachim Schulz, *Die apostolische Herkunft der Evangelien*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 373-91.

The relevance of this point for the date and purpose of John's writing is also underscored by the fact that the pericope of Peter's forgiveness, restoration, and predicted martyrdom is found *only* in John's Gospel.⁴³ Why is this episode unique to the fourth Gospel? A perfectly valid explanation that fits a pre-70 date is that the writing of this Gospel (and thus chapter 21) came *after* the completion of the other canonical Gospels partly for the purpose of bringing divine light and guidance to the early church in the wake of Peter's death in A.D. 64–65. This would have been subsequent to the completion of the other three Gospels that lacked this account in John 21. Thus, even 21:18–23 is subject to an interpretation that is consistent with a pre-70 date for John and is not necessarily evidence for a later date in the 80s–90s.

Having surveyed the strongest arguments that are raised in favor of a date for John in the 80s–90s,⁴⁴ it is remarkable to consider how little concrete evidence remains to support the late-date position. While a date for John in the 80s–90s remains a possibility, a pre-70 date appears to be at least equally viable.

EVIDENCE FOR AN EARLIER DATE (Pre-A.D. 70)

Though the later-date position in the 80s–90s is still the majority opinion among Johannine commentators and scholars, there have been several scholars in the last century who have made an equally plausible case for an earlier pre-A.D. 70 date,⁴⁵ including prominent figures such as conservative Reformed commentator and theologian Leon Morris,⁴⁶ Dallas Theological Seminary professors W. Hall Harris and Daniel B. Wallace,⁴⁷ and the erudite but liberal Anglican scholar John A. T. Robinson.⁴⁸ Even the former Dallas Seminary professor and Free Grace proponent, the late Zane Hodges, held

⁴³ D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 46.

⁴⁴ I have intentionally chosen to omit discussion of one final argument that has been frequently proposed for a late date of John. In the last century, it was vigorously contended that the term for being "put out of the synagogue" (ἀποσυνάγωγος; 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) points to an official decision by the Jewish Council of Jamnia to excommunicate Christians from synagogues. If this hypothesis were true, it would fix a date for John sometime after A.D. 85, when such a ban took effect. But this argument has not proven convincing and is quickly losing steam even among supporters of the later-date position.

⁴⁵ Klaus Berger, *Im Anfang war Johannes: Datierung und Theologie des vierten Evangeliums* (Stuttgart: Quell, 1997), 11 (Berger dates John's Gospel to a time in the late 60s, though he argues against Johannine authorship); idem, "Neue Argumente für die Frühdatierung des Johannesevangeliums," in *Für und wider die Priorität des Johannesevangeliums*, ed. Peter L. Hofrichter (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2002), 59-72; J. F. Coakley, "The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988): 241-56; F. Lamar Cribbs, "A Reassessment of the Date of Origin and the Destination of the Gospel of John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 38-55; Erwin R. Goodenough, "John a Primitive Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 64 (1945): 145-82; Friedmar Kemper, "Zur literarischen Gestalt des Johannesevangeliums," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 43 (1987): 247-51. See also, Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 31, who concludes that John might have been composed as early as A.D. 70 but not later than 90.

⁴⁶ Leon Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 34-35; idem, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 283-92.

⁴⁷ W. Hall Harris, *The Gospel of John: Introduction and Commentary* (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 18; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 531.

⁴⁸ Robinson, *Redating*, 307; idem, *Priority of John*.

to a pre-A.D. 70 date⁴⁹ without going as far as a date in the 30s–45.⁵⁰ There is nothing in the evidence for the earlier-date position that points to an extremely early date in the range of the 30s–45, which is why the contingent of scholarship holding to a pre-70 date nearly always arrives at a timeframe somewhere in the 60s.⁵¹

A.D. 70 and the Destruction of the Temple

In the reasoning of earlier-date proponents, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70 fixes an outer limit (*terminus ante quem*) for the composition and completion of John's Gospel. A pre-70 date is established in at least two ways. First, it is reasoned that this event was too significant in the historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity not to have been included in John's Gospel, especially when it would have furthered John's theme of Jesus as the replacement tabernacle or temple. Therefore, its omission is evidence that the destruction of the Temple had not yet occurred. Harris explains this view, saying, "Ultimately, the temple (2:21) is replaced by Christ himself. Yet in chapter two there is no mention of Jerusalem's fall. Instead, Jesus' prophecy is seen as a prophecy not of what the Romans would do in destroying Jerusalem, but of the events of AD 33—what the Jews would do to Jesus. With an author as reflective as John, it is very strange that he does not see something of the coming doom in all of this."⁵²

Similar to Jesus as the replacement temple, Harris argues that the acceptance versus rejection theme in John's Gospel indicates an early date. He says, "of all the NT writings with the exception of Hebrews and Revelation, the Fourth Gospel is the most likely to contain an allusion to the fall of Jerusalem. The focus of the gospel is on the rejection of Messiah by 'his own' (1:11). The visitation and rejection must mean divine judgment."⁵³ But is this necessarily so? Though rejection versus acceptance is admittedly a prominent theme in John, this theme is actually about the nation of Israel's rejection of Christ. John does not make Christ's rejection of the nation in judgment his emphasis. This is a critical distinction. Ultimately, the lack of reference to Jerusalem's destruction does not *require* a pre-70 date. To insist that it does merely amounts to another argument from silence.

A second line of evidence for the early date of John based on the events of A.D. 70 is made by comparing John to other non-biblical, post-70 Christian literature. It is reasoned that if other post-70 literature mentions the destruction of Jerusalem, and John's Gospel never refers or even alludes to this event, then such an omission establishes the likelihood that John wrote before A.D. 70.⁵⁴ For example, the Epistle of Barnabas makes the first explicit reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in extra-

⁴⁹ Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 6; idem, "In the Upper Room (John 13–17) with Jesus the Christ." Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 4, 2008.

⁵⁰ Hodges proposed a date "most likely . . . in the period A.D. 48–52." Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 25.

⁵¹ Hodges and Cribbs are the exceptions, with Cribbs theorizing a range from the late 50s–early 60s.

⁵² Harris, *Gospel of John*, 18.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Robinson, *Redating*, 312–35.

biblical Christian literature. It says, “Because they [the Jews] went to war it [the Temple] was pulled down by their enemies.”⁵⁵ Proponents of the early date see significance to the fact that there are no such comparable references to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the Gospel of John. But the force of this argument is muted somewhat by the realization that this reference in the Epistle of Barnabas is possibly as late as A.D. 130,⁵⁶ and the remaining allusions or references to Jerusalem’s destruction in Christian literature all occur *after* 130. There are no references to Jerusalem’s destruction in extra-biblical Christian literature that can be dated definitively to a period contemporaneous with a late composition of John in the range of A.D. 70–100. Thus, the lack of reference to Jerusalem’s destruction in John’s Gospel, or anywhere else in the New Testament, does not prove that this Gospel must have been written before A.D. 70. This constitutes yet another argument from silence that is ultimately inconclusive.

John 5:2 and the Historical Present

One significant piece of internal evidence sometimes enlisted in support of a pre-70 date for John is the occurrence of the present tense of the Greek verb εἶμι in John 5:2.⁵⁷ The prima facie reading of this verse indicates that the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem and its five porticoes were intact at the time of John’s writing, thus providing a solid piece of evidence from within John’s Gospel that he wrote before the razing of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70. John 5:2 says, “Now there is [ἔστιν] in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called [ἐπιλεγομένη] in Hebrew, Bethesda, having [ἔχουσα] five porches.” In this verse, three present tenses are employed. They are bounded by past-tense verbs in verse 1 (imperfect- and aorist-tense verbs) and verse 3 (imperfect tense). This contrast appears to lend support for present time being portrayed by the present tense-forms in verse 2.

John 5:1-3

1 After this there was [ἦν] a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up [ἀνέβη] to Jerusalem.

⁵⁵ *Epistle of Barnabas*, 16.4.

⁵⁶ Though Robinson suggests a date between A.D. 70–79 (Robinson, *Redating*, 313-19), other scholars favor a date closer to A.D. 130 (L. W. Barnard, *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and Their Background* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1967], 46; Reidar Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996], 17-32, esp. 23; K. Wengst, *Tradition und Theologie des Barnabasbriefes* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971], 105-13). While some contend for an early range of dates from A.D. 70–100 (A. Lukyn Williams, “The Date of the Epistle of Barnabas,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 34 [1933]: 337-46), the evidence is inconclusive and it appears best to leave open a range of dates from A.D. 70–132 (Delbert Royce Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 480-81; Robert Alan Kraft, “The Epistle of Barnabas: Its Quotations and Their Sources” [Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1961], 15-18; Kirsopp Lake, “The Epistle of Barnabas,” in *The Apostolic Fathers, with an English Translation by Kirsopp Lake*, ed. G. P. Goold [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912], 1:337-39; James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994], 9-30; idem, “The Epistle of Barnabas,” *Expository Times* 117 [2006]: 441-46).

⁵⁷ Robinson, *Redating*, 277-78; Wallace, “John 5, 2,” 177-205.

- 2 Now there is [ἔστυν] in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called [ἐπιλεγομένη] in Hebrew, Bethesda, having [ἔχουσα] five porches.
- 3 In these lay [κατέκειτο] a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed

Those who maintain the 80s–90s date for John argue that the present tense of “there is” (ἔστυν) in John 5:2 is merely an instance of the “historical present.”⁵⁸ The “historical present” occurs when the present tense of a verb is used to describe a past-tense action or event. It is commonly used throughout the four Gospels to provide a heightened sense of action or vividness to a scene. But is the present-tense verb ἔστυν in verse 2 merely a historical present or had Jerusalem, along with the pool of Bethesda and its five porticoes, not been destroyed yet when John wrote his Gospel?

To answer this question, we must know what the criteria are for a historical present. Wallace cites three. They must be: (1) a verb of action;⁵⁹ (2) occurring within a narrative text; and (3) used for the sake of vividness—“as though the author were reliving the story.”⁶⁰ Does the present tense verb ἔστυν in verse 2 fit all of these criteria and thus fall into the syntactical category of a historical present? This does not appear to be the case. The verb εἰμί can hardly be described as a verb of action since it is a state of being verb or copula.⁶¹ Though some scholars believe that there are other possible occurrences in John where εἰμί is used as a historical present, this has not been demonstrated conclusively.⁶² Some who reject a pre-70 date for John have even gone so far as to suggest that John 5:2 may be the *only* use of εἰμί in the New Testament as a historical present.⁶³ Late-date proponents have yet to disprove the present temporal significance of

⁵⁸ Croteau, “An Analysis of the Arguments,” 53; Köstenberger, *John*, 178. A few non-grammatical explanations besides the use of the historical present are sometimes proposed to negate the present temporal force of ἔστυν in verse 2. These have very little support and have been decisively answered by Wallace (“John 5, 2,” 183-97).

⁵⁹ The qualification that a historical present be an action verb, thus precluding εἰμί, also holds true in secular Greek literature. See Wallace, “John 5, 2,” 203 n. 109.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 202-5; *idem*, *Greek Grammar*, 531.

⁶² David Croteau, Andreas Köstenberger, and Mavis Leung (“The Narrative Function and Verbal Aspect of the Historical Present in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51 [December 2008]: 709) maintain that the present tense of εἰμί does occur in John’s Gospel as a historical present. Köstenberger insists that 10:8 and 19:40 fit this category. In Croteau’s article (“An Analysis of the Arguments,” 53) he mentions six possible instances of the historical present of εἰμί in John. Through personal correspondence Dr. Croteau kindly provided *nine* such instances (5:2, 13, 15; 6:24; 12:9; 19:40; 20:14; 21:4, 7). However, pre-A.D. 70 proponent Daniel Wallace rejects these present-tense occurrences of εἰμί in John’s Gospel as true historical presents. Wallace argues that these should more accurately be designated “extending-from-past-presents” since the present tense-form in each case includes both the present and past within its temporal scope (Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], 217-19). What is needed to establish that these are truly historical presents, he contends, are examples where the present-tense use of εἰμί refers to the past and only to the past. See Daniel B. Wallace, “John 5:2 One More Time: A Response to Andreas Köstenberger” at <http://bible.org/article/john-52-one-more-time-response-andreas-kostenberger> (accessed January 25, 2009).

⁶³ Thomas L. Constable, *Expository Notes on John* (Garland, TX: Sonic Light, 2005), 3 n. 11.

ἔστιν in verse 2. Even though a pre-A.D. 70 proponent of such stature as John A. T. Robinson felt “nothing can be built upon” the present tense in John 5:2,⁶⁴ his opinion now appears prematurely dismissive. The use of the present tense in John 5:2 remains a slender but significant piece of evidence for an earlier dating of John—one that merits further serious consideration.

Jewish Missions Document

Another evidence that has been proposed for an earlier, pre-70 date of John is the Jewish missional character and purpose of the fourth Gospel, which is said to reflect a time period prior to the complete severing of Christianity from Judaism in A.D. 70. Cribbs, for instance, suggests a date for John in the late 50s–early 60s, maintaining that John was written to “non-Christian Jews in areas where the church was attempting to carry on a mission to Jews in an effort to persuade them that Christianity was a genuine extension of historic Judaism.”⁶⁵ Clarifying further, he states:

The Neronian persecution is the first clear indication we have that Rome had come to regard Christianity as a sect distinct from Judaism, and this must have been due at least in part to the development of distinctive non-Jewish characteristics by the early church itself. The fall of Jerusalem hastened this process, forever cutting the remaining ties that then existed between Christianity and historic Judaism, so that the dominant forces in the church from A.D. 70 onward “were Gentile rather than Jewish.” Moreover, the flight of the Jerusalem Christians to Pella before the outbreak of the Jewish revolt created such an irreparable rift between orthodox Judaism and Christianity that it is extremely doubtful if any extensive mission to the Jews could have been attempted after A.D. 70. The Gospel of John, with its extensive Jewish background, dialectic, and missionary appeal, would therefore seem to belong to a time when church and temple were still in dialogue and when the early church was still engaged in a mission to the Jews.⁶⁶

This line of evidence for an early dating of John is fundamentally flawed. The Gospel of John was *not* intended to be a strictly Jewish evangelistic document. It is a book that is universal in scope and purpose, emphasizing Christ’s redemptive mission to the “world,” which encompasses both Jews and Gentiles. Another flawed assumption in Cribbs’s theory is that church and temple were “in dialogue” through the middle of the first century⁶⁷ and that the irreparable breach occurred in A.D. 70. But this is hardly the case. In the Book of Acts we see that the Temple was never “in dialogue” with the church, even from its infancy. Instead, the Jewish hierarchy tried to silence the voice of

⁶⁴ Robinson, *Priority of John*, 70. He also says, “too much weight must not be put on this” (*Redating*, 278).

⁶⁵ Cribbs, “A Reassessment of the Date of Origin and the Destination of the Gospel of John,” 55.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

the church from earliest times (Acts 4:1–21; 5:17–41), and little changed thereafter with the recalcitrant Jewish leadership up until A.D. 70. However, even if Jewish-Christian tensions peaked at the end of the first century, making evangelistic outreach to the Jews nearly impossible, this would not necessarily mean that the Holy Spirit ceased His intention for the Gospel of John to be used as a powerful evangelistic tool with Jewish people throughout the entire interadvent, church age. Thus, the theory that John is a uniquely Jewish evangelistic document is based on too many faulty assumptions to provide any real support for an early, pre-70 date of John.

Aramaic Original

Related to the erroneous idea that John's Gospel is a distinctively Jewish missionary document, and therefore early, is the possibility that John was originally written in Aramaic rather than Greek. When it comes to the date for the Gospel of Matthew, John Wenham cites the early church tradition about an Aramaic original of Matthew⁶⁸ as possible evidence for its early date.⁶⁹ Possibly as early as the latter third century Eusebius wrote, "Matthew also having first proclaimed the gospel in Hebrew, when on the point of going also to other nations, committed it to writing in his native tongue, and thus supplied the want of his presence to them, by his writings."⁷⁰ The clear implication of Eusebius's statement is that the apostle Matthew wrote his Gospel in Aramaic, leaving it with his brethren in Judea before he left to evangelize other countries. If Eusebius's account is accurate, this might place Matthew's Gospel very early in the church's history, possibly as early as A.D. 42, according to Wenham's optimistic theory.⁷¹

It was similarly conjectured in the last century that the Gospel of John was originally written in Aramaic. This hypothesis was based on the presence of Aramaisms in John's Gospel, consisting not merely of Aramaic words, such as Γαββαθα (19:13) and Παββουλι (20:16), but of underlying grammatical and syntactical constructions common to Aramaic that are foreign to Greek. It would be tempting to speculate on the possibility of a very early date for an Aramaic original of John's Gospel, at least as early as Wenham's proposal for Matthew. But this possibility simply cannot be proven from the Greek text of John. Earlier in the last century, Ernest Colwell and others effectively demonstrated that though John's Greek text does contain Aramaisms, these exist only to a degree consistent with a first-century author who was himself Aramaic-speaking and Aramaic-influenced yet who still penned his document in Greek.⁷² Though it appears that Colwell may have overstated his case by concluding that the author of the fourth Gospel neither thought nor wrote in Aramaic,⁷³ it is clear that the Greek text of John's Gospel

⁶⁸ Papias as cited by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.16.

⁶⁹ Wenham, *Redating*, 160-62, 239.

⁷⁰ *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.24.6.

⁷¹ Wenham, *Redating*, 223.

⁷² Ernest C. Colwell, *The Greek of the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Its Aramaisms in the Light of Hellenistic Greek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931). See also Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 208-9, 272-74. Black believes that although John originally composed his Gospel in Greek, he still utilized an Aramaic "sayings tradition" as the source for much of Jesus' preserved speech.

⁷³ Colwell, *Greek of the Fourth Gospel*, 131.

does reveal an underlying Aramaic thought pattern shy of being a Greek translation from an Aramaic original.⁷⁴ On this point, Brown says, “Few, if any, today are willing to go along with the notion of a complete Aramaic gospel, of which our present Fourth Gospel would be nothing but a slavish and inelegant translation. Few, on the other hand, are prepared to reject out of hand all Aramaic influence, or even the possibility that the author of the Fourth Gospel has made use of Aramaic sources.”⁷⁵

A century ago, when the idea of an Aramaic original for John was being entertained, the lack of even a single extant copy of John in Aramaic seemed no obstacle. Like the missing link to evolutionary paleoanthropologists, it was assumed that since the theory was true, Aramaic copies of John would eventually surface. But a century has passed and we are still waiting. Therefore, it would be inadvisable to return to this outdated and unsubstantiated line of argumentation in order to support a very early date for the composition of John. Since we have no extant manuscript evidence for an Aramaic original, to pursue the Aramaic-John concept would simply be another argument from silence.⁷⁶

Other Voices for an Early Dating of John

While a reasonable case can be made for the pre-70 dating of John’s Gospel, to my knowledge not a single scholar has proposed the radically early 30s–40s date that some are now suggesting.⁷⁷ Impressive attempts have been made in recent scholarship to defend a pre-70 date for the Gospels, principally by liberal Cambridge scholar John A. T. Robinson and conservative Oxford scholar John Wenham. But in neither case do they even come close to supporting a date in the 30s–45 range.

In addition, the arguments in Robinson’s two treatises *Redating the New Testament* and *The Priority of John* must be handled judiciously since they are laden with redaction and source-critical methodology. Robinson argues that the Gospel of John was written in stages over time in an evolving fashion, as were the Synoptics.⁷⁸ He does not

⁷⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 74-75; Nigel Turner, “The Style of John,” in *Style*, Volume 4 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by James H. Moulton, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 64-75.

⁷⁵ Schuyler Brown, “From Burney to Black: The Fourth Gospel and the Aramaic Question,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 26 (1964): 339.

⁷⁶ In addition, it would also betray the principle of providential preservation of God’s Word that is espoused by most Free Grace adherents.

⁷⁷ Goodenough is no exception (“John a Primitive Gospel,” 145-82). He never fixes a date for John, or even a range of dates, but simply says, “The Gospel seems to me quite a primitive product from the very early church, though of course nothing indicates any precise date” (ibid., 145). He ventures only to claim that John antedates the fall of Jerusalem (ibid., 150 n. 12).

⁷⁸ Opposition to source and redaction criticism of John does not require that this Gospel was written and published all in the same year or even that John worked continuously on his Gospel without any intervals until its completion. Verbal, plenary inspiration does not demand such a facile notion. Although it is conceivable that John labored over his manuscript during different periods in his life and ministry as guided by the Holy Spirit, it is unlikely, as D. A. Carson states, “that the work was released in stages, at least in stages with long delays between them, since there is no textual evidence of a distinction between earlier and later editions” (*Gospel According to John*, 45). If various editions of John’s Gospel were produced, reflecting different levels of redaction as theological liberals suppose, we should expect at

claim that John was the first canonical Gospel to be completed; rather, he uses the term “priority” in a different sense. Where the Gospel of John is purportedly at variance with the Synoptics in recording historical incidences, Robinson claims that we should give “priority” or greater weight to John as reflecting the factualness of the original historical event since he was nearer in time to the original source (i.e., the Lord Jesus) than has traditionally been assumed about him by critical New Testament scholarship.

Though Robinson’s work is a much needed corrective to the extreme perspectives on John introduced by nineteenth to twentieth century historical criticism, his books are marred by a denial of the verbal, plenary inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.⁷⁹ He argues that the whole of John’s Gospel came together in stages, with the Prologue and Epilogue being added last, and that the entire Gospel was completed not much after A.D. 65.⁸⁰ Despite this early pre-70 dating of John, Robinson cannot be appealed to for unqualified support of the view that John preceded the other three canonical Gospels. Robinson explains, “I am now persuaded in fact that *all* the Gospels were coming into being over a period more or less simultaneously, and at different stages their traditions and their redaction could well show signs of mutual influence—as well as, of course, between the Synoptists, of common written sources. But the priority of John does not depend on which Gospel was actually begun or finished first.”⁸¹ For Robinson, the term “priority” applies more to a methodology of comparison with the other Gospels than to a chronology of their composition. He wrote, “As far as our assessment is concerned, the priority of John means that we begin with what he has to tell us on its own merits and ask how the others fit, historically and theologically, into that, are illumined by it, and in turn illumine it.”⁸²

John Wenham was another British scholar who defended earlier dates for the Gospels. He also did not support the extreme view that John’s Gospel was produced in the 30s–45. Wenham made the bold and provocative claim that the Gospel of Matthew was completed in A.D. 42, Mark in 45, and Luke in 55.⁸³ Though he did not incorporate John’s Gospel directly into his thesis, he did accept the testimony of Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 that John wrote his Gospel last.⁸⁴ Although Wenham did not venture to propose a date for John, if he believed that John wrote his Gospel after the Synoptics, then this would logically place John at least as late as A.D. 55. Wenham also concluded regarding matters such as the apostolic authorship of Matthew’s Gospel and its chronological “priority” to the other three Gospels that the tradition of the early church fathers on this point is “solid and weighty.”⁸⁵ In this respect, even Wenham is not in agreement with the extreme 30s–45 date and its corresponding claim of Johannine priority.

least some fragmentary extant evidence to support this. But there is none. All existing manuscripts of John’s Gospel reflect the present ordering of chapters 1–21.

⁷⁹ See, for example, *Redating the New Testament*, 356-57.

⁸⁰ Robinson, *Priority of John*, 71, 91, passim.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸³ Wenham, *Redating*, 223.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 240-42.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

OBSTACLES TO THE PRIORITY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

The preceding sections surveying the evidence for both the later 80s–90s date and the pre-70 date have revealed just how sketchy our present understanding is for the origin of John's Gospel. It seems prudent, therefore, not to be dogmatic about a precise date for John but to allow a range of dates, extending from approximately the 60s–late 90s.⁸⁶ But at this point some might raise the objection that if we are going to allow a pre-70 date for John, why not allow for a very early pre-70 date? Why not allow for the priority of John's Gospel relative to the Synoptic Gospels? Having surveyed the evidence for the two main positions on the date of John, we can now begin considering the reasons why John could, or could not, have written his Gospel in the 30s–40s and whether he wrote it before or after the other Gospels.

John and Gentile Missions

One clue to the date and chronological order of John's Gospel relative to the Synoptic Gospels is found in the brief biographical snapshots of John's early church ministry in the New Testament. When considering this information, we must ask whether the extremely early date of the 30s–45 is consistent with the New Testament profile painted of John. According to the early chapters of Acts, John's evangelistic endeavors were consistently linked with Peter's (3:1; 4:19; 8:14). Peter and John appear in the biblical record as close evangelistic partners. In the Book of Acts, we do not see any indication that John was involved in evangelistic outreach beyond the borders of Israel and Samaria. Whatever may have happened to him after ministering to the Samaritans with Peter (8:14), we are simply not told in Acts. But we are told in Galatians that, at least fourteen years after Paul's conversion, John is still with Peter in Jerusalem as one of the "pillars" (Gal. 2:1, 9) in approximately A.D. 46–47. At that time, Peter, James, and John gave Paul the right hand of fellowship and encouraged him to go to the Gentiles "and they to the circumcised" (2:9). The impression gathered from Acts and Galatians is that by approximately A.D. 46–47 John had not engaged yet in significant evangelistic outreach to the Gentiles.

What bearing does this have on the dating of John? First, the Gospel of John was written to both Jews and Gentiles.⁸⁷ It is more than a Jewish mission document. It is a Jewish-Gentile evangelistic document written for the entire "world." It would be more consistent, therefore, and in keeping with the composite picture of John in Acts and Galatians, *not* to view John writing such a universal evangelistic book during the years 32–45 while he was still residing in Jerusalem with a ministry focused on "the circumcised." Admittedly, this is only a deduction drawn from these portions of the New Testament and it does not *necessarily* follow. But it is still more consistent with the New Testament portrait of John than the 30s–45 date that is currently being advocated by some prominent Free Grace proponents of Johannine priority. This point could be strengthened further if church tradition is correct that John wrote his Gospel while living later in

⁸⁶ Constable, *Expository Notes on John*, 3.

⁸⁷ Wallace, "John 5, 2," 195-96. This point is developed in the next chapter.

Ephesus.⁸⁸ In such a case, John would not have written his Gospel until he moved from Jerusalem to Ephesus, sometime after A.D. 46–47, which would be after Paul’s ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19–20; 20:31) and even after Timothy’s ministry there in the early-mid 60s (1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:9).⁸⁹

No Intratestamental References to the Gospel of John

Another major obstacle to an early A.D. 30s–45 view is the complete silence of the remaining twenty-six New Testament books about the Gospel of John. If John predates all of the other New Testament books with the possible exception of James, and John also has evangelistic and theological priority, then we should expect to find some direct reference to its existence in the remaining twenty-five to twenty-six books of the New Testament that were written and used subsequent to it. But we do not find any quotes from John’s Gospel or even allusions or oblique references to it.

While some might claim that this is just another argument from silence, it is an argument that has some merit in this context since we should *expect* to find such references if the A.D. 30s–45 Johannine priority theory were correct. Since we do find clear instances where New Testament writers refer to other books within the New Testament, why nothing concerning John? It is reasonable to expect at least some intratestamental attestation to John’s Gospel, especially if this Gospel held primacy in the early church among the scriptural canon of twenty-seven New Testament books and if it truly was the *only* book with an evangelistic purpose. In 1 Timothy 5:18, we have an example of a known, dateable epistle that actually quotes from one of the Synoptic Gospels. First Timothy 5:18 reads, “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’ [”Αξιός ὁ

⁸⁸ The view that John wrote his Gospel from Ephesus was also advocated by Zane C. Hodges. See *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God’s Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 25, and “In the Upper Room (John 13–17) with Jesus the Christ,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 4, 2008.

⁸⁹ Hodges believed it was “quite possible” that John wrote his Gospel in Ephesus *before* Paul’s missionary journey to the Jews (Acts 18:19) and Gentiles (Acts 19) of that city. He stated that, “John already had a mission there focused on the Jewish synagogues” (*Epistles of John*, 25). But if John did have an evangelistic ministry to the Jews of Ephesus before Paul arrived, Acts is strangely silent about this enterprise. Furthermore, the plain reading of Eusebius’s testimony does not naturally accord with John having a short Jewish mission in Ephesus before Paul arrived. In *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.1., Eusebius wrote, “Such was the condition of the Jews. Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Savior were dispersed throughout the world. Parthia, according to tradition, was allotted to Thomas as his field of labor, Scythia to Andrew, and Asia to John, who, after he had lived some time there, died at Ephesus.” While Eusebius does report that John was dispatched to Asia Minor, where Ephesus was a key city, the timeframe for this does not fit best with the A.D. 48–52 date proposed by Hodges (*Epistles of John*, 24–25). First, a straightforward reading of Eusebius’s statement does not imply any breaks or intervals or recurring visits in the ministry of John at Ephesus. It does not give the sense that John went to Ephesus in 48–52, left the city upon Paul’s arrival, only to return later in life and eventually die there. Second, and more importantly, the statement in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.1 in its context follows immediately after the mention of the outbreak of the Jewish War in 2.26.1–2. Since historically the Jewish revolt occurred in A.D. 66–70, Eusebius’s statement in 3.1.1 most naturally indicates that Thomas, Andrew, and John went out either in consequence of the Jewish War or in conjunction with it, for Eusebius says, “Such was the condition of the Jews. *Meanwhile* the holy apostles and disciples of our Savior were dispersed throughout the world” (emphasis added).

ἐργάτης τοῦ μισθοῦ αὐτοῦ].” There is no passage in the Septuagint that contains this exact Greek expression. Thus, the “Scripture” that Paul refers to in this verse must be another New Testament book. In fact, these exact words and word order in Greek are found only in Luke 10:7, showing that the Gospel of Luke was known and read by the apostle Paul prior to his writing the Epistle of 1 Timothy in A.D. 62.

Similarly, in 2 Peter 3:15–16, Peter refers to the corpus of Pauline epistles: “and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” Here is another example of the New Testament providing a self-authenticating witness to its own content being regarded as “Scriptures” (v. 16). The epistle of 2 Peter is also dateable to the early 60s (assuming Petrine authorship), being written shortly before Peter’s martyrdom in Rome (2 Peter 1:14).

Based on these examples of intratestamental witness, we should expect at least some attestation to the prior existence of John’s Gospel if it was written in the 30s–45, long *before* the Pauline epistles and other New Testament books. We should expect that if the whole Johannine corpus of five books is not referred to collectively, as Paul’s writings are in 2 Peter 3:15–16, then at least the head of that body, the Gospel of John, should be referred to. But there is a deafening silence coming from the pages of the New Testament on this point.

John’s Significant Omissions and Additions

Another factor that must be considered which appears to discount priority for John’s Gospel is the marked difference in content between John and the Synoptics. John’s Gospel contains a sizeable percentage of unique content when compared to the other three Gospels. The reason that best accounts for this difference is that John must have intended his Gospel to supplement the other three rather than reduplicating much of their content.⁹⁰ If this conclusion is correct, it would preclude a chronological priority for John. While the conclusion that John was intended to supplement the other Gospels is based on inference rather than any explicit biblical statement to that effect, it still must be acknowledged as an inference that harmonizes well with the available details of Scripture.

John’s Gospel contains substantial material from the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus that is not recorded in the other three canonical Gospels. In terms of

⁹⁰ It is certainly more nuanced and accurate to say that John wrote to complement the other three Gospels, rather than seeking to replace them (liberal-critical view), or merely supplementing them (traditional view). On this point, Richard Bauckham writes, “The nineteenth-century view that John wrote to *supplement* the Synoptics certainly does not do justice to the relationship of John’s narrative to Mark’s. It is not a mere series of additions to Mark’s narrative. It has a narrative integrity of its own. It makes both narrative and theological sense in its own terms, quite independently of Mark. But for readers/hearers of John who also knew Mark, John’s narrative can be read as *complementing* Mark’s, just as Mark’s can be read as complementing John’s” (“John for Readers of Mark,” 170). For the independence of John’s Gospel from the Synoptic Gospels, see also Mark A. Matson, “Current Approaches to the Priority of John,” *Evangel* 25 (Spring 2007): 6-8.

additional, supplemental material, John adds such significant signs and events as the wedding feast at Cana (John 2), the evangelistic encounters with Nicodemus (John 3) and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), as well as the raising of Lazarus (John 11) and the doubting-Thomas pericope (John 20). John also adds several extended discourses not found in the Synoptics (Bread of Life; Light of the World; Good Shepherd; Upper Room).

The amount of material intentionally left out by John is also considerable. This would include: the Lord's virgin birth; His temptation by Satan in the wilderness; a description of Christ being physically baptized with water by John the Baptist; the "Lord's Prayer"; the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes; the preaching of the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven; the casting out of demons; Christ's transfiguration before Peter, James, and John; the Olivet Discourse; the institution of the Lord's Supper; and the Lord's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even the Ascension is not actually recorded anywhere by John but is only referred to predictively in a statement by Christ (20:17). How do we account for these significant differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels?

These differences cannot be attributed to John's Gospel supposedly being the only evangelistic book in the New Testament. Some events left out by John would actually have furthered this purpose by demonstrating the deity of Christ (1:1; 20:28), thus establishing in a greater way the Lord Jesus as the only sufficient object of faith (8:24; 20:31). John was apparently quite cognizant of the Lord's deity as he chose material to include in his Gospel; yet he omitted the Lord's virgin birth—the very sign pointing to Christ's deity (Isa. 7:14). Why? The purpose of complementing and not reduplicating the Virgin Birth accounts in Matthew and Luke best explains this. In addition, John chose to include the miracle at Cana instead of the amazing account of Christ's conception by the Holy Spirit. The transfiguration on the mount would also have enhanced John's purpose of revealing Jesus as the incarnate Son of God (1:14). It was there on the mount that the Father declared Jesus to be His only begotten Son and thus revealed to the disciples the co-extensive, co-equal glory of the Father and the Son. And what about Christ's temptation by Satan in the desert? Would this not have demonstrated Christ's sinless humanity, which is another point underscored by John in his Gospel (8:29, 46)? These omissions by John lead us to conclude that his purpose in writing the fourth Gospel was not to produce the only evangelistic book in the New Testament. Rather, it was to produce a book that served the purposes of both evangelism and Christian edification while not reduplicating much of the material already contained in the other evangelistic and edifying books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

We should also not attribute John's omission of key events from the Synoptics to any supposed ignorance on John's part. How could John (or "the beloved disciple") have remained ignorant of such an epochal event as the Virgin Birth when he wrote his Gospel, as is sometimes implied by those of the historical-critical school?⁹¹ Such supposed ignorance seems incredibly strained when considering that it was John who took care of Mary following Christ's death (19:26–27). If John was still ignorant of the miraculous events attending the Lord's birth by the end of Christ's three-and-a-half year

⁹¹ Goodenough, "John a Primitive Gospel," 170-71.

earthly ministry with him, then John certainly could not have remained ignorant much longer while residing and communing with the earthly mother of Jesus.

The most reasonable explanation for the substantial differences between the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels is that John intended his Gospel as a supplement or complement to the Synoptics, rather than a reduplication of their contents.⁹² Blomberg says, “We may assume that he knew that at least some, if not many, in his audience would be familiar with the basic stories about Jesus and that he did not want to repeat many of these accounts.”⁹³ This interpretation fits harmoniously with a number of details in John’s Gospel. For example, why does 1:28–33 record Christ’s coming to John the Baptist at the Jordan, and even John’s testimony that he saw the Holy Spirit descend on Christ like a dove (v. 33), yet it never actually informs the reader that John baptized Jesus *with water*? John most likely assumed his readers already possessed this information or at least would have access to such information from the Synoptic Gospels. This explanation also harmonizes with the absence of any explicit reference to the Virgin Birth in the fourth Gospel. In 8:41–42, there is a possible allusion to the Virgin Birth,⁹⁴ but this would only be understood by a reader who already possessed this background knowledge supplied by Matthew 1 or Luke 1.

A potential objection to the “supplemental” theory of John’s purpose should be addressed at this point. Someone defending the priority of John and the early dating of his Gospel in the 30s–45 might object that just because he wrote to supplement the already revealed events and teachings of Christ’s earthly ministry does not necessarily indicate that John was supplementing the other *three canonical Gospels* in particular. They might argue that John could have been supplementing merely the *oral teachings* or “tradition” of the apostles as they preached all of this information about the life of Christ prior to the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. However, such an argument would be based on the dubious assumption that the oral teachings of the apostles were so highly structured that they contained the exact details and verbiage replicated later *in toto* in the Synoptic Gospels. In addition, such an objection would necessarily mean that the oral teaching of the apostles prior to the composition of the Synoptic Gospels omitted all of the unique information that John chose to include in his Gospel. Are we really to assume that the wedding feast at Cana, the evangelistic encounters with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, the raising of Lazarus, and the Upper Room teachings of John 14–17 were not commonly taught as part of the apostolic *kerygma* prior to the completion of John’s Gospel?

The best explanation for the substantial amount of additional and omitted material in the fourth Gospel is that John’s purpose was simply to supplement the other three Gospels, rather than reduplicate their content. This, of necessity, rules out chronological priority for John’s Gospel. While this interpretation of John’s unique material accords best with the details of Scripture, it also happens to be the opinion of the early church. Eusebius quotes Clement as testifying that John’s Gospel was written “last

⁹² J. H. Crehan, “The Fourfold Character of the Gospel,” in *Studia Evangelica* (Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 5; F. David Farnell, “Independence Response to Chapter Two,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 224.

⁹³ Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, 49.

⁹⁴ This passage is addressed in greater detail in chapter 7.

of all” and that John wrote his Gospel with its unique content because a substantial portion of Christ’s life was already “sufficiently detailed” in the other Gospels.⁹⁵

Twelve Disciples Assumed in John’s Gospel

The fact that the Gospel of John was preceded by three other inspired Gospels can be demonstrated by additional internal evidence from John. In the fourth Gospel, when characters appear for the first time, they are sometimes introduced without explanation, as though John’s readers were already familiar with them.⁹⁶ For example, there is an unexpected reference to “the twelve” in 6:67 as a distinctive group within Jesus’ “disciples.” The phrase “the twelve” occurs in verse 67 for the first time without any explanation by John as the narrator.⁹⁷ It is an obtuse reference. There is no record of any appointment of “the twelve” by Jesus or even a corresponding list provided for the reader as to the identity of this select group such as occurs in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 10:1–5; Mark 3:14–19; Luke 6:13–16). There is, however, a brief comment that Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, was one of these twelve (John 6:71). Simon Peter is also identified as belonging to the twelve. But who are the other ten? We are never told specifically. The names of several other disciples occur throughout John’s Gospel, such as Andrew (1:40), Philip (1:44; 6:5; 12:21; 14:8), Thomas (14:5; 20:24), and the other Judas (14:22), but we are still never told that these men constitute a portion of “the twelve.” The only way the reader can know if these disciples belong to “the twelve,” or even to know the identity of the other six disciples who are unnamed (James of Zebedee, John, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thaddaeus, James of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot), is by knowledge that may be obtained from the Synoptic Gospels or a Christian’s oral witness.

John the Baptist Assumed in John’s Gospel

A similar case of assumed knowledge on the part of John’s readers occurs with respect to John the Baptist. Most readers of the four Gospels read John through the lens of the Synoptic Gospels. That is, they assume information in John’s Gospel based on what they know already from the Synoptics. This is true with respect to the identification of the great prophet named “John” in the fourth Gospel. Many Christians have overlooked the simple fact that the title “John the Baptist” (Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστής) never occurs in the Gospel of John. It is found only in the Synoptics. In the fourth Gospel, he is simply introduced as “John” (1:6–24). The fact that he also performs baptisms is not broached until 1:25. Upon encountering this name in the fourth Gospel, the reader is apparently expected to know that this “John” is the one who later is said to perform baptisms (1:26, 28; 3:23; 4:1; 10:40), making him none other than “John the Baptist.”

It is also conspicuous that John’s martyrdom is never mentioned in the Gospel of John, but it is in each Synoptic Gospel (Matt. 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29; Luke 9:7–9). In

⁹⁵ Clement of Alexandria as quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.14.7.

⁹⁶ Bauckham, “John for Readers of Mark,” 167-68 n. 22; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, 48; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 214.

⁹⁷ Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 77, 104.

the fourth Gospel, John's death may be assumed knowledge on the part of the reader. In 3:24, for instance, we are only told that he had "not yet been thrown into prison." But what happened to him after that? The reader is never told. In the last reference to him in the Gospel of John (10:41–42), he is referred to in the past tense by the apostle John as narrator. But how did he go from being "present" to being "past"? Did he die? If so, how? When? Or, did he spend the remaining years of his life in prison, outliving the Lord Jesus, Stephen, James, and the other early martyrs? If John's Gospel was the only Gospel in our possession, how would we ever know the answers to these questions?

The absence of the Baptizer's death in the fourth Gospel is highly unusual for one who played such a prominent role in the Prologue and Introduction (1:6–8, 15, 19–36). In this book, John the Baptist is set forth as the preeminent human witness to Jesus Christ, so "that all through him might believe" (v. 7). It was John the Baptist who first testified that Jesus was the Son of God and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (vv. 29, 34, 36). Why should the star witness in the Gospel of John not be afforded a proper burial within the narrative? The reason is simple—his death had already been recorded for the inquiring reader in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Gospel of Mark Assumed in John's Gospel

A case can also be made that when John wrote his Gospel he took into consideration the fact that some of his readers may have already been familiar with the Gospel of Mark,⁹⁸ and thus he wrote to complement and expand on portions of Mark.⁹⁹ One example of this can be seen in 3:23–24, where it says, "Now John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there. And they came and were baptized. For John had not yet been thrown into prison." The reference here to John the Baptist's imprisonment provides a chronological reference point for the public ministry of the Lord Jesus. The intent of verses 23–24 is not to tell John's readers that John the Baptist was baptizing before he was imprisoned. Such a fact is self-evident and does not need to be stated.¹⁰⁰

Nor does the reference in verse 24 seek to make a point primarily about the chronological relationship of Jesus' ministry to John's, but instead "that this period of Jesus' ministry in Judea preceded the beginning of the Galilean ministry recounted by

⁹⁸ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 44-45; Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," 147-49; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 51; James D. Dvorak, "The Relationship Between John and the Synoptic Gospels," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (June 1998): 211-13; M. E. Glasswell, "The Relationship Between John and Mark," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 23 (1985): 99-115; D. Moody Smith, "John and the Synoptics: Some Dimensions of the Problem," *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 444. This in no way implies that John was "dependent" on Mark as a source when he wrote the fourth Gospel. John relied directly on his own eyewitness experiences with the Lord Jesus as the Holy Spirit gave him recollection (14:26). Even the tide of critical scholarship has turned so that many scholars agree that John was "independent" of the Synoptic writers. See chiefly, C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) and Percival Gardner-Smith, *St. John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

⁹⁹ Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," 147-71; Wendy E. Sproston-North, "John for Readers of Mark? A Response to Richard Bauckham's Proposal," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25 (2003): 449-68.

¹⁰⁰ Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," 153.

Mark.”¹⁰¹ The Gospel of John dovetails neatly here with the chronology of Mark’s Gospel regarding the Judean and Galilean ministries of the Lord Jesus. John is the only Gospel writer to inform us that prior to the imprisonment of John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus also had a Judean ministry.¹⁰² In particular, the function of John 3:24 for readers already familiar with Mark is “not to correct Mark’s chronology, but to place the events of John 1:19–4:43 between Mark 1:13 and Mark 1:14.”¹⁰³ In Mark 1:13–14, we are told that the Lord Jesus “was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him. Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God.” Thus, whether the reader of John’s Gospel initially recognizes it or not, it is discernible that John wrote to complement and expand on previous Gospel writers such as Mark. This is also what early church tradition states regarding John’s reason for writing subsequent to the other three Gospels.¹⁰⁴

No Synoptic Literary Collaboration with John’s Gospel

Another obstacle to accepting the claim for the chronological priority of John’s Gospel is the fact that there is no internal evidence to show that the Synoptic Gospel writers utilized John’s Gospel in composing their own Gospels. It would only stand to reason that if John wrote his Gospel first, and there was afterwards some degree of intersynoptic literary collaboration, then there should also be some evidence that Matthew, Mark, and Luke consulted and utilized John in writing their Gospels.

Presently there is nowhere close to a consensus among those who accept the inspiration and authority of Scripture as to which Synoptic Gospel was written first and to what degree the Synoptic writers collaborated with one another. On one end of the spectrum are those who hold to the Markan priority hypothesis, which maintains that Mark preceded Matthew and Luke and that Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark during the composition of their Gospels.¹⁰⁵ On the other end of the spectrum is the Independence view that maintains that none of the Synoptic Gospel writers used the other Gospels in any sense,¹⁰⁶ and Matthew, Mark, and Luke were possibly not even aware of the existence of each other’s Gospels when they wrote.¹⁰⁷

Niemelä represents a mediating position between the Markan hypothesis and the Independence view. He argues for a “Two Gospel” hypothesis that seeks to demonstrate that it was actually Mark who used both Matthew and Luke when writing the

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.24.13.

¹⁰³ Bauckham, “John for Readers of Mark,” 154.

¹⁰⁴ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.24.7-11.

¹⁰⁵ Grant R. Osborne and Matthew C. Williams, “The Case for the Markan Priority View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 19-96.

¹⁰⁶ Gary W. Derickson, “Matthean Priority/Authorship and Evangelicalism’s Boundary,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 14 (Spring 2003): 87-103; F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 226-309.

¹⁰⁷ Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 190.

Gospel of Mark.¹⁰⁸ Niemelä contends that Matthew and Luke could not have independently used Mark as a source when composing their Gospels, as the prevailing Markan priority theory maintains. Therefore, Niemelä's "Two Gospel" view sees Matthew and Luke as predating Mark and that Mark collaborated or consulted with Matthew and Luke in writing his own Gospel without actually being "dependent" on either Matthew or Luke.¹⁰⁹ This has some significance for the question of John's priority. Niemelä goes to great lengths to demonstrate through the use of statistics that Mark utilized the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. If one accepts either the Markan priority theory or the Two Gospel hypothesis and agrees that the evidence is compelling for intersynoptic collaboration, then according to Niemelä's position, there should be some evidence that the Synoptic Gospel writers also utilized John's Gospel. And yet we find no such evidence. Why? The answer is clear—John wrote *after* Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Patristic Testimony on the Order of the Gospels

The final obstacle that remains for the chronological and theological priority of John is the collective testimony of the early church writers. These voices have been reserved as the last piece of evidence to consider since their witness is only of secondary, corroborative value in terms of reliability and credibility. Though they cannot be accepted uncritically as an infallible source of truth such as the Bible, and they were sometimes prone to contradiction, it must be admitted that they preserve at least a residuum of historical fact and thus have some confirmatory value. With respect to the possible priority of John's Gospel, it is noteworthy that all early church writers who address the subject speak in complete unison to the fact that John composed his Gospel last of the four canonical Gospels. This includes the testimony of Irenaeus,¹¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria,¹¹¹ Origen,¹¹² Eusebius,¹¹³ the *Acta Timothei* (c. 340),¹¹⁴ and Jerome.¹¹⁵ The witness of these early church writers cannot be completely dismissed or ignored. Any theory of the date and order for the composition of the four Gospels must adequately account for the uniform testimony of early church writers on this point.

CONCLUSION

A reassessment of each piece of evidence for the completion date of the Gospel of John leads to a few reasonable conclusions. First, a date range of the 30s–45 is found to be wholly out of sync with the mass of internal biblical evidence as well as the testimony of early church history. Instead, the evidence indicates that one reason John was written was

¹⁰⁸ John H. Niemelä, "The Infrequency of Twin Departures: An End to Synoptic Reversibility?" (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000), 108-10, 192.

¹⁰⁹ John H. Niemelä, "The Case for the Two-Gospel View of Gospel Origins," in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 127.

¹¹⁰ *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

¹¹¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.14.7.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 6.25.6.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.24.7.

¹¹⁴ Crehan, "The Fourfold Character of the Gospel," 4-5.

¹¹⁵ *De Viris Illustribus*, 9.

to complement and supplement the other three canonical Gospels, making it chronologically the fourth and last inspired Gospel. This means that any claims for the theological-evangelistic priority or exclusivity of John's Gospel cannot be based on an alleged chronological priority. Second, there is no conclusive proof for an extremely late date for John's Gospel ranging from the end of the first century into the second century. Such a view, though currently a minority opinion, is based ultimately on critical unbelief and rejection of biblical testimony rather than a fair and honest assessment of the evidence. Third, though the Bible itself does not reveal through explicit statements the date for the completion of John's Gospel, the existing evidence reasonably eliminates any possible dates that fall outside the range of roughly the 60s–90s A.D., with the weight of evidence slightly favoring a date before A.D. 70. These conclusions ought to induce confidence among readers of John's Gospel that it is a trustworthy and reliable record of the recollections of the life, teachings, and miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ written by a firsthand eyewitness.

CHAPTER 3

THE AUDIENCE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

Knowing the national, religious, and ethnic background of the intended reader of John's Gospel can help determine its divine purpose. There is an abundance of implicit evidence in the Gospel of John to show that the book was written with a Jewish audience firmly in mind. However, this does not necessarily mean that John intended to exclude a Gentile readership or that he intended his Jewish audience to have precedence over Gentiles recipients. Though John nowhere provides an explicit statement about the ethnic background of his intended readers, there is still sufficient evidence within his Gospel to identify the target audience.

EVIDENCE FOR A JEWISH AUDIENCE

Provenance of John's Gospel

Oftentimes, knowing the setting and circumstances in which a book was written can provide a clearer picture of that book's literary purpose. With some books of Scripture, we are blessed with the knowledge of their earthly origination or provenance. For instance, we know that Peter wrote his first epistle from "Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13), and that Paul wrote several of his epistles while in prison in Rome, and even that John wrote Revelation while on the Island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). But with the Gospel of John, we have no explicit reference to its place of composition or the location where this Gospel was first published.

Based on a profile of the reader drawn from clues in the text, it appears that John wrote his Gospel *for* an audience residing outside the borders of his native Israel.¹

¹ Modern scholarship typically refers to the *land* of Israel as "Palestine" but to the *people* of that land as "Jews" or "Israelites." However, the term "Israel" is used here in order to reflect a biblical rather than secular perspective. In the Bible itself, "Israel" is the name given by God to both the *people* who descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as the *land* promised to them by God (2 Chron. 34:7; Ezek. 7:2; 11:17; 20:42). The term "Palestine" is a secular, manmade term, of historically hostile origin toward the land of Israel and its people, often identified as "Jews" based on their association with one of the twelve tribes of Israel—the prominent tribe of Judah. Hence the name "Judea" or "Judeans." The name "Palestine" is a derivative of "Philistine." "Palestine" was applied to the historic land of Israel by the Romans after A.D. 135. Current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu writes, "It was the Roman Empire, bent on destroying every vestige of Jewish attachment to the land, that invented the name *Palestina* to replace *Judea*, the historic name of the country" (*A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World* [New York: Bantam, 1993], 4 n.). First-century Israelites customarily referred to one another as "Israelites" and their nation as "Israel." But they often switched to "Jews" when addressing Gentiles in order to accommodate Gentile usage (Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine*

Perhaps he also wrote it *from* a foreign city or region as well. Repeatedly John must explain to the reader the location of cities in Israel and Israel's geographical features. For example, Aenon, where John was baptizing, is said to be near Salim (3:23); and in Jerusalem, it is explained that there is a pool, called Bethesda, by the Sheep Gate (5:2); and the town of Bethany is identified as being near Jerusalem (11:18). This pattern is characteristic of John's Gospel. One thing becomes clear as we read the book: its writer has firsthand familiarity with the geography of Judea, but the assumed reader does not.² This not only supports the identity of the apostle John as the author but also that his intended audience extended beyond the borders of Israel and comprised either Gentiles or Jews of the Diaspora. But if John wrote for a foreign audience, is it possible that he also wrote and published the fourth Gospel from a foreign locale?

Some have conjectured that John was most likely written and published from the Gentile and cosmopolitan city of Ephesus with its Jewish diasporic population in mind.³ This is certainly possible since historical tradition says John's Gospel was written in Ephesus while the apostle John lived and ministered there subsequent to Paul and Timothy. Though an indisputable case for Ephesus as the place of origination still cannot be made at this point, C. K. Barrett has rightly concluded that the evidence for Ephesus is "perhaps a little stronger than has recently been allowed."⁴ While there is no explicit reference in John's Gospel or the rest of the New Testament to substantiate the provenance of the fourth Gospel from Ephesus, there are a few biblical and historical factors pointing in this direction.

First, it may be significant that when John was exiled to Patmos and wrote the book of Revelation, the very first church that the Lord Jesus instructed His servant to write to was the church in Ephesus, a church John would have been most intimately and recently acquainted with.⁵ Second, there is the consistent testimony of early church tradition that John not only lived in Ephesus but also wrote his Gospel there. This includes the statements of Irenaeus, Polycrates, Eusebius, and the anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Gospel of John.⁶ Third, there is a "long and now epigraphically provable connection between Ephesus and [the name] *Joannes*."⁷ In the surviving inscriptions from ancient Ephesus, there are preserved 18 occurrences of the name *Joannes*, but very

Theology [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015], 159-60). John's Gospel reflects this pattern. Compare 1:31, 47, 49; 3:10; 12:13 to 18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21 (idem, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 230). Bauckham writes, "The very frequent use of 'the Jews' in John is largely due to the fact that the evangelist himself, writing for Gentiles (as well as Jews), follows Gentile usage" (ibid., 230 n. 96).

² R. D. Potter, "Topography and Archaeology in the Fourth Gospel," in *Studia Evangelica* (Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 335, 337.

³ Zane C. Hodges, "In the Upper Room (John 13-17) with Jesus the Christ," Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 4, 2008; idem, "Introducing John's Gospel: In the Upper Room with Jesus the Christ," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 21 (Spring 2008): 34-37.

⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 129.

⁵ Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 2:267.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.22.5 and 3.1.1; Polycrates in Eusebius's, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3:31.1-3; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3:39.6.

⁷ Sjeff van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 3.

few by comparison for any other biblical name. Mary's name, for instance, has been found only four times, as well as four occurrences for Paul, and only one for Peter.⁸

Considering that such an early, consistent testimony remains for John's association with Ephesus, it would be remarkable if this apostle did *not* actually write and minister in that city. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Emperor Justinian in the mid-sixth century built the Church of St. John in Ephesus upon the reputed burial site of this beloved apostle, the ruins of which remain to this day as a popular tourist site in modern-day Turkey. Though it has yet to be proven, it is quite possible that the apostle John lived in Ephesus and first published his Gospel there.⁹ Of all ancient locations, Ephesus should still be considered the frontrunner.¹⁰

But no theory is without its challenges. Some scholars have raised one apparent problem with the Ephesus theory of John's residence and origination of his Gospel. They object that when Ignatius of Antioch wrote his epistle to the church in Ephesus early in the second century (c. 110), he extolled the apostle Paul while John did not receive even honorable mention.¹¹ Though Paul ministered in Ephesus for the space of only three years (Acts 20:31), tradition leaves the impression that John had a much longer tenure in the city. Consequently, some scholars claim that it would be peculiar for Ignatius to skip over the more recent ministry of John at Ephesus, less than a quarter century prior, while praising Paul's more distant and brief residence there, over 50 years beforehand.¹² But this objection quickly evaporates once it is realized that in Ignatius's letter to the Ephesians, Paul himself is not exactly "extolled" or emphasized, since he is referred to only once.¹³ Even then, the lone reference to Paul is a passing reference to his martyrdom, with martyrdom being a pervasive theme in the letters of Ignatius because of his own imminent death in Rome. No doubt the reason Ignatius referenced Paul and not John in such a context is simply because Paul was martyred for the faith, as Ignatius was soon to be as well; and thus Paul provided the suitable comparison, whereas John was exempt from martyrdom. In the final analysis, the fact that Ignatius omits any reference to John is ultimately an argument from silence.

Whether or not John wrote the fourth Gospel in Ephesus, we may never know; but this would not necessarily prove that he intended to write for either a Jewish or Gentile audience. It is far from conclusive that John must have written his Gospel to a strictly (or even primarily) Jewish audience in Ephesus since first-century Judaism was greatly influenced by its surrounding Hellenistic culture, and even an audience in the Jewish quarters of Ephesus was most likely affected by syncretism.¹⁴ This explains why

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3 n. 6.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, "St. John at Ephesus," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 60 (1978): 339-61.

¹⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 83-84.

¹¹ Colin G. Cruse, *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 26.

¹² D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6.

¹³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 12.2.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 54-73; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 230-31; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine*

interpreters have had such difficulty determining whether John was written primarily for a Jewish or a Greek audience.

Old Testament Background

A more solid piece of evidence for John's Gospel being written for a Jewish audience is its extensive Old Testament background. As recent as the mid-twentieth century, many New Testament scholars regarded the background of John's Gospel to be primarily Hellenistic.¹⁵ How times have changed, as the pendulum has swung decisively back in the right direction. Now there is virtual unanimous agreement that the Gospel of John is a thoroughly Jewish book in terms of its background and the influences upon its composition.¹⁶ This is evident through its abundance of Old Testament quotations,¹⁷ allusions,¹⁸ and systemic tabernacle and feast-day imagery.¹⁹ Naturally, this has led some to conclude that John was writing primarily to a Jewish audience.²⁰

The Jewish orientation of the fourth Gospel is apparent from analyzing the type of Old Testament text John used. It is clear that John was not dependent upon the Greek Septuagint (LXX) when quoting from the Old Testament. In several of John's Scripture quotations, the quote agrees with *both* the Hebrew text and the Septuagint (John 10:34 cf. Ps. 82:6; John 12:38 cf. Isa. 53:1; John 15:25 cf. Ps. 34:19; John 19:24 cf. Ps. 22:18). There are even places where the quote follows the Hebrew text *against* the Septuagint (John 6:45 cf. Isa. 54:13; John 13:18 cf. Ps. 41:9; John 19:37 cf. Zech. 12:10). But, significantly, there are *no* instances where John follows the Septuagint against the

During the Early Hellenistic Period, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 298, 308; Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 158.

¹⁵ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 308.

¹⁶ J. W. Bowker, "The Origin and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 11 (1964–65): 398–408; Jack P. Lewis, "The Semitic Background of the Gospel of John," in *Johannine Studies: Essays in Honor of Frank Pack*, ed. James E. Priest (Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University Press, 1989), 97–110; Nigel Turner, "The Style of John," in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by James H. Moulton, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 4:64.

¹⁷ Saeed Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ: A Theological Inquiry into the Elusive Language of the Fourth Gospel*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 132–44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91–120.

¹⁹ Martin Hengel, "The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 380–95; John Painter, "The Quotation of Scripture and Unbelief in John 12:36b–43," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 429–58; Eugene W. Pond, "The Theological Dependencies of John's Gospel on Isaiah," (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985); Günter Reim, "Jesus as God in the Fourth Gospel: The Old Testament Background," *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984): 158–60; C. Van der Waal, "The Gospel according to John and the Old Testament," *Neotestamentica* 6 (1972): 28–47.

²⁰ John A. T. Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London: SCM, 1962), 113.

Hebrew text.²¹ This demonstrates that the writer of the fourth Gospel was at least familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and not dependent upon a Greek translation.²²

An Old Testament background and Jewish flavor for John is also apparent in the similar phraseology between John 1:1 (“In the beginning was the Word [λόγος]”) and Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning God”).²³ In fact, the first two words of John 1:1 and of Genesis 1:1 (LXX) are identical (ἐν ἀρχῇ).²⁴ John may have intentionally patterned the opening verse of his Gospel after Genesis; and undoubtedly, only a biblically informed reader such as a Jew or God-fearing Gentile would have made the connection between these two verses. But this does not mean, as some commentators assume,²⁵ that a biblically illiterate Gentile would be unable to correctly *interpret* John 1:1 without this Old Testament background. That would be concluding too much. John may have deliberately employed the λόγος terminology of verse 1 in order to pique the interest of the average Gentile reader.²⁶ The term λόγος would have been familiar to John’s Gentile readers since it was a common term of the day, often employed in Greek philosophy.²⁷ Even though John chose a term in popular usage (as guided by the Holy Spirit), the word λόγος in the fourth Gospel is invested with a unique meaning that aligns with the Old Testament rather than pagan philosophy.²⁸ In John 1:1 and 1:14, λόγος is personified as the Lord Jesus Christ. This is similar to the personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22–31 and in later Jewish literature (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 7:22, 25; 9:1–2).²⁹ According to Proverbs, the one who finds wisdom finds life (Prov. 8:35), just as in John, where the Logos is the true source of life (John 1:3–4). But once again, this does not necessarily mean that a Gentile reader would be unable to accurately interpret John’s distinct meaning of λόγος without prior knowledge of this Old Testament background. John

²¹ W. Hall Harris, *The Gospel of John: Introduction and Commentary* (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 13.

²² Turner, “Style of John,” 4:68.

²³ John Painter, “Rereading Genesis in the Prologue of John?” in *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, ed. David E. Aune, Torrey Seland, Jarl Henning Ulrichsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 179-201.

²⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *The Johannine Logos*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1989), 23.

²⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 91.

²⁶ Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 6-7.

²⁷ Daniel Roy Mitchell, “The Person of Christ in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1982), 26-27; Turner and Mantey, *Gospel According to John*, 26-28.

²⁸ Clark, *Johannine Logos*, 15-19; Eldon J. Epp, “Wisdom, Torah, Word: The Johannine Prologue and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 128-46; Jarl E. Fossum, “In the Beginning Was the Name: Onomanology as the Key to Johannine Christology,” in *The Image of the Invisible God* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 109-33; Harris, “A Theology of John’s Writings,” 190-91; David J. MacLeod, “The Eternality and Deity of the Word: John 1:1–2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (January-March 2003): 55; Mitchell, “The Person of Christ in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” 28-36.

²⁹ Mitchell, “The Person of Christ in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” 34-36; D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 18.

develops the meaning of his key terms, including the most significant one (“Christ”), within his own Gospel.³⁰

The Old Testament background to John’s Gospel is also apparent from its repeated references to biblical characters. These characters often appear without a word of explanation, as though John assumes his readers already know their identity. For example, in the Prologue and Introduction, Moses (1:17), the Levites (1:19), and Elijah (1:21, 25) are all mentioned without qualification or explanation. Later in John’s Gospel, even though much is said about Moses, not another word is mentioned about the Levites or Elijah. Even in John 4:12, where the Samaritan woman at the well asks the Lord Jesus, “Are You greater than our father Jacob?” the identity of the patriarch Jacob is partially assumed for John’s readers. But precisely who is this “Jacob”? We learn from the context only that he gave a plot of land to his son Joseph (4:5) and consequently that Jacob’s well is there (4:6). An uninformed Gentile reader would certainly not grasp the full significance of this episode in John 4 without further Old Testament knowledge of these characters, yet the Gentile interpreter would still be able to infer from the context that Jacob must be an important patriarch in the history of the Samaritans and Jews. The same situation pertains with Abraham in John 8:53, where the Jews ask Christ, “Are you greater than our father Abraham?” Once again, the context furnishes the implication for the reader who may lack any Old Testament background that Abraham was the physical progenitor of the Jewish nation (8:33, 37, 39). What each of these examples illustrates is that some prior knowledge of the Old Testament (as a Jewish reader might possess) would certainly be advantageous, but not absolutely necessary, for understanding the main theological lessons of John’s Gospel.³¹ Therefore, an Old Testament background to John’s Gospel would not necessarily constitute proof of a primarily Jewish audience. It may only indicate the background of the writer, John, not the background or identity of his intended readers.

Prevalence of “the Jews”

Besides the evident Old Testament background to John’s Gospel, another argument put forth in favor of a primarily Jewish audience is the prevalence of the phrase “the Jews.” According to John Robinson, who is the principal spokesman for the primarily-Jewish-audience view, the phrase “the Jews” occurs 26 times in John, compared with only five occurrences in Matthew, six in Mark, and five in Luke.³² This disparity would ostensibly indicate that John was targeting a distinctly Jewish audience. However, Robinson’s point about the recurrent use of “the Jews” may actually favor the opposite conclusion. In order for Robinson’s theory to be correct that John is speaking directly to a Jewish audience while simultaneously referring to them as “the Jews,” this must mean that John is addressing his readership with the use of the third person. It would be equivalent to someone having a personal conversation with me, the author, but continually talking

³⁰ Ibid., Mitchell, 46, 131-34.

³¹ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 168.

³² Robinson, “The Destination and Purpose,” 109. Robinson grossly miscalculates the number of times the phrase “the Jews” occurs in John. It occurs 71 times rather than only 26 times. This fact underscores the contrast with the Synoptic Gospels even more.

about me as “Mr. Stegall” instead of directly addressing me as “you.” When the reader of John’s Gospel repeatedly encounters “the Jews” it leaves the impression that John is actually speaking to Gentile readers rather than directly to the Jews themselves.

But Robinson’s point about the prevalence of “the Jews” momentarily appears to receive some support from his additional observation that there is not a single instance in John’s Gospel where a Gentile character is referred to as a “Gentile.” In fact, the term “Gentile/s” (ἔθνος) does not appear even once. Nor is there any evangelistic appeal to Gentiles as such in the fourth Gospel. Robinson writes:

There are no more universalistic sayings in the New Testament than in the fourth Gospel: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (12.32). Yet for all this there is no mention of, nor appeal to, the Gentiles as such. When Jesus is pressed to “show himself to the world” (7.4), it is not an urge to missionary expansion but to public demonstration—and that to “the Jews”. . . . If as a whole the Jews are hopelessly blind and walk on in darkness, those who come to the light and hear Jesus’ voice are still Jews, not Gentiles—both in general (there are repeated references to the Jews who believe in him: 2.33; 7.31; 8.31; 10.42; 11.45; 12.11) and as represented by particular individuals: Nathanael, the ideal Israelite (1.47), Nicodemus, “the ruler of the Jews” and “teacher of Israel” (3.1, 10), Joseph of Arimathea (19.38) and the man born blind (9.1–39).³³

Robinson makes another important observation at this point. It does seem rather conspicuous that John never includes the faith of Gentiles in his Gospel, in contrast to the Synoptic writers (Matt. 8:10; 15:28; Mark 15:39; Luke 7:9; 23:47). But once again, Robinson’s conclusion does not necessarily follow from his observation. It is hardly necessary to conclude from John’s exclusive references to the Jews that he is not addressing a Gentile audience. It is more likely that in his Gospel “the Jews,” though still meaning first-century ethnic, religious Judeans,³⁴ are used by John representatively of humanity in general, serving as the embodiment of the universal human condition.³⁵ For instance, they are described as not having seen or heard the Father (5:37), as being without the life that Christ can give them (5:41), and as not possessing the love of God within themselves (5:43). John’s description of “the Jews” could equally be stated for the Gentiles, even as Paul writes in Ephesians 4:17–18: “This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.” In the

³³ Ibid., 112.

³⁴ Cornelis Bennema, “The Identity and Composition of Οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 60.2 (2009): 239–63.

³⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 130; G. Theodore Martinez, “The Purpose of the Gospel of John,” (Th.M. thesis, Talbot School of Theology, 1990), 95. For an entire doctoral thesis supporting this position, see Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 220 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

fourth Gospel, it is evident that “the Jews” are not primarily defined by their cultural or ethnic “Jewishness” but in terms of universally applicable spiritual characteristics.³⁶

Jewishness of Jesus

Another argument that has been proposed in favor of a primarily Jewish audience for the Gospel of John is that Jesus is described throughout the fourth Gospel as the quintessential Jew. Lamar Cribbs observes that John is the only Gospel in which Jesus is explicitly declared to be a “Jew” (4:9).³⁷ In addition, John affirms that Jesus always “taught in synagogues and in the temple” (18:20) and that He held Moses (1:17, 45; 3:14; 5:45–47; 6:32; 7:22–23) and the Law in highest esteem (1:17, 45; 4:12; 5:45–47; 6:31; 7:19, 49, 51; 8:13, 56; 12:34; 18:31; 19:7).³⁸ Cribbs goes on to note that in the Gospel of John, Jesus is described “as a devout Jew” who followed “the God of Israel (4:22) and who made regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem to share in the holy feasts of Judaism (2:18; 5:1; 7:10; 10:22; 12:22).”³⁹

It is certainly true that John highlights the fundamental Jewishness of Jesus since He is the Jewish Messiah and thus the very fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic Scripture concerning the Christ. But again, this does not necessarily prove that John is appealing primarily to a Jewish audience, for in fact there are times in the fourth Gospel when Jesus, though truly Jewish, purposely distances Himself from the Jewish nation. Though He is one of them in a physical sense, He disassociates Himself from them in a spiritual sense. This can be observed in 13:33, where the Jewish Lord speaks to His eleven Jewish disciples and refers to “the Jews” as a separate, third category or group. He says, “Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come,’ so now I say to you.” This distancing from the Jews is also evident in those passages where the Lord refers to the Pentateuch as “your Law” (7:19; 8:17; 10:34) and “their Law” (15:25),⁴⁰ when in actuality it was every bit as much His Law since He is its principal subject (5:39, 46).

Messiahship of Jesus

Similar to the preceding argument, another reason some scholars believe John was written primarily to a Jewish audience is because they claim John’s Gospel places special emphasis on the Jewish, messianic character of Jesus as the Christ. Robinson sees this demonstrated in John’s use of the title “the Christ,” claiming “it comes as a surprise to most to be told that John uses the title [ὁ Χριστός] more frequently than Matthew (21 times to 17), and more often than Mark (7) and Luke (13) put together.”⁴¹ But a higher frequency of occurrence for Χριστός does not necessarily prove that John wrote primarily

³⁶ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 125-32, especially 129.

³⁷ F. Lamar Cribbs, “A Reassessment of the Date of Origin and the Destination of the Gospel of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 47

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁰ Martinez, “The Purpose of the Gospel of John,” 95.

⁴¹ Robinson, “The Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel,” 114.

to the Jews. If that were the case, then the much shorter New Testament books of Romans and 1 Corinthians were definitely aimed at a Jewish audience since they contain the title Χριστός 68 and 65 times respectively, and were written by Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, to predominantly Gentile congregations.⁴²

Robinson also points out that the Gospel of John is the only book in the entire New Testament to contain the word Μεσσίας (John 1:41; 4:25), which is the Aramaic (Jewish) equivalent of the Greek title Χριστός.⁴³ While Robinson's observation is correct once again, his deduction is not valid. The force of his argument is immediately blunted by the realization that in both occurrences of Μεσσίας, John the narrator must interpret the term for his readers. Why would he do this for a primarily Jewish audience, especially when such a term was supposedly used by John to convey a greater Jewish connection with his audience than the use of the Greek term Χριστός? Furthermore, in the John 4:25 occurrence of Μεσσίας, the context deals with a *Samaritan* woman believing in Jesus, which would hardly elicit Jewish sympathies.

Carson proposes another argument for a Jewish, messianic emphasis and purpose for the fourth Gospel. He believes that John 20:31 should not be translated the way it has been traditionally: "but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Instead, Carson thinks John 20:31 should read, "but these are written that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God is Jesus."⁴⁴ According to Carson's theory, believing that "the Messiah is Jesus" versus believing that "Jesus is the Messiah" highlights a significant difference. If this verse were really saying "the Messiah is Jesus," then this would presuppose knowledge of the Messiah and His characteristics on the part of John's readership, pointing to a biblically informed Jewish audience. If the reading "the Messiah is Jesus" were correct, then John would not be seeking to answer the question, what will the Messiah/Christ be like? That is already assumed to be known by John's readers. The real question in such a case then becomes, who is this Jesus and does He fit the profile and qualifications of the biblical Messiah?

To arrive at this novel interpretation and translation of John 20:31, Carson seeks to prove that the articular noun ὁ Χριστός actually functions as the subject in the sentence and conversely that the personal name Ἰησοῦς is the predicate nominative. To date, few scholars have embraced Carson's theory,⁴⁵ while several have found reasons to reject it.⁴⁶ There are some valid objections to this "Messiah-is-Jesus" view of John 20:31.

⁴² Though Rome and Corinth each had mixed congregations comprised of both Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ (Rom. 16:3, 11, 21; 1 Cor. 7:18), there is no reason to believe that the church in either city was predominantly Jewish in proportion. In fact, the evidence points to predominantly Gentile churches (Rom. 1:5–6; 11:13; 1 Cor. 12:2). See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 3-13; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 3-4, 13-15.

⁴³ Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," 114.

⁴⁴ Carson, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel," 643-51; idem, "Syntactical and Text-Critical Observations," 712-13.

⁴⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 582.

⁴⁶ James V. Brownson, "John 20:31 and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel," *Reformed Review* 48 (1995): 212-15; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in John's Gospel* (Peabody, MA:

First, Carson's grammatical claim is unconvincing. Greek grammarian Daniel Wallace says that this view's grammatical "evidence is ambiguous and, if anything, moves in the opposite direction."⁴⁷ Wallace concludes, "In short, there is no *grammatical* argument that John is written to Jews. Such a view must be based on [evidence] other than grammar where, in fact, the case seems less well founded."⁴⁸

A second significant problem with the "Messiah is Jesus" view is that it does not agree with parallel Johannine constructions. We see this demonstrated from within the Gospel of John, particularly from Martha's statement in John 11:27, where she says to Jesus, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are [σὺ εἶ] the Christ [ὁ Χριστός], the Son of God, who is to come into the world." Grammatically, Martha cannot be saying to Jesus here, "the Christ are You," forcing "You" (σὺ) to take the position of the predicate nominative and "the Christ" to be the subject.⁴⁹ Brownson presents several similar constructions in John's Gospel (1:49; 3:28; 6:35, 69; 8:12; 10:7; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1), concluding, "These examples illustrate John's fondness for titles in the predicate, and his tendency to retain the definite article with the title, even when it is used in the predicate."⁵⁰

Likewise, in John's first epistle, the parallel structure to John 20:31 appears in at least four passages. First John 2:22 and 5:1 read Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστός ("Jesus is the Christ"). And in 1 John 4:15 and 5:5, we find the appositional equivalent Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ("Jesus is the Son of God"). There is no reason to believe that these passages should be read backwards in Greek, saying in effect, "the Christ is Jesus" and "the Son of God is Jesus," which would, according to Carson's logic, point to a Jewish audience for 1 John, whereas Wallace points out regarding this epistle, "the audience seems clearly to be of a Gentile nature (cf. 5:21)."⁵¹

Finally, the major flaw in the "Messiah is Jesus" theory of John 20:31 is that it assumes that Israel had a harmonious and settled doctrine of the Messiah when Jesus appeared and that the only real question left to resolve was whether or not Jesus was this Messiah. This theory assumes too much spiritual comprehension about the Messiah on the part of a Jewish readership in the first century. While it is true that God had progressively *revealed* vast amounts of truth about the coming Messiah in the Old Testament Scriptures leading up to the advent of Christ, and the Jews were in possession of this revelation, one would be hard pressed to prove that the Jews actually *understood* this revelation adequately. In fact, the nation of Israel in Jesus' generation grossly misunderstood the true spiritual character and qualifications of the Christ. For this reason, they did not recognize Jesus as their Messiah. This explains why the Lord Jesus was reticent to publicly apply the term "Christ" or "Messiah" to Himself, though He was and is the Christ. The term was filled with misconceptions about a political, military

Hendrickson, 2000), 177; John Niemelä, "Finding True North in 1 John," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (July-September 2000): 26 n. 5; idem, "The Message of Life in the Gospel of John," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (July-September 2001): 10 n. 15; Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 46-47.

⁴⁷ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 46-47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁹ Niemelä, "Finding True North," 26 n. 5; idem, "The Message of Life," 10 n. 15.

⁵⁰ James V. Brownson, "John 20:31 and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel," *Reformed Review* 48 (1995): 214.

⁵¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 46.

conqueror who would overthrow Roman rule rather than a Savior from sin and its wages.⁵² This also explains why the Gospel of John develops the key terms “the Christ” and “the Son of God” independently of first-century Jewish presuppositions (6:15; 7:27, 34; 18:36).⁵³ If the reader of John’s Gospel is to receive eternal life by believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, or conversely that the Christ, the Son of God (i.e., the Messiah) is Jesus, this necessitates having a correct conception of “the Christ” and “Son of God.” Throughout John’s developing narrative, the reader is provided with an accurate depiction of Jesus’ identity and the meaning of the Messiah in order to equate the two by faith. Readers must comprehend spiritually both who Jesus is and who the Messiah is supposed to be in order to place their faith in Him as the Christ.

Omission of the Great Commission

Another argument sometimes proposed for a primarily Jewish audience of John’s Gospel is the fact that it contains no Great Commission to the nations like the Synoptic Gospels.⁵⁴ In this respect, it is claimed that John is Judeo-centric to the extreme. Robinson even goes so far as to claim that in John “Jesus is not presented as a revelation to the Gentiles.”⁵⁵ In addition, after considering all the characters who serve as “witnesses” in the fourth Gospel for Jesus being “the Christ,” Robinson concludes, “there is no Gentile witness to Jesus in the entire Gospel—not even the final testimony of the centurion to him as the Son of God.”⁵⁶ Unfortunately, Robinson has not faithfully

⁵² John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 238-91; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 409-11; James H. Charlesworth, “From Jewish Messianology to Christian Christology: Some Caveats and Perspectives,” in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, ed. Jacob Neusner, William S. Green, and Ernest Frerichs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 234-35; John J. Collins, “The Son of Man in First-Century Judaism,” *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 448-66; Marinus de Jonge, “The Use of the Word ‘Anointed’ in the Time of Jesus,” *Novum Testamentum* 8 (1966): 132-48; John M. Drexler, “Jewish Messianic Hopes at the Time of Christ as Revealed in John’s Gospel,” (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1985), 4-49; R. A. Horsley, “Popular Messianic Movements Around the Time of Jesus,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 471-95; Michael E. Stone, “The Question of the Messiah in 4 Ezra,” in *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, ed. Jacob Neusner, William S. Green, and Ernest Frerichs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 214-19; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:285-98; J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 90-128; Yunju Ryou, “Understanding Popular Messianic Belief around the Time of Jesus and the Messiahship of Jesus” (M.S.T. thesis, Yale Divinity School, 1989), 6-22.

⁵³ Drexler, “Jewish Messianic Hopes at the Time of Christ as Revealed in John’s Gospel,” 50-101; James Parker, “The Incarnational Christology of John,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3.1 (Spring 1988): 45-46.

⁵⁴ Robinson, “The Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel,” 111.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Robinson’s claim here is not entirely accurate since Pilate provides a Gentile witness to Christ through the use of irony in John 19:19–22, where Pilate calls Him “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,” which the Jews themselves are unwilling to claim for Him. For the fact that there is a valid theological point being made by John here through the literary device of irony, see Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 136-37.

represented the fourth Gospel on this point and has once again drawn invalid conclusions about its audience.⁵⁷

While John's Gospel contains a post-resurrection, pre-ascension commissioning of the disciples (20:21–23) similar to the Synoptic Gospels,⁵⁸ John's commission is not as explicitly universal as the commission in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 28:19, "all nations"; Mark 16:15, "all the world"; Luke 24:47, "to all nations"). The Great Commission *is* present in the fourth Gospel; but John's Gospel takes a unique literary approach to the doctrine of the Great Commission⁵⁹ by implicitly assuming a worldwide commission for the disciples based on Christ's own mission to the world. In the Upper Room Discourse, the Lord promises His disciples that "when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning" (John 15:26–27). Later, in Christ's High Priestly prayer to the Father, the Great Commission is assumed once again for His disciples. There Jesus prays, "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. . . . I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word" (17:18, 20). While John's Gospel does not emphasize the historical event of Christ commissioning His disciples as the Synoptic Gospels do, it certainly stresses the theology of the commission.

In the Gospel of John more than any other Gospel, there is a very strong "sending" motif⁶⁰ that defines Jesus' incarnational mission as being universal in scope and not just to the Jews. This is nowhere communicated more clearly than in John 3:16–17, where verse 17 uses the term "world" (κόσμος) three times, saying, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." By no stretch of the imagination can verse 17 be interpreted to mean just "the world" of the Jews. Nor can Robinson's assertion stand that in John "Jesus is not presented as a revelation to the Gentiles."⁶¹ The extent to which Christ became an enlightening revelation is best expressed by Jesus Himself, who declared in 8:12, "I am the light of *the world*." Likewise in 1:9, the writer John states that Christ "was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into *the world*." Derickson and Radmacher agree that John's Gospel is intended from its very beginning for Gentiles: "early in the

⁵⁷ John Niemelä also cites the supposed lack of a Gentile mission in Matthew and John as a reason for both books being written before A.D. 44. He explains that the words of Jesus were "pregnant" with meaning regarding the Great Commission but not explicit about going to Gentiles. This allowed Peter and John to think that they were fulfilling Christ's commission by going to Jews who were dispersed to every nation, and this is why the Lord's revelation to Peter in Acts 10 was such a marked change. Niemelä, "Luke 1 Is the Edifying Introduction to Both Luke and Acts," Grace Evangelical Society National Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 2011.

⁵⁸ Edward W. Klink, III, "The Breath of Jesus: An Examination and Interpretation of the 'Johannine Pentecost' in John 20:19–23" (Th.M. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002), 87-91.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Two Johannine Verbs for Sending: A Study of John's Use of Words with Reference to General Linguistic Theory," in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctures*, ed. D. A. Carson and Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 125-43; Calvin Mercer, "Jesus the Apostle: 'Sending' and the Theology of John," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (December 1992): 457-62.

⁶¹ Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," 111.

Gospel [John] moves from the covenant people, Israel, to the broader Gentile audience when he says, ‘He came to His own and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name’ (1:11–12).⁶² Therefore, John’s Gospel does not present a mission and outreach that extends only, or even primarily, to the Jews. The message of the fourth Gospel extends to the entire “world” of both Jews and Gentiles.

Samaritans

While there is an abundance of evidence that positively *includes* the Jews among John’s intended readership, the pro-Samaritan posture of John’s Gospel poses an insuperable challenge to the view that Jews are John’s *principal* audience. If John’s primary concern were convincing Jews to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, then the choice to positively portray the Samaritans makes little sense in light of the Jews’ animosity toward the Samaritans (4:9; 8:48).

John’s Gospel displays a pro-Samaritan posture in several ways. The first example may be inferred from the unbelieving Jews’ response to Jesus, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” (8:48). Jesus replies, “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me” (v. 49). Jesus’ response may reflect a positive posture toward the Samaritans in that He says nothing to the charge of being a Samaritan, while choosing only to deny that He has a demon.⁶³

Second, there is a contrast between the negative spiritual response of the Judean Jews versus the positive response of the Samaritans. John 11:54 mentions Jesus’ journey to the Samaritan city of Ephraim⁶⁴ to avoid the antagonism of the Judean Jews the week before He is crucified in Jerusalem.⁶⁵ Similarly, Jesus’ travel from Judea to Samaria is attributed to the hostility of the Judean Pharisees (4:1–3). After the Samaritan city of Sychar comes to believe in Jesus (4:39–42), He stays there two days and then departs to Galilee, citing the proverb that “a prophet has no honor in his own country” (4:44). Here Jesus refers to the region of His birth, namely, Judea (Micah 5:2), rather than the region of His upbringing, namely, Galilee.⁶⁶ These contrasts serve to verify John’s general claim in the Prologue: “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (1:11–12).⁶⁷

⁶² Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* (Salem, OR: Charis, 2001), 23.

⁶³ Edwin D. Freed, “Did John Write His Gospel Partly to Win Samaritan Converts?” *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970): 243; Charles H. H. Scobie, “The Origins and Development of Samaritan Christianity,” *New Testament Studies* 19.4 (1973): 404; Gerard S. Sloyan, “The Samaritans in the New Testament,” *Horizons* 10.1 (1983): 16-17.

⁶⁴ The Samaritans claimed to be descendants of the tribe of Ephraim (and Manasseh). Freed, “Did John Write His Gospel Partly to Win Samaritan Converts?” 242.

⁶⁵ Sloyan, “The Samaritans in the New Testament,” 17.

⁶⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 39-40; James D. Purvis, “The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans,” *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975): 170; Scobie, “Origins and Development of Samaritan Christianity,” 403 n. 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Scobie, 403.

Third, the lengthy account in John 4 of the Samaritan woman at the well near Sychar presents someone who is outside the ranks of Judaism and becomes saved from out of the κόσμος. After her salvation, when the rest of the Samaritans in her town believe, they testify that Jesus is “the Christ, the Savior of the world [κόσμος]” (4:42). In the process, these Samaritans (not Jews) become emblematic of the entire Gospel, where Christ saves believers from the whole “world.”⁶⁸ By selecting this episode that occurred in the Samaritan village of Sychar, the writer John is targeting a broader audience than just the Jews. John is the only Gospel writer who chose to include this historical episode in his Gospel; and by doing so, he anticipates the church’s future commission to evangelize not just Jerusalem and Judea but also Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8; 8:1–38).

It seems most reasonable to include Samaritans, as well as Jews and Gentiles, among the intended recipients of John’s Gospel.⁶⁹ When the internal evidence from the Gospel of John is allowed to speak for itself, it paints a convincing picture that John intended his Gospel for a mixture of Jewish and Gentile readers.

EVIDENCE FOR A GENTILE AUDIENCE

Having surveyed the evidence for a Jewish audience intended by John, we now turn to the positive evidence for a Gentile readership. In doing so, we find the evidence for Gentile recipients to be at least as strong as the evidence for Jewish readers; but once again, the positive evidence for a Gentile audience in John does not necessarily preclude a Jewish readership.⁷⁰

Gentiles versus Diasporic Jews

The following evidence is proof for a *Gentile* audience and not merely for a Jewish audience living outside the regions of Judea and Galilee. Some scholars who hold to the principally-Jewish-audience view qualify their position by maintaining that John is addressing Jews of the Diaspora.⁷¹ However, John’s many explanatory asides to his readers do not fit neatly with the Jewish Diaspora interpretation. Just one example is sufficient for now to illustrate this point. Returning again to the pericope about the Samaritans, John 4:9 contains the words of the Samaritan woman to Jesus, which are immediately followed by John’s own explanatory note to the reader: “‘How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?’ For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.” An explanation about Samaritan-Jewish relationships would, of course, be completely unnecessary for a Judean or Galilean Jew who was reading John’s Gospel. Such a comment would also be unnecessary for a Samaritan

⁶⁸ Craig R. Koester, “The Savior of the World (John 4:42),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109:4 (1990): 678-79.

⁶⁹ Freed, “Did John Write His Gospel Partly to Win Samaritan Converts?” 245-46, 256.

⁷⁰ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 165-74.

⁷¹ Zane C. Hodges, “Miraculous Signs and Literary Structure in the Fourth Gospel,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 5, 2008; Robinson, “Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel,” 107-25; W. C. van Unnik, “The Purpose of John’s Gospel,” in *Studia Evangelica* (Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 407-8.

reader. So who was it intended for? The animosity between these two ethnic rivals was well known by each party in that day, similar to Jews living in the modern State of Israel who do not need to be informed that there is open hostility between Arab Palestinians and Israelis. Some things are so obvious that they do not require explanation. John's explanatory note in 4:9 was certainly not needed for Jews or Samaritans living in the land of Israel, nor was it necessary for diasporic Jews and Samaritans living outside the land, as Bowman writes, "Even if John's Gospel was written in Ephesus, it is quite wrong to think of the Samaritan Jewish dispute as a local affair. Samaritans were throughout the Empire."⁷² Jews and Samaritans outside the land still had some ties to the land and culture of Israel and Samaria, and thus they had some familiarity with the notorious rift between their two groups. This leaves only Gentiles as the audience intended by this necessary explanatory note.

Identification of Geography and Topography

The positive evidence for a Gentile audience can also be observed by John's routine identification of Israel's geographical and topographical features for the reader.⁷³ Such explanations would be unnecessary for a Judean or Galilean Jew, or even a Samaritan, but these would be quite helpful to a Gentile unfamiliar with the environs of Israel. Explanatory notes to the reader abound in John's Gospel.⁷⁴ Regarding the story of the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4, John gives the location of the city within Samaria, as well as the location of the well of the famous patriarch Jacob. He informs his readers, "So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob's well was there." Then later, in John 5:2, the narrator assumes some of his readers had never been to the temple in Jerusalem, for he describes the place known as the pool of Bethesda, saying, "Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches."⁷⁵ John also considers it necessary to tell his readers that the Sea of Galilee is also called the "Sea of Tiberias"⁷⁶ (6:1), thus envisioning an audience beyond Galilean Jews. In 11:18, John tells his readers that the town of Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were from, was a suburb of Jerusalem, located roughly two miles (fifteen stadia) from this great city. It seems unlikely that diasporic Jews who routinely traveled to Jerusalem for feast days (Acts 2:8–11; 20:16) would have been completely unfamiliar with the location of towns around the holy city. Similarly, regarding John 5:2, many diasporic Jews would have already known about the "Sheep Gate" at the temple in Jerusalem. As a final example, the location of the Lord's crucifixion in Jerusalem is also provided for the reader, where John describes it as "a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha" (John 19:17).⁷⁷ This may have been a known location for those Jews

⁷² John Bowman, "Samaritan Studies," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40 (1958): 308.

⁷³ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 22-23.

⁷⁴ Potter, "Topography and Archaeology in the Fourth Gospel," 329-37.

⁷⁵ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 23.

⁷⁶ When referring to the "Sea of Tiberias" the second and only other time in his Gospel (John 21:1), John does not see the need to offer this explanation again.

⁷⁷ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 23.

who frequented Jerusalem. For these reasons, some commentators are convinced that John wrote his Gospel “primarily” with a Gentile audience in mind.⁷⁸

Interpretation of Aramaic Words

Besides John’s geographical explanations to his readers, we also see evidence for a Gentile audience living outside the territory of Israel based on John’s frequent translation of Aramaic terms. It appears from passages where this occurs that John assumed many of his readers knew Greek.⁷⁹ Concerning *people*, John feels constrained in his opening chapter to translate “Rabbi” as “Teacher” (1:38; cf. 20:16), “the Messiah” as “the Christ” (1:41), and “Cephas” as a “Stone” (1:42).⁸⁰ Even when Aramaic terms are used by John for various *places* in Jerusalem, such as Bethesda (5:2), Gabbatha (19:13), and Golgotha (19:17), these are all considered foreign words from the viewpoint of the reader and thus they require translation by John as the narrator.⁸¹ This would be inexplicable if John had primarily Jewish readers in mind.

Interpretation of Jewish Customs and Feasts

The evidence for an intended Gentile audience is also based on several passages in the Gospel that explain Jewish customs and religious feast days.⁸² Customs related to purification are referenced in 2:6 and 18:28,⁸³ while the burial practice of the Jews is detailed in 19:40–42. These customs are significant in identifying John’s audience since they point beyond a merely Jewish diasporic audience to Gentile readers.⁸⁴ There is no reason to believe that these practices would have been unique to Jews living within Israel’s borders. In fact, Jewish cultural identity was still preserved among Jews of the Diaspora in their marriage and funeral customs, despite some compromises to Hellenistic influences.⁸⁵ Regarding the burial practices described in 19:40–42, Jews demonstrated the utmost reverence for the body in anticipation of the resurrection—a belief held in common by Jews the world over, in contrast to their Hellenistic neighbors (Acts 17:16–34). It is hardly tenable to claim that the Jews of the Diaspora would have been ignorant of these customs practiced by their fellow Jews in the land of Israel, especially when

⁷⁸ Ibid., 22-24.

⁷⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 218.

⁸⁰ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 131 n. 29.

⁸¹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 219.

⁸² Koester, *Word of Life*, 5-6; Martinez, “Purpose of the Gospel of John,” 99.

⁸³ The explanation offered by John in 18:28 served both to make an ironic point and to provide clarity for the Gentile reader. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 222.

⁸⁴ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 23.

⁸⁵ Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 514-16, esp. 516; Byron R. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 5-26; Jürgen Zangenberg, “‘Buried According to the Custom of the Jews’: John 19,40 in Its Material and Literary Context,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 888-89.

considering the relatively rapid rate of communication in the ancient world⁸⁶ and that Diaspora Judaism was anything but isolated from the free flow of diverse cultural and religious ideas and practices. The information gap between Jews living in Israel and those outside the land was negligible.⁸⁷

Furthermore, the appeal to a Jewish audience in the Diaspora versus a Gentile audience cannot be reconciled with the various places where John describes Jewish feasts for the reader. In a few passages, he refers to the “Passover *of the Jews*” (2:13; 6:4; 11:55), which points specifically to a non-Jewish, Gentile readership. In another passage, John refers to the Feast of Tabernacles as the “Jews’ feast” (7:2). In yet another place, he informs the reader that the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) occurs in winter (10:22), but this is a fact that virtually any Jew of the Diaspora would have known already, just as today.

Universal Scope of John’s Gospel

One final, compelling piece of evidence for Gentiles as the intended audience of John’s Gospel is the consistent emphasis on the theme of the “world.”⁸⁸ Though this point was made earlier, it bears repeating: no other Gospel lays such heavy stress upon the universal mission and outreach of God the Father in sending His Son to save the world (3:16–17) as does the Gospel of John.⁸⁹ Though the Gospel of Luke refers to Jesus as “Savior” (Luke 1:47; 2:11) and all of the Gospels teach thematically the Saviorhood of Christ, John is the only Gospel in which the Lord Jesus is explicitly referred to as “the Savior *of the world*” (John 4:42).⁹⁰ The Gospel of John places special emphasis on the worldwide scope of Christ’s saving work.⁹¹ Such a constant, repeated theme is certainly not lost on any Gentile reader of John’s Gospel. The message comes through loud and clear: “This book, as well as the Savior it describes, is intended for you.”

While some scholars attempt to limit the meaning of “world” only to Jews based on the Jewishness of John’s Gospel,⁹² there are passages in the book where Christ

⁸⁶ Eldon J. Epp, “The Significance of the Papyri for Determining the Nature of the New Testament Text in the Second Century: A Dynamic View of Textual Transmission,” in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 281-83; Michael B. Thompson, “The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation,” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 49-70.

⁸⁷ A. Wind, “Destination and Purpose of the Gospel of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 14.2 (1972): 61.

⁸⁸ Richard Bauckham, “The Audience of the Gospel of John,” in *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 123; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 172-74, 199; Martinez, “The Purpose of the Gospel of John,” 83-86.

⁸⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 539-46; *ibid.*, “The Two Johannine Verbs for Sending,” 125-43; Calvin Mercer, “Jesus the Apostle: ‘Sending’ and the Theology of John,” 457-62.

⁹⁰ Koester, “Savior of the World (John 4:42),” 665-80.

⁹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 158; Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 159-60.

⁹² J. E. Botha and P. A. Rousseau, “For God Did Not So Love the World—Only Israel! John 3:16 Revisited,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 61.4 (2005): 1149-68.

seems to speak beyond the Jews to future Gentile readers of John's Gospel. In 8:26, Jesus addresses the Jews gathered in the temple and says to them, "I have many things to say and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him." In the original, historical context, when the Lord says, "I speak to the world," He is directly addressing the Jews. But the Lord Jesus clearly intended His words to go beyond his immediate, historical audience to a future, universal audience. Thus, from a literary point of view, the fact that John chose by the Spirit's direction to include Christ's prospective statement in 8:26 indicates that the fourth Gospel's intended audience is broader than just the Jews. It is for "the world." Nor should Christ's projection beyond these Jerusalem Jews to "the world" be limited simply to the Jews of the Diaspora, as some commentators conclude.⁹³ This seems unnecessarily restrictive, since it is doubtful that any use of the term "world" in John's Gospel means merely the world of the Jews.

The statement by the Pharisees recorded in 12:19 also illustrates John's intent to speak to the Gentiles. The setting of this verse takes place shortly before Christ's crucifixion, right on the heels of His raising of Lazarus and His triumphal entry into Jerusalem where He is hailed as "The King of Israel" (12:13). As Christ is surrounded by a Jewish multitude in Jerusalem who have heard of His miracle with Lazarus, verse 19 goes on to state, "The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, 'You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!'" Though the Pharisees spoke with hyperbole in this instance, John chose to record their speech in order to make another one of his many ironic points.⁹⁴ The masses that had gone after Jesus were Jewish, yet rhetorically they represented "the world."⁹⁵

In the very next verse (12:20), John also records that "certain Greeks" were in Jerusalem to worship. This statement serves to connect the phrase "the world" with the "Greeks" (Ἕλληνες).⁹⁶ As the moment of Christ's glorification at the Cross draws near, these Greeks express to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (12:21). If these Greeks are God-fearing Gentiles or proselytes, as appears to be the case,⁹⁷ and not merely Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora, then John is clearly intimating that the entire "world" (12:19) includes the Gentiles and they may come to Christ and "see Jesus."⁹⁸ This passage serves as a virtual, though subtle, invitation to the Gentiles to "Behold the Lamb of God who

⁹³ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 91-92.

⁹⁴ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 173; Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, 86.

⁹⁵ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 435; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 373; Leon Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 589; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 426; Elmer Towns, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1990), 236.

⁹⁶ A. S. Geysler, "Israel in the Fourth Gospel," *Neotestamentica* 20 (1986): 18.

⁹⁷ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 421; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 435-36; Köstenberger, *John*, 377; C. I. Scofield, *Where Faith Sees Christ* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 5; Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 144 n. 103, 154-55. Contra Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," 112 n. 7.

⁹⁸ Johannes Beutler, "Greeks Come to See Jesus (John 12,20f)," *Biblica* 71 (1990): 333-47; Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 592; Scofield, *Where Faith Sees Christ*, 6-8.

takes away the sin of the world”—that is, to come to Christ by faith.⁹⁹ This interpretation of John 12:19–21 also fits with Jesus’ subsequent, climactic statement that follows in the intermediate context, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (John 12:32).¹⁰⁰ From a historical standpoint, this incident of the Greeks seeking out Jesus in Jerusalem served as a foreshadowing of the future events of the church age.¹⁰¹ For John’s literary purposes, the inclusion of this episode at this point in the progression of his Gospel was intended to deliberately communicate the message to the Gentiles that they are within the scope of the church’s worldwide evangelistic mission.

Omission of the “Gentiles”

John’s heavy emphasis on the “world” also answers Robinson’s earlier point about the prevalence of “the Jews” and the corresponding omission of any direct reference to the “Gentiles.”¹⁰² He writes, “Indeed, the entire absence from the Gospel [of John], to which we have already alluded, of any reference to ‘the Gentiles’ (or even to individual Gentiles, apart from Pilate and his soldiers) is as remarkable as it is unremarked.”¹⁰³ Elsewhere Robinson repeats the same point, claiming, “The fourth Gospel, with the Johannine Epistles, is the only major work in the New Testament in which the term τὰ ἔθνη never occurs.”¹⁰⁴ Yet if the occurrence of “the Jews” is so disproportionate with “the Gentiles,” then why does John use the term “world” 81 times versus “the Jews” 71 times? We are also never told why John would be *required* to use the term “Gentile” in order to address a Gentile audience.¹⁰⁵ Robinson assumes his point, leaving us with another argument from silence that ultimately proves nothing.

Furthermore, Robinson’s reasoning leads to serious theological problems for John’s Gospel if applied consistently. We might also claim in the language of Robinson that it is as remarkable as it is unremarked that John never uses the noun “faith” (πίστις),¹⁰⁶ while generously employing the verb “believe” (πιστεύω) nearly 100 times in his Gospel. Though it may be tempting on account of this fact to see some theological distinction in meaning between πίστις and πιστεύω in John’s Gospel, no such distinction exists. Therefore, when it comes to the identity of John’s intended readers, simply

⁹⁹ Beutler, “Greeks Come to See Jesus (12,20f),” 346.

¹⁰⁰ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., “Some Observations Regarding the Argument, Structure and Literary Characteristics of the Gospel of John,” *Bible Translator* 26 (April 1975): 238.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁰² Geysler makes the same point, concluding from this fact that “the fourth Gospel was totally unconcerned about the Gentiles” (“Israel in the Fourth Gospel,” 18).

¹⁰³ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 274. See also Robinson, “Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel,” 109-12.

¹⁰⁴ Robinson, “Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel,” 109.

¹⁰⁵ The reason John omitted “Gentile” in preference for “world” was not because “Gentile” was a term used only by Jews for non-Jews; for, in fact, ἔθνος was a term used even by the Greeks for non-Greeks. J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 181; Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “ἔθνος, ἔθνικός,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:371-72.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., “Translating ‘Believe’ in the Gospel of John,” *Bible Translator* 30 (April 1979): 205.

because John opted not to employ the word “Gentile” (ἔθνος) in no way precludes a Gentile audience.

CONCLUSION

Having considered the evidence for the ethnic, racial, and religious profile of John’s intended readers, we are now able to answer the question of whether John had Jews or Gentiles in mind. The biblical evidence supports the conclusion that John, the human writer, and the Holy Spirit, the divine author, intended both Jews and Gentiles to be the recipients of this Gospel, with neither ethnic group having precedence over the other. It would be a false and unnecessary distinction to pit the two audiences against one another.¹⁰⁷ There is positive evidence to support both groups, as well as positive evidence even for a Samaritan readership.¹⁰⁸ There is *no* explicit, incontrovertible evidence to exclude any of these groups.

Though John is a very Jewish book in terms of its background and character, this does not necessarily point to a predominantly Jewish *audience*. Rather, it points to a Jewish *author* in John¹⁰⁹ and a Jewish principal *subject* in the Lord Jesus Christ. We may even agree with Robinson when he claims that it is from the Jewish, Hellenistic “point of view that I believe the story of St. John’s Gospel is written.”¹¹⁰ That John was a thoroughly Jewish apostle, possibly living and writing to the Greeks from the metropolis of Ephesus, we have no reason to doubt. Yet, simply because the Gospel of John is written from a scriptural, Jewish point of view does not mean that its intended recipients were only Jews or even primarily Jews, whether in the Diaspora or in Israel.

It is simply undeniable that the Gospel of John contains a vast number of allusions and implicit connections to the Old Testament.¹¹¹ While certain passages may not be able to be comprehended *thoroughly* without prior knowledge of their Old Testament referents (e.g., the bronze serpent in 3:14; the bread of the wilderness in 6:32–33; the light of the temple in 8:12), this would not make John completely incomprehensible to the average, non-Jewish or non-Christian, unbelieving reader who may be seeking to know who Jesus is and why he or she should believe in Him.¹¹² The interpretative asides placed throughout the book by John the narrator are clearly intended for a non-Jewish reader in order to explain some facet of Judaism, or the Hebrew/Aramaic language, or the features of the land of Israel. But these explanatory asides do not necessarily preclude a Jewish audience. Bauckham offers a balanced perspective on this point:

We should not suppose that all of the implied readers are expected to need all of these explanations. For example, the translations of the words “Rabbi” and “Messiah” (1:38, 41) are unlikely to have been needed by any Jewish reader/hearer, even in the Diaspora, but their presence in the

¹⁰⁷ Wind, “Destination and Purpose of the Gospel of John,” 65.

¹⁰⁸ Purvis, “The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans,” 161-98.

¹⁰⁹ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 131 n. 29.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, “The Destination and Purpose of St. John’s Gospel,” 117.

¹¹¹ Köstenberger, “John,” 417-21.

¹¹² Bauckham, “The Audience of the Gospel of John,” 122.

Gospel does not indicate that only Gentile readers/hearers are expected. They are included for the sake of those readers/hearers who may need them.¹¹³

Therefore, it is best to see the Gospel of John, just like the saving gospel message itself, as being intended for both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 1:16), but with special historical and chronological connection to the Jews, and as being equally applicable to the spiritual needs of all parties, whether Jews in Israel, Jews in the Diaspora, Samaritans, or Gentiles.¹¹⁴ Groenewald is certainly correct in concluding: “it is clear that John at Ephesus looked upon the whole world as the destination of the Gospel. God loved the whole world and therefore sent forth His only-begotten son. He came as the Messiah of the Jews, but He entered the world as Son of God in order to be the means of salvation for all mankind. He is in truth the *sōtēr tou Kosmou*. As such He is proclaimed in order that everyone who believes may have life in His name.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Richard Bauckham, “John for Readers of Mark,” in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 150.

¹¹⁴ Won-Ha Hwang and Jan G. Van der Watt. “The Identity of the Recipients of the Fourth Gospel in the Light of the Purpose of the Gospel,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 63.2 (2007): 683-98.

¹¹⁵ E. P. Groenewald, “The Christological Meaning of John 20:31,” *Neotestamentica* 2 (1968): 140.

CHAPTER 4

THE PURPOSE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

Having considered in the previous chapter the ethnic and religious profile of John's intended audience, we are now able to turn to the question of whether John is addressed to a believing or unbelieving audience. As with the mixed ethnic and religious makeup of John's readership, there is positive evidence for John having a dual purpose that includes both evangelism of unbelievers and edification of believers, with his primary emphasis being evangelism of unbelievers.

EDIFICATION OF BELIEVERS

Upper Room Discourse

One of the primary evidences for the edification view of John's purpose is the significant portion of text within the book dealing with those who are already genuine disciples and believers. This portion of text consists of the Upper Room Discourse or "Last Discourse" in chapters 13–17, as well as the Epilogue of chapter 21. It is difficult to conceive how John could be addressing these portions primarily or even "exclusively" to unbelievers, as some Free Grace proponents claim,¹ since these chapters are devoted almost entirely to Christian-life truths for believers in the church age and they comprise 6 of John's 21 chapters. Though there are a few passages in the Upper Room Discourse that have definite evangelistic relevance toward the unsaved (14:6; 16:9–11; 17:3), when these are compared to the sheer number and depth of passages dealing with believer-truth, it is apparent that this section of John's Gospel is not directly applicable to unbelievers. Compare these few evangelistic passages in the Upper Room Discourse to the following passages that are directly applicable only to those who are already saved.

- Only believers are capable of following Christ's example of humble service (13:15).
- Only believers have a place being prepared for them by Christ and will have Christ return to receive them (14:1–6).
- Only believers have the privilege of praying in Jesus' name and the guarantee of answered prayer (14:13–14; 15:7; 16:23–24).

¹ Robert N. Wilkin, "Why Is Discipleship Material in John?" Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 26, 2016.

- Only believers have the promise of the Holy Spirit’s permanent indwelling (14:16–17; 16:7).
- Only believers are being taught by the Holy Spirit (14:26; 16:13–14).
- Only believers can have the peace of Jesus Christ (14:27; 16:33).
- Only believers are spiritually cleansed through Christ’s word (15:3).
- Only believers have the capacity to bear fruit for Jesus Christ as a result of abiding in Him (15:4–5, 8, 16).
- Only believers have the privilege of being a “friend” of Christ and not merely a servant (15:15).
- Only believers are hated by the world for Christ’s sake (15:18–21).
- Only believers are capable of being led by the Holy Spirit as witnesses for Jesus Christ (15:26–27).
- Only believers are a gift from the Father to the Son (17:6, 22, 24).
- Only believers are the special recipients of Christ’s intercession to the Father (17:9).
- Only believers are specially kept and protected by God (17:11–12, 15).
- Only believers can have the fulfillment of the Son’s joy (17:13).
- Only believers are sanctified by the Word of God (17:17, 19).

Besides the preceding list, another evidence for the edification view of the Upper Room Discourse, rather than an evangelistic purpose, is found in the distribution of “one another” (ἀλλήλων) statements within the fourth Gospel. For instance, the passages where Christians are specifically exhorted by Christ to “love one another” can apply only to believers since unbelievers are incapable of true Christian love because it is a byproduct of the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 15:4–5; Gal. 5:22–23), who only believers possess (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9). The term ἀλλήλων occurs 15 times in John’s Gospel, with 9 of these “one another” statements occurring in chapters 13–16 (13:14, 22, 34 [twice], 35; 15:12, 17; 16:17, 19).² This high percentage of “one another” passages demonstrates that the Last Discourse was intended primarily for a believing audience rather than unbelievers. But this evidence does not prove that the primary purpose of

² The remaining six occurrences deal either with unbelievers relating to one another in their *opposition* to Christ (5:44; 6:43, 52; 11:56; 19:24) or the disciples merely *talking* to one another (4:33).

John's entire Gospel is the edification of already existing believers. It merely shows that John has a dual purpose for the book, with one purpose being primary (evangelism) and the other being secondary (edification).

John's Epilogue

The Epilogue in John 21 is also used as evidence for an already-believing readership. This chapter certainly has evangelistic value in recording another post-resurrection appearance of Christ to confirm the evangelistic truth of the Lord's bodily resurrection. But the content of this chapter is devoted to believers, with a touching portrait of the Savior's love and forgiveness, as fallen and disillusioned Peter is restored to fellowship and service with the risen Christ (21:15–19), whom he had previously denied three times. This is a moving illustration for the church about the Lord's restorative ministry as the Shepherd of His sheep and about the need for the believer's restoration to fellowship, not about the condition to receive eternal life. John also provides the church with valuable information pertaining to the predicted course of Peter and John's ministries and their deaths in light of the Lord's promised return (21:20–23). This would have been particularly relevant to a first-century church that needed reassurance about the Lord's coming in response to the deaths of its greatest leaders in Peter, James, and Paul. While it could be argued that the lessons about the Lord's return and His forgiveness of Peter can be used with the lost to instruct them regarding salvation, John 21 has primary application to those who are already children of God.

If chapters 13–17 and 21 are geared primarily for believers, how does this fit with John's evangelistic purpose statement in 20:30–31? According to the purpose statement itself, John's Gospel is structured around its signs. These were recorded by John so that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and have life in His name. But the Upper Room Discourse does not contain even a single sign. Therefore, it appears to be parenthetical to John's larger purpose for the entire "book" (20:30). Regarding the Epilogue, even the post-resurrection appearance of Christ in chapter 21 comes *after* the evangelistic purpose statement of 20:30–31.³ In reference to the "signs" that are mentioned in verse 30, the next verse says, "But these [ταῦτα] are written that you may believe" (v. 31). The very next verse, John 21:1, says, "After these things [Μετὰ ταῦτα], Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples." John's evangelistic purpose statement in 20:30–31 is deliberately placed *after* certain select signs in chapters

³ There is no need to speculate, as do many liberal redaction critics, that John 21 was added as a postscript or addendum after John's entire manuscript comprised of chapters 1–20 had already been published. If such were the case, then the purpose statement of 20:30–31 would have served as the concluding verses of John's original, shorter Gospel. But the external and internal evidence stands against this view. In terms of external evidence, there has never been a manuscript of John's Gospel unearthed that omits chapter 21. Every extant manuscript of John's Gospel that contains 20:31 also contains chapter 21 (Paul Minear, "The Original Function of John 21," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 [1983]: 85-86, 98; Daniel B. Wallace, "John 5, 2 and the Date of the Fourth Gospel," *Biblica* 71:2 [1990]: 197). Likewise, internal evidence based on the style and vocabulary of chapter 21 compared to chapters 1–20 does not demonstrate separate authorship (Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015], 225-45; Nigel Turner, "The Style of John," in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by James H. Moulton, 4 vols. [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976], 4:67).

2–12 and 18–20 (20:31, “But *these* are written”), yet *before* the Epilogue (21:1, “After *these* things”). The placement for such an evangelistic statement indicates that even though there is a significant post-resurrection appearance of Christ in chapter 21, the chapter still deals primarily with edification, like chapters 13–17.

At this point, a potential objection must be addressed. Some might object that John 20:30–31 cannot be John’s purpose statement for the entire book because it is not comprehensive enough and does not adequately include chapters 13–17 and 21, which are clearly intended first for believers rather than unbelievers. There is some validity to this objection. We should not force the Upper Room Discourse and Epilogue to fit a purely evangelistic mold.⁴ Free Grace proponents generally agree that the structure of John’s book is built around its seven signs in chapters 2–12, in addition to its eighth and greatest sign of Christ’s death and resurrection in chapters 18–20, and that John’s purpose statement in 20:31 pertains directly to these signs-portions⁵ when it says that “these [ταῦτα] are written that [ἵνα] you may believe.” By saying this, John explicitly links his evangelistic purpose to Jesus’ signs. When this evangelistic sign-structure is realized, along with the obvious omission of any signs recorded in chapters 13–17, there should be no problem in concluding that the Upper Room Discourse is primarily a parenthesis on edification in an otherwise predominantly evangelistic book. Chapters 13–17 and 21 can be viewed as applicable to evangelism only indirectly. With these important qualifications in mind, John 20:30–31 can still be regarded as the purpose statement for the book and retained as the interpretative key for the fourth Gospel as a whole.⁶

Developing Faith of the Disciples

Another argument for the edification-purpose of John that some have proposed is that there is in the fourth Gospel a demonstrable development of faith occurring within the disciples⁷ based on Jesus’ signs. If the disciples were already believers in Christ, and the signs built them up in their faith, then this must also be the purpose for John’s readers.⁸ Whether or not it is entirely valid to transfer the example of the disciples’ faith recorded

⁴ Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?* 16-19; Michael D. Halsey, *The Gospel of Grace and Truth: A Theology of Grace from the Gospel of John* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015), 43-44.

⁵ Zane C. Hodges, “Miraculous Signs and Literary Structure in the Fourth Gospel,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 5, 2008; John Niemelä, “Finding True North in 1 John,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (July-September 2000): 25-29.

⁶ One Free Grace writer proposes 10:10 as an additional and more encompassing purpose statement for the Gospel of John because it contains both an evangelistic statement for unbelievers, “I have come that they may have life,” and a statement on edification for believers, “and that they may have it more abundantly” (Niemelä, “Finding True North,” 27-28). But in this verse, *Jesus* is speaking and expressing the purpose of His incarnation and entrance into the world, which is different from *John* speaking as the narrator, expressing the *literary* purpose of the book, which he does only in 20:30–31.

⁷ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 652.

⁸ W. H. Griffith Thomas, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part I,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (July-September 1968): 256-57; idem, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part II,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (October-December 1968): 320-21, 323.

in the fourth Gospel to John's purpose for Christian readers today, it remains true that John does document the development of faith within the already believing disciples.

Before any signs are done by Jesus and documented by John starting in chapter 2, the disciples already believe Jesus is the Messiah. In 1:41, Andrew says to his brother Simon Peter, "We have found the Messiah (which is translated, the Christ)." Then Philip testifies to Nathanael, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (1:45). After Nathanael testifies that Jesus is "the Son of God" and "the King of Israel" (1:49), it says in 1:50 that Nathanael "believe[s]." All of this transpires in chapter 1, prior to the first of John's recorded signs which begin in chapter 2. When it says in 2:11, "This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him," it should be carefully noted that this verse does not say that the miracle of turning water into wine at Cana was "the beginning of *belief*" among the disciples, but that Cana was the "beginning of *signs*." John 2:11 records only the fact of the disciples' belief at Cana, but it does not tell us when this belief began.

Certain signs in the Gospel of John not only elicit faith within unbelievers but they also lead to the development of faith among Christ's believing disciples. For example, before the miraculous multiplication of the five loaves and two fish, John informs the reader that this sign was done "to test" the disciples—presumably to test their faith. John 6:5–6 tell us, "Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?' But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do." It is no coincidence then that when the fragments of the loaves were gathered up *by the disciples* after the crowd of 5,000 had eaten (6:12), there were exactly 12 baskets left over. Conspicuously, there was one basket for each disciple. This confirms that Jesus was deliberately testing the faith of His own disciples and that the original historical occurrence of this sign was for the developing faith of the disciples.

Similarly, in John 11 with the sign of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus is testing both the believing disciples and the unbelieving Jews who are present. Even though John had recorded earlier the fact of the disciples' belief (2:11; 6:69), we are also informed prior to the actual raising of Lazarus that this miracle was intended to expand the existing belief of the disciples. After Lazarus dies, 11:14–15 states, "Then Jesus said to them plainly 'Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him.'" If the disciples were already believers, then why would Christ raise Lazarus from the dead in order that the disciples "may believe" (11:15)? This sign was evidently intended for the progression of their belief in Him, not the inception of their faith.

This was true not only for the faith of the twelve, but also for the development of the faith of Martha, the sister of Lazarus. The profession of Martha in 11:27 is often cited by many Free Grace proponents to support their interpretation of believing in Jesus merely as the guarantor of eternal life without requisite knowledge of His deity,

humanity, substitutionary death for sin, and bodily resurrection.⁹ However, in its original context, Martha's confession in 11:27 describes the faith of one who was already regenerate but needed to grow in her faith. This is in contrast to the evangelistic meaning of 20:31.¹⁰ Prior to the raising of her brother Lazarus, Martha does not appear to have an accurate conception of at least one aspect of Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God, as she confessed in 11:27. Not long afterwards, she expresses doubt about Jesus' ability to raise Lazarus from the dead (11:39), even though she possessed a general belief in the resurrection of the dead (11:24). Consequently, the Lord exhorts her in the very next verse (11:40) to "believe" that she would yet "see the glory of God" demonstrated through Him (cf. 1:14). Therefore, Martha's earlier belief in Jesus needed further development and growth as part of her edification or practical sanctification.

The raising of Lazarus in its historical context was intended not only for the edification of Martha and the other believing disciples but also for onlooking unbelievers. In 11:42, Christ speaks to the Father, exclaiming, "And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that you sent Me." The bystanders included both believing disciples and unbelievers.¹¹ This is evidenced by 11:45, which says, "Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him." The sign of the raising of Lazarus resulted in many Jews becoming believers in Jesus (12:11). The Lazarus-sign thus becomes representative of John's purpose as a whole.¹² It served a dual purpose for both believers and unbelievers by developing the faith of already existing believing disciples and leading unbelievers to initial belief in Jesus as the Christ for eternal life.

The progression and development of the disciples' faith in Jesus as the Christ, which was concurrent with His ongoing messianic self-revelation (1:18), is also apparent

⁹ Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 4; John Niemelä, "The Message of Life in the Gospel of John," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (July-September 2001): 12-19; Robert N. Wilkin, "John," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1:426-28; idem, *The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2012), 20-21, 146.

¹⁰ Although 11:25-27 is not Jesus' invitation to Martha to become a child of God by exercising first-time belief, Martha's confession that Jesus is the guarantor of eternal life as "the Christ, the Son of God" still constitutes essential evangelistic truth that the lost must believe today. But belief in Jesus as the guarantor of eternal life simply cannot be separated today from belief in His person and work. This will be demonstrated further in chapter 6.

¹¹ Some have concluded that as many as five signs recorded in the Gospel of John were either just for individuals or for the developing faith of the disciples, not for unbelievers at large. Based on this, they conclude that John's purpose must be primarily edification rather than evangelism (Thomas, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part I," 256). But this seems to be an overstatement of the case since unbelievers were either present during the actual performance of each sign (2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-16; 6:1-15; 9:1-11; 11:1-45) or else they witnessed the after-effect of the sign (6:15-21).

¹² C. H. Dodd writes, "Thus the narrative before us is not only the story of dead Lazarus raised to life; it is also the story of Jesus going to face death in order to conquer death. In the previous episode we were told that the Good Shepherd comes to give life to His flock, and that in doing so He lays down His life for the sheep (x. 10-11)" (*The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955], 367). Dodd concludes that in John 11 "the theme is not only resurrection, but resurrection by virtue of Christ's self-sacrifice. More exactly, the theme is Christ Himself manifested as Resurrection and Life by virtue of His self-sacrifice" (ibid., 368).

in John's Gospel from several passages in the Upper Room Discourse where the disciples are challenged to "believe" even though they are already believers (13:19; 14:1, 11, 29; 16:27, 30). There are at least two additional passages where these believers are recorded as having believed the Scriptures after the fact of Christ's resurrection (2:22; 20:8–9). All of this information is relevant for identifying the purpose of the fourth Gospel.

Consider first what the developing faith of the disciples does *not* mean. The fact that believers themselves are challenged to deeper belief throughout John's Gospel in no way supports the Reformed, Lordship Salvation interpretation of passages using πιστεύω throughout this book. The Lordship Salvation view asserts that the purpose of John is evangelistic in the sense of testing the genuineness of a person's faith, as if John is concerned with a special *kind* or *quality* of faith for eternal life—a persevering, working faith. Without such faith, a person is considered not to be truly regenerated. But this presents a theological, interpretative contradiction for the Lordship Salvation position. If this is the manner in which we ought to interpret and apply John for today, then how does this same standard apply to John's historical audience of the original disciples? If the disciples in John's Gospel are repeatedly described as already having believed, yet they are exhorted later in the book to believe again, then according to the Lordship Salvation view, the Lord Jesus must have been questioning the regenerated status of His own disciples.

But the faith of the eleven disciples was genuine, and they were regenerate as Jesus Himself explicitly declared (6:68–71; 13:8–11; 15:3).¹³ Their faith simply developed *in proportion to the progress of revelation about Jesus being the Christ*.¹⁴ Since biblical faith is always a response to God's revelation and since Jesus in His earthly ministry was an unfolding revelation of God before their very eyes (1:14–18; Heb. 1:1–2), the faith of the eleven disciples developed or progressed in the measure that the object of their faith was progressing in His self-revelation. For this reason, we must be careful not to draw a direct parallel between the developing faith of the disciples as recorded in John's Gospel and the growing faith or edification of believers today. John describes a situation prior to the Crucifixion with the progress of revelation that is dissimilar to the growth of the Christian's faith in this present dispensation. As His disciples, we are not living in a three-and-a-half-year period where the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus forms an unfolding revelation right before our eyes. Instead, we already possess, right from the inception of our faith, the completed, full deposit of revelation concerning Jesus Christ as contained in the written Word of God. Therefore, it would be invalid to use the historical example of the developing faith of the disciples in an attempt to establish that spiritual edification or growth as a Christian is the primary purpose for which the fourth

¹³ Richard W. Christianson, "The Soteriological Significance of ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ in the Gospel of John," (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1987), 58-69; Anthony D. Hopkins, "A Narratological Approach to the Development of Faith in the Gospel of John" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992), 136, 137 n. 79.

¹⁴ Gerald F. Hawthorne, "The Concept of Faith in the Fourth Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116 (April 1959): 126 n. 10; Elizabeth Liebert, "That You May Believe: The Fourth Gospel and Structural Developmental Theory," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 14 (April 1984): 68-70; Brian R. Ortner, "The Progressive Belief of the Disciples in the Gospel of John," (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1996), 81; Clay D. Porr, "The Relationship Between Belief and Discipleship in John's Gospel" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1993), 16 n. 8.

Gospel was written. God's purpose for *the original disciples* as historical figures within the unfolding narrative of John's Gospel must be kept distinct from God's purpose for *the readers* of John's Gospel.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 Principle

One final piece of evidence for the edification view of John's purpose comes from outside of John. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, the apostle Paul sets forth a basic principle for every book of the Bible, including John. "All Scripture" is profitable for the believer's edification and equipping by virtue of being inspired, God-breathed revelation. Thus, even if John's Gospel does not contain a purpose statement declaring it to have Christian growth and edification as its purpose (like John 20:30–31 has for an evangelistic intent), we must still recognize that the Holy Spirit intended John to be used by the church for its edification and equipping. This does not negate the fact that John also has an expressly evangelistic purpose. It simply means that the Gospel of John must have a dual purpose, with evangelization being its primary and explicitly stated goal.

EVANGELIZATION OF UNBELIEVERS

The positive evidence for the evangelistic purpose of John's Gospel is more explicit and abundant than the evidence cited previously to support John's purpose being the edification of already existing believers. Several lines of evidence demonstrate that John's primary purpose is the evangelism of unbelievers.

Contrast with 1 John

In John's first epistle he indicates explicitly that his intended readers are already believers in Christ: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). This is in clear contrast to John 20:31¹⁵ where John writes in order that his readers may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and as a result have life in His name. In 1 John 5:13, John assumes faith in the Lord Jesus on the part of his readership, whereas in the Gospel of John he expresses the opposite conclusion—his readers are assumed *not* to be believers yet (19:35; 20:30–31). This contrast supports the interpretation that John's Gospel is primarily evangelistic,¹⁶ whereas 1 John is for the edification of already existing believers.

Noticeably absent from the Gospel of John is also any affectionate reference to the readers as "my little children" (τεκνία, τεκνόν, παιδία), which is characteristic of the Johannine epistles (1 John 2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28; 3:1, 2, 7, 18; 4:4; 5:21; 2 John 4; 3 John 4). While the *disciples* are called "children" twice in John's Gospel (13:33; 21:5), John himself never addresses his *audience* or *readers* by this term as he does in his first

¹⁵ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 290.

¹⁶ David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2005): 15; John A. T. Robinson, "The Destination and Purpose of the Johannine Epistles," *New Testament Studies* 7 (1961): 56-57.

epistle since “children” is a designation reserved only for believers—those who have entered God’s family (John 1:12). One would think that in a book the length of the fourth Gospel, if the same author, John, was addressing a believing audience, he certainly would refer to his readers as “children” at least once.

Nor do we find in the Gospel of John a purpose statement similar to 1 John 1:3–4, where John indicates his purpose for writing his first epistle: “that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.” If the purpose of the Gospel of John is primarily edification or fellowship between the regenerate person and God, then we should expect at least one comparable statement in the Gospel expressing John’s purpose to be edification or fellowship.

Additionally, the placement of each respective purpose statement is significant. When writing to convince unbelievers that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, John places his purpose statement at the end of his Gospel. But when writing to believers for purposes of fellowship, John states his objective right up front in his first epistle. With the Gospel of John, it is crucial for John the writer to establish first who the Christ is, and that this includes Jesus’ finished work on the Cross and His bodily resurrection, in order for John’s readers to believe in Him as the Christ, the Son of God and receive eternal life. John’s Gospel has a consummate view of Jesus as the Christ, where the plot builds with the hour, work, Passover, kingship, and glory themes all pointing to, and culminating in, the Cross and Resurrection. By contrast, in 1 John, the truth about Christ shared by John and his readers is expressed immediately as the basis for the fellowship that exists between John and his readers (1:1–3) since Christ’s finished work is already known and believed (1:7; 2:2, 12).¹⁷

At this point, a potential objection should be anticipated and addressed. Some might claim that the fourth Gospel contains an abundance of Old Testament quotations, allusions, and references, and that this most likely points to an audience comprised of believers who are already familiar with the Scriptures rather than unbelievers. The same point was raised in the previous chapter while addressing the question of the ethnic makeup of John’s readership, that such a thoroughly Old Testament background for John necessitates a Jewish, or at least, biblically-literate and God-fearing audience. If this were true for the intended readers of the fourth Gospel, then we would expect the epistle of 1 John to be saturated with Old Testament references since it is written expressly to believers—yet we find the opposite.¹⁸ The Old Testament is *never* quoted in 1 John, and it is alluded to only once (3:12). A thoroughly Old Testament background and orientation for a New Testament book does not necessarily imply a believing, or even a primarily Jewish, readership. This is consistent with the fact that although the saving message of the gospel is “according to the Scriptures” (Rom. 1:1–2; 1 Cor. 15:3–4), it is for both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 1:16) and it applies first of all to unbelievers (Mark 16:15–16; 1 Cor. 1:14–21).

¹⁷ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 47.

¹⁸ D. A. Carson, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 646.

Pivot of the Prologue's Chiastic Structure

A third form of evidence for the Gospel of John having a primarily evangelistic purpose comes from the chiastic structure of the Prologue (reflecting the Greek letter χ), which not only provides a preview of the book but identifies verse 12 as its focal point. John's prologue gives his readers a preview of its most important theological themes. Griffith Thomas goes so far as to say, "In a general way, the prologue contains the whole Gospel."¹⁹ Yet, if John 1:1–18 summarizes the key points of the book, and it is chiastic in structure, then locating its center point should reveal the main purpose of the book.

The Prologue possesses a symmetrical thematic structure where each theme parallels or mirrors the same point within the Prologue, forming a thematic chiasm. While several scholars have observed this pattern in John's Prologue,²⁰ there has not always been agreement on the chiasm's center or focal point, known as its "pivot." Initially Nils Lund proposed verse 13 as the Prologue's pivot, effectively highlighting the topic of regeneration as the purpose for the entire book.²¹ More recently Alan Culpepper has demonstrated that verse 12 is the pivot,²² as reflected in the following adaptation:

¹⁹ W. H. Griffith Thomas, "The Plan of the Fourth Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (October 1968): 319. See also, Barclay M. Newman, Jr., "Some Observations Regarding the Argument, Structure and Literary Characteristics of the Gospel of John," *Bible Translator* 26 (April 1975): 235; Simon Ross Valentine, "The Johannine Prologue—A Microcosm of the Gospel," *Evangelical Quarterly* 68 (October 1996): 291-304.

²⁰ Stephen S. Kim, "The Literary and Theological Significance of the Johannine Prologue," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (October 2009): 427-28; Ronald E. Man, "The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (April 1984): 151; Brad McCoy, "Chiasmus: An Important Structural Device Commonly Found in Biblical Literature," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 9 (Fall 2003): 29; Stephen Voorwinde, "John's Prologue: Beyond Some Impasses of Twentieth-Century Scholarship," *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (Spring 2002): 23-28.

²¹ N. W. Lund, "The Influence of Chiasmus upon the Structure of the Gospels," *Anglican Theological Review* 13 (1931): 42-46. See also, Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in the Form and Function of Chiastic Structures* (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), xv-xvi.

²² R. Alan Culpepper, "The Pivot of John's Prologue," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1980–81): 1-31. Technically, Culpepper views the phrase "He gave them the right to become children of God" (v. 12b) as the pivot of the Prologue (*ibid.*, 15-16). My own adaptation here of Culpepper's chiasm reflects a slightly broader pivot point that also encompasses the condition for eternal life.

- A 1:1–2 Jesus as the Word/God—revelatory
- B 1:3 All things were made through Jesus—regarding creation
- C 1:4–5 A rejection: darkness has rejected Him as Light
- D 1:6–8 John the Baptist: testifying to the Light
- E 1:9–10 The Incarnation: a coming and a not knowing
- F 1:11 The people of God only physically born (created) who reject Him
- G 1:12 The divine condition (belief), content (in His name), and promise (become children of God)
- F' 1:13 The people of God spiritually born who accept Him
- E' 1:14 The Incarnation: a coming and a perceiving
- D' 1:15 John the Baptist: testifying about the Coming One
- C' 1:16 A reception: we have received from Him blessing upon blessing
- B' 1:17 Grace and truth have come through Jesus—regarding new creation
- A' 1:18 Jesus as the Only God—revelatory

Figure 1. The Pivot of the Prologue's Chiastic Structure

If the Prologue gives a preview and introduction to the main themes of John's Gospel, and its structure focuses on receiving the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, by believing in His name (His person and work) so as to become a child of God (1:12), then this pivot point becomes a virtual, implicit purpose statement for the book, mirroring the explicit purpose statement of 20:30–31. Since becoming a child of God at the point of initial belief and new birth concerns eternal salvation rather than discipleship, the pivot of John's prologue confirms that his purpose is primarily evangelism rather than edification.

Predominant Usage of Πιστεύω

The purpose of John's Gospel is also revealed through its 98 uses of the word "believe" (πιστεύω). If John was written either to lead unbelievers to faith in Christ or to develop the faith of existing believers, then this should be reflected in the usage of πιστεύω throughout the book. When every occurrence of this term is studied, the majority are observed to occur in evangelistic contexts. The occurrences of initial faith outweigh the instances of developing faith by a ratio of 4 to 1. This is also the pattern for πιστεύω in

purpose clauses in John. The ἵνα clauses that contain πιστεύω are especially relevant since they express purpose in believing. This makes them an explicit indicator of John's primary objective. When the ἵνα + πιστεύω constructions are studied case by case in John, the instances of initial belief predominate over those of developing faith by a count of 14 to 4. While John could have chosen to include in his Gospel certain historical episodes of belief that were disproportionately higher for the developing faith of the disciples versus the initial faith of the lost, the fact remains that John deliberately chose to include more examples of inceptive belief in order to serve his literary and theological purpose for his Gospel. Therefore, the patterns of occurrence for the ἵνα + πιστεύω constructions, as well as the general usage of πιστεύω, mirror John's evangelistic purpose statement in 20:30–31. They are another convincing confirmation that John's goal is principally the evangelization of unbelievers.

Inceptive Faith of Unbelievers	Developing Faith of Believers
1:7 (ἵνα), 12, 50 2:23 3:12, 15 (ἵνα), 16 (ἵνα), 18, 36 4:21, 39, 41, 42, 48, 50, 53 5:24, 38, 44, 46 (2x), 47 (2x) 6:29 (ἵνα), 30 (ἵνα), 35, 36, 40 (ἵνα), 47, 64 (2x), 69 7:5, 31, 38, 39, 48 8:24, 30, 31, 45, 46 9:18, 35, 36 (ἵνα), 38 10:25, 26, 37, 38 (3x [MT], ἵνα), 42 11:25, 26a, 27, 42 (ἵνα), 45, 48 12:11, 36 (ἵνα), 37, 38, 39, 42, 44 (2x), 46 (ἵνα) 16:9, 27 17:8, 20, 21 (ἵνα) 19:35 (ἵνα) 20:29b, 31 (ἵνα)	2:11, 22 11:15 (ἵνα), 26b, 40, 42 (ἵνα) 13:19 (ἵνα) 14:1 (2x), 10, 11 (2x), 12, 29 (ἵνα) 16:30, 31 20:8, 25, 29a

Table 1. Inceptive versus Developing Faith in John's Gospel

Some explanation is in order regarding the categorization of πιστεύω in the preceding table. In 2:11, the disciples are already believers in Jesus as the Messiah based on their testimony in chapter 1:41, 45, 49, but their concept of the Christ still needed development with the unfolding, progressive revelation of Christ's life, death, and resurrection contained in this Gospel.

In 2:24, πιστεύω refers to *Jesus*' trust not being in men, and thus this passage does not apply to the question of the type of belief being exercised by others in John's Gospel—whether incipient faith for the possession of eternal life or continuing faith for the enjoyment of fellowship with God. In John 6:69 (in contrast to Judas in 6:64), 8:31, and 11:27, the perfect tense of πιστεύω is used to describe not merely present belief but also the past, initial faith of Peter, the disciples, and Martha. In 11:42, both believers and unbelievers are present, thus πιστεύω applies to both categories. John 16:27 also uses the perfect tense to describe the initial faith of the disciples that was persisting up to the time of Christ's imminent crucifixion. Whereas three verses later in 16:30, John uses the present tense as he portrays the present, developing faith of the disciples. Though John 17:8 occurs in the Upper Room Discourse in a larger context of edification, it refers to initial faith where the aorist indicative form of πιστεύω is used as Christ speaks retrospectively and summarily about the faith of the disciples in contrast to the unbelief of the world.

Finally, in John 20:29b, there is a twofold application being made by the Lord Jesus, and hence πιστεύω could refer to both believers and unbelievers in the passage. The context deals with Thomas's unique, individual case of unbelief, having not yet seen the risen Christ as the other disciples had. At this point in John's Gospel, Thomas needs his concept of the Messiah expanded and developed by grasping Christ's death and resurrection. This occurs in the passage as he beholds the risen, crucified Savior. Application is then made in verse 29 by the Lord Jesus to all who have not yet believed in Jesus as He presently exists as Christ-crucified and risen.

Pronoun Identifiers

If the intended purpose of the fourth Gospel is first and foremost evangelism, then we should also expect to see this reflected in John's description of himself as a believing writer in contrast to his largely unregenerate audience. John presents such a contrast by his occasional use of pronouns to identify himself in distinction to his readers. There are only a few places where John uses pronouns in this manner (1:14–16; 19:35; 20:31; 21:24). In the Prologue, John uses the pronouns “we” (ἡμεῖς) and “us” (ἡμῶν).

John 1:14–16

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among **us** [ἡμῶν], and **we** beheld [ἐθεασάμεθα] His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’”

16 And of His fullness **we** [ἡμεῖς] have all received, and grace for grace.

Some interpreters might be prone to think that “we” and “us” refer to John and all believers.²³ Whoever the “us” (ἡμῶν) and “we” (ἡμεῖς) represent in the passage, they are

²³ Paul S. Minear, “The Audience of the Fourth Evangelist,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 341.

a limited group. The “us” and “we” here cannot include all believers in general. In the Prologue’s “context of incarnation, the *we* who saw the Word’s glory must refer to the Evangelist and other Christians who actually saw Jesus in the days of his earthly life.”²⁴ This interpretation fits with the testimony of Clement of Alexandria in Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*, as well as the Muratorian Canon’s testimony, that John was accompanied by fellow eyewitnesses of Christ and at least the apostle Andrew when he published the fourth Gospel.²⁵

In verse 16, it is doubtful that John’s *readers* are included in the pronoun “we.”²⁶ If the readers are part of the “we,” this would mean that they too, in addition to John and the original eyewitnesses of verse 14, had received Christ’s “fullness” and “grace for grace” (1:16). This would point to John’s readers being believers. However, against this conclusion stands the fact that there are only two places in John’s Gospel where he directly addresses his readership using the pronoun “you” (19:35; 20:31), and there he invites his readers to become believers.

Unbelieving readers cannot be included among the “we” of John 1:16 for essentially two reasons. First, in the context the “we” are said to have “received” (ἐλάβομεν) Christ’s “fullness” and “grace for grace.” Regarding the word “received,” the immediate context of verse 16 involves a sharp contrast between those who had rejected Christ (1:11) and those who had “received” (ἐλάβον) Him and been born again (1:12–13). The root word for “receive” (λαμβάνω) occurs in chapter one only in verses 12 and 16, along with one occurrence of the related term παραλαμβάνω in verse 11, making it likely that John considered the “we” in verse 16 to be believers who had “received” Christ’s fullness and grace for grace by receiving Christ (v. 12) rather than rejecting Him (v. 11).²⁷ When believers “receive” Christ (v. 12), they receive His “fullness” (v. 16) since He Himself is “full of grace and truth” (v. 14).²⁸ In addition, the reference to “grace for grace” in verse 16 points to “we” being believers since only believers have received Christ’s “fullness” and “grace for grace.” Although unbelievers receive God’s common grace (Matt. 5:45), in no sense can it truthfully be said that they have “all received” Christ’s “fullness” and “grace for grace.”²⁹

Second, the most likely identification of the “we” in 1:16 is that it consisted of John and his fellow early disciples who were also original eyewitnesses of Christ’s glory based on the statement in verse 14 “and we beheld His glory.” If we assume that John’s Gospel directly addresses believers, believers in general would still be precluded from the “we” group of 1:14–16 because such an audience would have never personally witnessed the Lord’s glory.³⁰ In this respect, the apostle John in 1:14–16 is speaking on behalf of

²⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 128.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 683–84.

²⁶ Ridderbos, *Gospel According to John*, 652.

²⁷ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 89.

³⁰ Hodges holds that in verse 16, it is John the Baptist who is speaking rather than the apostle John as narrator. Hodges thinks that the statement “of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace” refers to all the Israelites who had nationally experienced the grace of God under the ministry of

the believing disciples or “the apostolic circle” who personally beheld Christ’s glory,³¹ while directly addressing readers who consist primarily of unbelievers.

John 21:24–25

24 **This** [οὗτός] is the disciple who testifies of these things and wrote these things; and **we know** [οἶδαμεν] that his testimony is true.

25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, **I suppose** [οἶμαι] that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Verses 24–25 have an indirect bearing on the question of the fourth Gospel’s purpose. If these verses attest to the book being written collectively by a Christian community for that same community, as many liberal scholars contend, then the fourth Gospel’s main purpose must be the edification of already existing Christians rather than the evangelism of unbelievers. To whom, then, do the pronouns refer in verses 24–25?

John 21:24–25 forms the postscript of the book, in which the writer identifies himself and testifies to the trustworthiness of his composition. Taken at face value, these verses declare the writer to be none other than the apostle John. At least two factors in the text support this conclusion. First, the demonstrative pronoun “this” (οὗτός) in verse 24 (“This is the disciple who”) points back in the context to the account of the apostle John’s clarification of the Lord’s plan for his longevity in contrast to Peter’s martyrdom.³² Second, the first-person, singular verb οἶμαι in verse 25 (“I suppose”) continues the thought of verse 24 with the beloved disciple John speaking of himself as the singular writer of the book. Significantly, the writer concludes saying, “I suppose” rather than “we suppose.”³³ The fact that the apostle John composed the fourth Gospel would not necessitate the book being evangelistic, but it would nullify the Christian community hypothesis with its primary purpose for the book being edification.

Many liberal, critical scholars reject the simple, traditional view that the “we” (οἶδαμεν) of verse 24 refers inclusively to the apostle John and his fellow eyewitnesses of Christ’s ministry (1:14–16) who were with John decades later when he published the book. Instead, critical scholarship in the last century most often has interpreted “we” in verse 24 as a reference to a Christian community that followed the teachings and traditions of the apostle John and that wrote or redacted the fourth Gospel in stages over

John the Baptist (Zane C. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part I: Grace after Grace—John 1:16,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 [January 1978]: 37, 40-43). But it is difficult to conceive in what sense the nation of Israel “received” Jesus Christ in His “fullness,” while it is not hard to see this statement being true of John the apostle and the other believing eyewitnesses.

³¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 46.

³² *Ibid.*, 602-3.

³³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “‘I Suppose’ (οἶμαι): The Conclusion of John’s Gospel in Its Literary and Historical Context,” in *The New Testament in Its First Century Setting: Essays on Context and Background in Honour of B. W. Winter on His 65th Birthday*, ed. P. J. Williams, Andrew D. Clarke, Peter M. Head, and David Instone-Brewer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 72-88.

time to serve as a guiding document for their own community of faith.³⁴ Supposedly, the “Johannine community” referred to itself collectively and inclusively as “we” in verse 24.³⁵ Richard Bauckham explains that, according to the “Johannine community” hypothesis, the fourth “Gospel is understood as in some sense a product of this community, taking shape during the course of the community’s history and reflecting its experiences. Most who write about the Johannine community also assume that the Gospel was written for this community, not with the wider Christian movement in view.”³⁶

This hypothesis is rooted more in the imagination, conjecture, and speculation of its adherents than in the text of John’s Gospel.³⁷ Consequently, this view openly doubts the Gospel’s reliability as a witness to the original events of Christ’s life, supposing that the fourth Gospel is not historically accurate, even by design, but is merely “theological poetry.”³⁸ This view claims the book contains only a loose historical connection to the actual events of Jesus’ life, which supposedly have been creatively refashioned to reflect the history of the community itself. The imagined struggles and schisms within the community ostensibly have been addressed with each successive redaction or stage of the book’s evolution until its completion around the end of the first century to early second century.³⁹ The community hypothesis view practically shifts the reader’s focus from the book’s principal subject—the Lord Jesus Christ—to fallible people (the supposed community and its purported problems). Furthermore, this view depreciates the person of Jesus Christ as God-incarnate, claiming the book’s high Christology evolved from the earliest, primitive doctrine of the apostle John.⁴⁰

³⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1979); Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 717-18; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 213; J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1968); Minear, “The Audience of the Fourth Evangelist,” 342; Jan G. Van der Watt, *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 110-19.

³⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1123-29; Barnabas Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Creative Criticism* (London: SPCK, 1971), 641; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth, 3 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 3:373.

³⁶ Richard Bauckham, “The Audience of the Gospel of John,” in *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 113.

³⁷ Paul S. Minear, “The Beloved Disciple in the Gospel of John: Some Clues and Conjectures,” *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977): 105.

³⁸ Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 131.

³⁹ Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 120-21.

⁴⁰ Van der Watt, *Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters*, 119. For a theologically conservative answer to the “Johannine community” view, see Edward W. Klink, III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Leon Morris, “Was the Author of the Fourth Gospel an ‘Eyewitness’?” in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 139-214.

The “Johannine community” hypothesis flatly rejects the testimony of 21:24 that a single “disciple” both testified and wrote the book.⁴¹ The “we” of verse 24 consisted of the same small group of people described by the “we” references in the Prologue in 1:12–16, namely, the apostle John and fellow believers in Christ who were also original eyewitnesses of Christ’s earthly ministry and glory. These corroborating eyewitnesses are the ones who know that John’s “testimony is true.” In 21:24, John is simply using the pronoun “we” in an editorial fashion, which is consistent with first-century literary practice⁴² and with his custom in the epistle of 1 John.⁴³ This can be seen in the italicized words of 1 John 1:2–3: “the life was manifested, and *we* have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to *us*—that which *we* have seen and heard *we* declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with *us*; and truly *our* fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

First John 1:2–3 contains a “we”-versus-“you” distinction. Yet this obviously does not show that the intended audience of 1 John is unsaved. According to 1 John 5:13, the readers of the epistle are explicitly addressed as believers: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.” The real contrast is that the “you” group of 1 John 1:3 is invited to *fellowship* with God the Father and God the Son, whereas the “you” of John’s Gospel are given an evangelistic invitation to *believe* and receive eternal life (19:35; 20:31). The significance of the pronoun identifiers in the Gospel of John does not lie merely in the contrast between the eyewitnesses of Christ’s glory (“we”; 1:12–16; 21:24) and the readers (“you”; 19:35; 20:31) since 1 John 1:1–3 also contains the same contrast, where John’s readership are clearly believers (5:13). Rather, the real significance of the “we” versus “you” contrast in John’s Gospel is that both of the “you” statements are clearly addressed to people who have not yet believed that Jesus is the Christ (19:35; 20:31), whereas in 1 John the intended reader clearly has believed John’s testimony that Jesus is the Christ (5:1–13). Any attempt to determine John’s audience and purpose must account for this contrast between John’s Gospel and his first epistle.⁴⁴ Therefore, John (and editorially speaking, John along with his fellow eyewitnesses in 1:14–16 and 21:24, “we”) is directly addressing an unbelieving audience in the fourth Gospel primarily for the purpose of evangelism.

⁴¹ Over a century ago, one scholar spoke almost prophetically about the state of liberal, critical Johannine scholarship in the twentieth century: “The critics who assert that the Gospel is not the work of an eye-witness, and even those who say that the last chapter was not written by the author of the whole, wantonly accuse these last words of untruth. That is another of the methods of modern criticism that seem to me sorely in need of reforming. I hope that a time may come when it will be considered as wrong to libel the dead as it is to libel the living. I accept, then, this last verse as weighty testimony to the autopic character of the Gospel. It is easy to see that the two concluding verses are added on the occasion of its publication by those who published it. They, as it were, endorse the witness which it had borne to itself.” William Sanday, *The Criticism of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 81-82.

⁴² Köstenberger, “‘I Suppose’ (οἶμα): The Conclusion of John’s Gospel in Its Literary and Historical Context,” 88 n. 39; idem, *John*, 605.

⁴³ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 215.

⁴⁴ D. A. Carson, “Syntactical and Text-Critical Observations on John 20:30–31: One More Round on the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 713.

Possession of Everlasting Life

Another evidence for the primarily evangelistic purpose of John's Gospel comes from the purpose statement in 20:31 where it says that the reader who believes "may have life."⁴⁵ In this verse and throughout John's Gospel, "life" is synonymous with "eternal life." To "have life" (ἔχω + ζωή) throughout John always indicates the possession of eternal life or regeneration (3:15, 16, 36; 5:24, 39, 40; 6:40, 47, 53–54; 10:10a), not the experience of fellowship that the child of God may have with God (John 13:7–11; 1 John 1:3–10).

In John 20:31, John expresses his purpose for writing, saying, "and that believing, you may have life [ζωήν ἔχητε] in His name."⁴⁶ A critical question pertaining to the purpose of John's Gospel is whether the phrase "may have life" means coming to *possess* eternal life, or *experiencing* the divine life one already possesses, or both. If the two terms in combination, "have" (ἔχω) and "life" (ζωή), express the *possession* of eternal life, then this phrase points to an evangelistic purpose for John's Gospel. On the other hand, if this phrase primarily means the *experience* of a divine quality of life, then John's purpose is mainly the edification of believers. Or, a third possibility is that the combination "have" (ἔχω) and "life" (ζωή) may indicate both the possession of eternal life and the experience of it. In addition, we must ask what evidence exists to support the conclusion that there is no semantic distinction between "life" in 20:31 and the phrase "eternal life" throughout John's Gospel. Finally, since ἔχητε in 20:31 is a subjunctive-mood verb, we must address the question of whether having this life is something guaranteed and secure or something that is uncertain and insecure.

Some who hold that John's primary purpose is edification may reason that verse 31 does not say "eternal life" but only "life," and thus John is not expressing an evangelistic intent. Here the problem of the original reading resurfaces. Though it is not normally noted by commentators, there is a textual variant in John 20:31, where some manuscripts have ζωήν ("life") while others have the fuller expression ζωήν αἰώνιον ("eternal life"). Even though this variant does not change the meaning either way, as we shall see, for those interpreters who would still insist that a reading of ζωήν by itself in verse 31 indicates the believer's experience of qualitative fellowship with God rather than unending life, the strength of the evidence for the combined expression ζωήν αἰώνιον ought to give them sufficient reason to pause and reconsider their position.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Charles C. Bing, "The Condition for Salvation in John's Gospel," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9 (Spring 1996): 27.

⁴⁶ In verse 31, πιστεύοντες is an adverbial participle of means or instrumental participle, i.e., "and that *by means of believing* you may have life in His name." Though πιστεύοντες here is not an adverbial participle of purpose, it is predicated on the clear purpose statement about believing (ἵνα πιστεύ[σ]ητε ὅτι) that precedes it in verse 31.

⁴⁷ The manuscript support for the reading ζωήν αἰώνιον is surprisingly strong. It includes a few of the major uncials, Ⲛ (4th), C* (5th), D (5th), L (8th), Ψ (9–10th); more than a few minuscules, including 33 and family 13; a very good geographical distribution among the versions, particularly the three principal, early languages (Latin, Syriac, Coptic), including several early Old Latin mss., it^b (5th), it^e (5th), it^f (6th), it^g (8–9th), it^q (6–7th), several Vulgate mss., the Coptic Sahidic and Bohairic versions, the Syriac Peshitta and Harklensis versions, and the Ethiopic and Armenian versions. It is also supported by one very early patristic witness, Irenaeus (2nd).

But when the noun ζωή (“life”) and adjective αἰώνιος (“eternal”) are studied in John’s Gospel, it is evident that there is no meaningful theological distinction between “life” and “eternal life.”⁴⁸ The noun ζωή occurs 36 times in this Gospel,⁴⁹ and roughly half of the time (17 times) it occurs in combination with the adjective αἰώνιος. When the adjective αἰώνιος (“eternal”) occurs with the noun ζωή (“life”), this construction does not suddenly make ζωή αἰώνιος something quantitative, as opposed to the noun ζωή by itself being merely qualitative.⁵⁰ The term ζωή by itself refers to unending life in John, even without the adjective αἰώνιος.⁵¹ This is evident from the fact that God Himself is said to have simply ζωή (“life”) in certain passages (1:4; 5:26; 14:6). Since God is eternal by His very nature, the “life” He possess is necessarily everlasting.⁵² The addition of αἰώνιος to ζωή in these passages would be unnecessary and redundant, duplicating what is already implied by the unceasing nature of God.⁵³ In the 19 passages that use ζωή without αἰώνιος, the context usually supplies the meaning of an *eternal* life so that ζωή is semantically and theologically equivalent to ζωή αἰώνιος.⁵⁴ In these 19 passages, it can be demonstrated that the absence of αἰώνιος from ζωή is due mainly to stylistic choice on John’s part.⁵⁵ Jan Van der Watt explains why John may use only “life” (ζωή) and not “eternal life” (ζωή αἰώνιος) in 20:31.

It must however be remembered that this verse has a specific function in the Gospel in so far as it describes the purpose of the Gospel. For this reason several central theological themes are mentioned in summary fashion in this single verse. This explains why only essential information is given. Since this description of the purpose of the Gospel is found at the end, it can rightfully be said that it must be read in the light of the Gospel as a whole (and vice versa for that matter). The Gospel therefore supplies the “context” for understanding 20:31. αἰώνιος can implicitly be read in this case. The absence of αἰώνιος can be explained in the light of the special nature of 20:31 as a description of the purpose of the Gospel.⁵⁶

The fact that there is no semantic distinction in 20:31 between “life” and “eternal life,” plus the fact that John writes in order that the reader “may have” this life,

⁴⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 346; Paul S. Minear, “The Promise of Life in the Gospel of John,” *Theology Today* 49 (January 1993): 488-93; Leon Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 204-5.

⁴⁹ The related verb ζωοποιέω (“to give life”) also occurs twice in 5:21.

⁵⁰ Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* (Salem, OR: Charis, 2001), 304.

⁵¹ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 165.

⁵² Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 149.

⁵³ Jan G. Van der Watt, “The Use of ἸΩΝΙΟΣ in the Concept of ΖΩΗ ἸΩΝΙΟΣ in John’s Gospel,” *Novum Testamentum* 31 (July 1989): 219.

⁵⁴ U. E. Simon, “Eternal Life in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. L. Cross (London: Mowbray, 1957), 102; Van der Watt, “The Use of ἸΩΝΙΟΣ,” 221-22, 227.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Van der Watt, 227.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

points to an evangelistic purpose for the fourth Gospel. Some may object to this, claiming that “life” and “eternal life” in John are primarily qualitative rather than quantitative.⁵⁷ In reality, eternal life is both.⁵⁸ The qualitative aspect and quantitative aspect are inseparable for “to receive eternal life is to receive the life of God in Christ.”⁵⁹ Just as God is the source of this life, eternal life must be like Him with respect to both its quality and its duration. Sauer’s words at this point are fitting.

Eternity is more than merely unending time. Not only as to continuance but also as to content it is different in *essence* from everything temporal. It is something other, something higher, therefore not only a “before” and an “after.” Eternal is no bare notion of quantity, but above all of quality. . . . Therefore “eternal life” is indeed endless life (comp. Matt. 25:46), but at the same time more than deathlessness. It is *divine* life.⁶⁰

Eternal life in John’s usage is first an unceasing gift from God to all who believe in Jesus Christ;⁶¹ but it is also a new, divine quality of life that is to be presently enjoyed and *experienced* by believers who abide in fellowship with Him (8:12; 10:10c). The unending duration of this life stems only from the nature of the believer’s new birth (1:12–13; 3:5, 15–16),⁶² while the enjoyment and experience of this life is based on the added experience of abiding in fellowship with God. Even though eternal life adds a new dimension to believers’ lives in both quality and duration, John does not teach that the experience of this new quality of life will be automatic for all who have been regenerated (8:30–31; 13:8–10; 15:1–5).

Sometimes in John, the enduring, quantitative aspect is emphasized in a particular passage, while at other times the qualitative, experiential aspect is stressed, and sometimes the context contains both emphases.⁶³ When it comes to the possession of eternal life in the present, John makes a unique contribution to our theological understanding. The Synoptic Gospels also contain the phrase “eternal life,” but they use it strictly for blessing in the age to come (Matt. 19:29; Mark 10:30; Luke 16:9; 18:30);⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 304; G. Theodore Martinez, “The Purpose of the Gospel of John” (Th.M. thesis, Talbot School of Theology, 1990), 58.

⁵⁸ David R. Anderson, “Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?” Unpublished paper, Chafer Theological Seminary Conference, Houston, TX, March 21, 2007; W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 93; Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 146–47; C. I. Scofield, *The New Life in Christ Jesus* (Greenville, SC: Gospel Hour, n.d.), 26–28.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Cook.

⁶⁰ Erich Sauer, *The Triumph of the Crucified: A Survey of the History of Salvation in the New Testament*, trans. G. H. Lang (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 99.

⁶¹ Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 163.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁶³ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 303.

⁶⁴ If, in the Synoptics, “life” (ζωή) is also understood as theological shorthand for “eternal life” (ζωή αἰώνιος) as in John’s Gospel, then there is a genuine parallel between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics in terms of equating entrance into eternal life with entrance into the kingdom. In Mark 9:43–47, Jesus equates “life” with “the kingdom of God.” In verses 43 and 45 He speaks of entering into “life” (ζωήν) as equivalent to entering into “the kingdom of God” (τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ) in verse 47. Similarly, John 3:3 and 5 speak of seeing or entering “the kingdom of God” (τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ),

whereas in John, eternal life is said to begin in the present but also extend into eternity.⁶⁵ The Gospel of John is unique in its emphasis on the present possession of this life by believers (5:24) and its experience in our present, earthly lives (10:10c; 15:4–5).⁶⁶

Even though the Gospel of John teaches that eternal life has both a qualitative aspect and a quantitative aspect, we should never depreciate the linear and everlasting nature of this life, which is a major emphasis of the fourth Gospel. Observe how John colors our understanding of the phrase ζωή αἰώνιος. In 4:14, the Lord Jesus refers to “the water springing up into everlasting life.” He promises that all who receive this water “will never thirst.” In the Bread of Life Discourse, the Lord reiterates this promise, saying that He “gives life to the world” (6:33) and that all who receive Him as the Bread of Life “shall never hunger” and “shall never thirst” (6:35). Later in this same context, the Lord completes the bread metaphor, saying that He will give His flesh for the life of the world, so that if anyone “eats of this bread, he will live forever [ζήσει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.]” (6:51). Here, the future-indicative form ζήσει is coupled with the prepositional phrase εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, denoting eternity.⁶⁷ Likewise, in 6:27, eternal life is contrasted in the immediate context with the concepts of not perishing and enduring, as the Lord Jesus beseeches the unbelieving Jews, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life.” The quantitative aspect of eternal life is also demonstrated in 12:25, where the Lord seems to contrast temporal life in this world with the divine life that extends beyond this world: “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (12:25).

Eternal life in John has a strong linear component that emphasizes unending duration. Sometimes this aspect is enhanced by the contrasting language that surrounds ζωή αἰώνιος, as in 3:15–16 and 10:28, where eternal life is the opposite of perishing.⁶⁸ And in 3:36, 5:24, and 5:29 eternal life is equated with deliverance from the wrath of God

while the phrase “eternal life” (ζωὴν αἰώνιον) is substituted just a few verses later in 3:15–16. This use of “life” or “eternal life” reflects the Hebrew expression אֲחֵדָה עֲלֵי עֵדָה אֱלֹהִים, which is commonly found in Second Temple Jewish literature to represent the life of the age to come (Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 144-46; David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], 163-94; Hans Kvalbein, “The Kingdom of God and the Kingship of Christ in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Neotestentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, ed. David Edward Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl Henning Ulrichsen [Leiden: Brill, 2003], 222-23).

⁶⁵ Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 150.

⁶⁶ W. Robert Cook, “Eschatology in John’s Gospel,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1988): 88-89; idem, *Theology of John*, 95; W. Hall Harris, “A Theology of John’s Writings,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck and Darrell L. Bock (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 231; Raymond, *John Beloved Disciple*, 94; George B. Stevens, *The Johannine Theology: Study of the Doctrinal Contents of the Gospel and Epistles of the Apostle John* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 313.

⁶⁷ The prepositional phrase εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα is common in John and throughout the New Testament for eternity (Mark 3:29; Luke 1:55; John 4:14; 6:51, 58; 8:35, 51, 52; 10:28; 11:26; 12:34; 13:8; 14:16; 1 Cor. 8:13; 2 Cor. 9:9; Heb. 1:8; 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21, 24, 28; 1 Peter 1:25; 1 John 2:17; 2 John 2; Jude 13). The more emphatic phrase denoting eternity or endless time, “forever and ever” (εἰς τοῦς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰῶνων), is routinely employed by John in Revelation (1:6, 18; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 14:11; 15:7; 19:3; 20:10; 22:5) but never in his Gospel or epistles.

⁶⁸ Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 150.

and exemption from future condemnation.⁶⁹ Thus, salvation in John's Gospel can be properly termed "eternal salvation."⁷⁰ Likewise, in several contexts, the unceasing duration of eternal life (ζωή αἰώνιος) is evident by its association with the believer's future resurrection and by its contrast with death (5:21, 24, 29; 6:40, 44, 48, 53–54; 11:25–26). John's Gospel clearly teaches that the new divine life that Jesus Christ gives is everlasting in duration.

Logically, it may seem obvious that everlasting life, of necessity, lasts forever.⁷¹ But we must still pursue the question of whether John's Gospel teaches that the possession of this new divine life is really certain and guaranteed. Can eternal life, once received, later be lost through sin and unbelief? In addition, in John's purpose statement about possessing eternal life, how should the subjunctive mood of ἔχω be understood?

In terms of certainty, the ἵνα + subjunctive clause in verse 31b ("and that believing [ἵνα πιστεύοντες] you may have life [ζωὴν ἔχητε] in His name") should be interpreted at least as ecbatic, expressing result.⁷² The New International Version translates the parallel grammatical construction in 3:16 with this indicative sense: "that [ἵνα.] whoever believes in him *shall not perish* [μὴ ἀπόληται] but have eternal life." This well-established category of usage carries a sense of certainty of result from the divine perspective.⁷³ The construction formed by ἵνα with a subjunctive-mood verb certainly has an additional telic sense throughout John's Gospel, expressing both divine purpose and certainty of outcome. Although some older grammarians once denied that ἵνα clauses ever denote result in the New Testament,⁷⁴ this is now known to be inaccurate. Daniel Wallace writes that this category of usage "indicates both the intention and its sure accomplishment" and "what God purposes is what happens and, consequently, ἵνα is used to express both the divine purpose and the result."⁷⁵ This means that the promise of eternal life in 20:31 is not contingent upon the perseverance of the believer's faith and good works but upon the perseverance and worthiness of the object of one's faith—Jesus Christ Himself.

Sometimes the translation of the ἵνα + subjunctive clause creates a misimpression in the mind of the modern reader. The idiomatic English expression "in

⁶⁹ Minear, "The Promise of Life in the Gospel of John," 488-93.

⁷⁰ Though John's Gospel never uses the noun σωτηρία, it does use the verb σώζω four times (3:17; 5:34; 10:9; 12:47) for deliverance from eternal condemnation to eternal life. It also uses the verb once for physical restoration (11:12) and once for Christ's deliverance from the hour of His death (12:27).

⁷¹ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 300.

⁷² Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert Walter Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 176., 198, §391 (5); A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 997-99; Nigel Turner, *Prolegomena*, Volume 1 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by J. H. Moulton, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 206-9; idem, *Syntax*, Volume 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by J. H. Moulton, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 102.

⁷³ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 477.

⁷⁴ Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976), 94-95, §222-23.

⁷⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 473.

order that we might/may/should” often gives the initial impression that some human contingency or uncertainty is present, when in fact the outcome or result is never in doubt from the divine perspective. In this respect, passages involving the human condition of πιστεύω followed by a result in the subjunctive mood (e.g., “should . . . have eternal life” in 3:16 and “may have life” in 20:31) should be viewed as promises, not statements of mere probability.

Similar soteriologically significant examples of the ἵνα + subjunctive-mood clause expressing a definite result appear in 6:39–40 and 10:10.⁷⁶ The use of the subjunctive mood in these passages stems from the presence of ἵνα, not from John’s intent to introduce a measure of subjectivity or uncertainty into the divine promise.

Semantically, this means that passages such as 3:16 and 20:31 are not saying that believers might still perish; rather, they are guaranteeing that believers *will not* perish. Thus, Wallace concludes regarding 3:16, “The fact that the subjunctive is all but required after ἵνα does not, of course, argue for uncertainty as to the fate of the believer. This fact is obvious, not from this text, but from the use of οὐ μή in 10:28 and 11:26, as well as the general theological contours of the Gospel of John.”⁷⁷

The promise of 10:28 is explicit as to the certainty and security of the gift of eternal life to every believer: “And I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (καὶ γὰρ δίδωμι αὐτοῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον καὶ οὐ μὴ ἀπόλωνται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα καὶ οὐχ ἄρπάσει τις αὐτὰ ἐκ τῆς χειρὸς μου). The eternal life promised in John’s Gospel is not merely a temporal divine quality of life, but unending life, which can never be lost once it is received. Three factors in conjunction with the use of ζωὴν αἰώνιον in verse 28 bear this out.

First, the phrase “shall never perish” (οὐ μὴ ἀπόλωνται) contains the Greek double negative οὐ μὴ with the aorist subjunctive ἀπόλωνται. In Greek, this “is the most decisive way of negating something in the future.”⁷⁸ Wallace explains further:

Emphatic negation is indicated by οὐ μὴ plus the *aorist subjunctive* or, less frequently, οὐ μὴ plus the future indicative (e.g., Matt 26:35; Mark 13:31; John 4:14; 6:35). This is the strongest way to negate something in Greek. One might think that the negative with the subjunctive could not be as strong as the negative with the indicative. However, while οὐ + the indicative denies a *certainty*, οὐ μὴ + the subjunctive denies a *potentiality*. . . . οὐ μὴ rules out even the idea as being a possibility. . . . As well, a *soteriological* theme is frequently found in such statements, especially in John: what is negated is the possibility of the loss of salvation.⁷⁹

Second, Christ does not say in 10:28, “I give them eternal life and they shall never perish” (καὶ γὰρ δίδωμι αὐτοῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον καὶ οὐ μὴ ἀπόλωνται), but literally,

⁷⁶ For parallel Pauline usage, see Galatians 2:16 and 1 Timothy 1:16.

⁷⁷ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 474.

⁷⁸ Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 646.

⁷⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 468.

“I give them eternal life and they shall never perish *forever*” (καὶ γὰρ δίδωμι αὐτοῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον καὶ οὐ μὴ ἀπόλωνται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα). The additional phrase εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα is a Greek idiom meaning forever, time without end, or perpetuity, which in John’s usage begins even in this lifetime and extends into eternity.⁸⁰ Thus, in verse 28, Christ not only denies the possibility that His sheep could still perish but that such a situation is an impossibility both now and forever.⁸¹

Third, the Shepherd-sheep metaphor underscores the fact that believers as sheep do not keep themselves but are kept safe by the Shepherd. Some who deny eternal security point to the present-tense verbs in John 10 of hearing and following (v. 27),⁸² which purportedly speak of ongoing conditions for sheep to fulfill in order to retain eternal life.⁸³ But this violates the point of the Shepherd-sheep analogy. Following the voice of the Shepherd in John 10 illustrates the trust or belief of the sheep in their Shepherd (v. 25), in contrast to the doubt or unbelief of the Jews who surrounded Jesus in the Temple (v. 24). But even sheep, who at some point have trusted the Shepherd and entered the sheepfold (vv. 9–10), are still notorious for going astray and needing the “Good Shepherd” (v. 11) to protect and preserve them (v. 28).⁸⁴ In John 10:27–28, Jesus does not say believers are His sheep as long as they continue following, which would contradict His statement in verses 28–29 that no one shall snatch His sheep from either His hand or the Father’s. A characteristic of a *good* shepherd is that he will preserve and protect his sheep from perishing, not let them go when they fail to faithfully follow.⁸⁵

The unending and secure nature of eternal life is also taught in other passages in John’s Gospel, such as 6:37 and 39–40. In verse 37, Jesus says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” The latter statement, “I will by no means cast out,” contains οὐ μὴ with an aorist-subjunctive verb, fitting the pattern for the strongest possible form of negation in Greek. The Lord Jesus continues in the following verses to speak of “everlasting life” (v. 40) and not losing any believers (v. 39). When Christ says in verse 39, “that of all [the Father] has given Me, I should lose nothing,” it is clear that eternal life can never be lost because it is preserved by Christ Himself, not the believer.⁸⁶

These observations on the certainty and security of eternal life bring us full circle and have a direct bearing on the question of the purpose of John’s Gospel and the meaning of the purpose statement in 20:31, particularly the phrase “may have life” (ζωὴν ἔχητε). If verse 31 refers to “life,” and “life” itself in John’s Gospel is shorthand for “eternal life,” and this life can never be lost, then John’s purpose must be evangelistic.

⁸⁰ Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 32.

⁸¹ Dennis M. Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 88–89. See also, Harold Baker, *Secure Forever* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1974), 39–40; Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 18.

⁸² Stephen M. Ashby, “A Reformed Arminian View,” in *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 166.

⁸³ This misunderstanding of Greek verb tenses is addressed in the next chapter.

⁸⁴ Thomas L. Constable, *Expository Notes on John* (Garland, TX: Sonic Light, 2016), 203.

⁸⁵ Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever*, 89 n. 6.

⁸⁶ Besides the Gospel of John, see also Romans 5:9–10; 8:29–30, 34, 38–39; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; 2 Timothy 1:12; 2:13; 4:18; Hebrews 7:25; 10:14; 13:5–6; Jude 1.

Unending life that can never be lost does not relate directly to edification but is a soteriological or evangelistic concept.

Furthermore, if 20:31 is taken as essentially John's purpose statement for the entire Gospel (with the understanding that chapters 13–17 and 21 complement rather than contradict an evangelistic purpose), then special consideration should also be given to the construction of ζωή + ἔχω throughout John's Gospel and not merely ζωή. From each usage of this construction it becomes clear that in John the preponderance of such constructions occur in evangelistic contexts, not contexts involving the edification of already existing believers. The combination of ζωή + ἔχω occurs 11 times in evangelistic contexts involving unbelievers coming to faith in Christ (3:15–16, 36; 4:14; 5:24, 39–40; 6:40, 47, 54; 10:10b), whereas the ζωή + ἔχω construction occurs only twice in edification contexts (8:12; 10:10c).⁸⁷ Even these two instances need qualification since they are not exact parallels to 20:31. In 8:12, the Lord uses the language of discipleship, saying, "He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." Technically, Christ does not say, "He who follows Me shall . . . have life," but rather "He who follows Me shall" have the "light of life" to walk by. This is simply teaching that one who already possesses "life" by believing in Christ is now capable of walking as a disciple in the "light" (1 John 1:6–7)—"the light which springs from life" or "the light which illuminates life."⁸⁸

Even John 10:10c does not quite parallel 20:31. The true parallel is in 10:10b, where the Lord first speaks evangelistically, declaring, "I have come that they may have life [ζωήν ἔχωσιν]." But in 10:10c, He continues, "and that they may have it more abundantly [περισσόν ἔχωσιν]." Here the Lord adds the additional phrase περισσόν ἔχωσιν to express a quality of life that goes beyond evangelism and the possession of eternal life to the possibility of an abundant life for the abiding disciple.⁸⁹

All of this evidence leads to the conclusion that in John's Gospel when a person is said to "have life," this expression is equivalent to obtaining, receiving, or possessing eternal life,⁹⁰ not to the qualitative experience of an abiding disciple of Christ. Thus, the phrase "have life" in the purpose statement of John 20:31, coupled with the way in which this phrase is used throughout John, provides conclusive proof that the aim of this Gospel is primarily evangelism rather than edification.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented five main reasons for the purpose of John's Gospel being primarily the evangelism of unbelievers rather than the edification of believers. In

⁸⁷ John 5:26 and 6:68 also contain the construction ζωή + ἔχω, but these instances are unique since they speak of *Christ* having life, not *men*.

⁸⁸ Leon Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 439 n. 10.

⁸⁹ Constable, *Expository Notes on John*, 198.

⁹⁰ This conclusion is reinforced even further when the fuller construction of 20:31 is considered, where "believing" is added (πιστεύω + ἔχω + ζωή [αἰώνιος]). Apart from 20:31, this combination occurs only in the early evangelistic verses of 3:15, 16, 36a; 5:24a; 6:40, 47, and also 6:54 if granting the metaphor of eating = believing (cf. 6:35). See Gibson, "Eating Is Believing? On Midrash and the Mixing of Metaphors in John 6," 5-15; Van der Watt, "The Use of 'ΑΙΩΝΙΟΣ,'" 222-23.

summary, these include: (1) the contrasting explicit purpose statements and target audiences for John's Gospel (to unbelievers) versus the epistle of 1 John (to those who are already believers); (2) the pivot point of the chiastic structure of the Prologue that reveals the focal point of the book being the message of 1:12 about becoming a child of God through belief in Christ's name; (3) the predominant usage of πιστεύω throughout John's Gospel, which shows that his emphasis is on initial belief in Jesus, not an ongoing walk of faith by those who are already believers; (4) the pronouns used by John and his companion eyewitnesses of Christ in the fourth Gospel identify them as believers who are distinct from the unbelieving readers of the book; and (5) in the purpose statement of 20:31 and throughout the book, the expression "have life" (ἔχω + ζωή) speaks of the possession of everlasting life that cannot be lost, rather than the enjoyment of that life by an already existing believer who abides in fellowship with Christ as His disciple. Taken together, these five reasons demonstrate conclusively that the purpose of John's Gospel is primarily the evangelism of unbelievers rather than the edification of believers.

CHAPTER 5

THE MEANING AND NATURE OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ IN JOHN'S EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE

In seeking to accurately discern the evangelistic purpose and message of John's Gospel, it is necessary to carefully examine the sole explicit purpose statement for the book found in 20:30–31. The next two chapters drill down to explore each key term in John's purpose statement, starting in this chapter with the two references to believing (πιστεύω) in verse 31. This chapter focuses on the nature and duration of faith required for eternal life, while the next chapter focuses on the object and content to be believed for eternal life. This chapter and the next examine each element of John's purpose statement in terms of textual, grammatical, and semantic issues, as well as the theological implications of 20:30–31 for evangelism, Christology, and soteriology, particularly as they pertain to the nature and content of faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Since πιστεύω (“believe”) occurs twice in verse 31, and this word is so frequent and significant in John's Gospel, its form, meaning, and usage are considered first.

John 20:30–31

- 30 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;
- 31 but these are written that [ἵνα] you may believe [πιστεύσῃτε] that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [πιστεύοντες] you may have life in His name.

TEXT, SYNTAX, AND SEMANTICS OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ IN JOHN 20:31

Before interpreting what 20:30–31 *means*, the first responsibility in careful interpretation is to consider what this passage actually *says*. Among the extant manuscripts of John's Gospel, there is a textual variant in verse 31 for the key word “believe” (πιστεύω). Some manuscripts contain the present-tense, subjunctive-mood verb form (πιστεύητε), while others contain the aorist-tense, subjunctive-mood verb form (πιστεύσῃτε). As will be explained in the next section, some interpreters see semantic significance in this grammatical distinction. They maintain that if the present tense of πιστεύω is the original reading in verse 31, then this indicates that John is addressing the ongoing faith of Christians and the purpose of the fourth Gospel must be primarily edification. On the other hand, some commentators claim that if the aorist tense of πιστεύω is original, then this indicates that John is emphasizing the initial faith of unbelievers and the purpose of

the fourth Gospel is primarily evangelistic. So which reading does the evidence support—the present tense or the aorist tense of πιστεύω?

The manuscript evidence for each reading presents us with a classic Majority Text versus Critical Text distinction. For those who subscribe to the methodology behind modern eclectic textual criticism, they will most likely favor the present-tense reading.¹ For those who believe the original reading is best preserved through the majority of witnesses (but not necessarily the oldest), they will favor the aorist-tense reading.² In terms of the external evidence, those who favor the Critical Text regard the “earlier” and “better” witnesses of Papyrus 66 and codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus to outweigh the more numerous manuscripts of the Byzantine and Western text-types.³ But for those who accept modern text-type theory, even they must acknowledge that the evidence for the present-tense reading of πιστεύω is limited to only one text-type, the Alexandrian, versus two other text-types for the aorist tense, the Byzantine and Western (and even one, normally Alexandrian text-type⁴ witness in minuscule 33). Turning to the internal evidence, it is also not surprising to note that among scholars who favor the readings of the Critical Text and who subscribe to the text-critical canons of intrinsic and transcriptional probability, these scholars tend to favor the present tense of πιστεύω in verse 31 as the more difficult reading⁵ and thus as more likely original.⁶

When all the evidence is weighed, the conclusion in favor of a particular reading will ultimately be determined by a person’s text-critical presuppositions. Fortunately, as the rest of this chapter will explain, we are not beholden to the problem of the textual variant of πιστεύω in 20:31 in order to determine the purpose of John’s

¹ The present-subjunctive reading of πιστεύητε is supported by one papyrus ms., P⁶⁶vid (ca. 200), and by the uncials K* (4th), B (4th), Θ (9th), 0250 (8th).

² The aorist-subjunctive reading of πιστεύσητε is supported by the uncials K², A (5th), C (5th), D (5th), L (8th), N (6th), W (4–5th), Δ (9th), Ψ (9–10th), 0141 (10th); the majority of minuscules, including families 1 and 13 and the “queen” of the minuscules, 33; and patristic sources, Irenaeus (2nd) and Cyril.

³ Gordon D. Fee, “On the Text and Meaning of John 20:30–31,” in *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 31–32.

⁴ Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, 2nd ed., trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 129.

⁵ The canon of eclectic textual criticism that sees greater weight in the more difficult reading among variants must be treated carefully regarding theologically difficult variants. See Philip M. Miller, “The Least Orthodox Reading Is to Be Preferred: A New Canon for New Testament Textual Criticism?” in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence*, ed. Daniel B. Wallace (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 57–89; Maurice A. Robinson, “The Case for Byzantine Priority,” in *Rethinking New Testament Textual Criticism*, ed. David Alan Black (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 130–31; and Daniel B. Wallace, “Laying a Foundation: New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 41 n. 21, 47.

⁶ D. A. Carson, “Syntactical and Text-Critical Observations on John 20:30–31: One More Round on the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 697, 703; Fee, “On the Text and Meaning of John 20:30–31,” 30–35; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 855 n. 82; Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 328 n. 6; Moisés Silva, “Approaching the Fourth Gospel,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3.1 (1988): 21 n. 12.

Gospel and the nature of believing.⁷ Regardless of one's textual predilections, it seems prudent to heed the advice of Moisés Silva when he writes, "We have a serious textual ambiguity [in John 20:31]. The decision between the present and the aorist is sufficiently difficult that it would seem folly to build a case on either reading."⁸

Despite Silva's note of caution, some *have* built a case for John's audience, purpose, and the nature of πιστεύω on the basis of the grammatical distinction between the present and aorist tense of πιστεύω in 20:31. Those commentators who see such a distinction conclude that the present tense indicates the continuance of faith and thus points to a readership consisting of those who are already believers,⁹ whereas the aorist tense of πιστεύω would indicate the initial belief of an unregenerate audience. As an example of this reasoning, reputed Roman Catholic commentator and Johannine scholar Raymond Brown explains the traditional perseverance-in-faith interpretation: "Since here the present would mean 'keep believing,' it would imply that the readers of the Gospel are already Christian believers."¹⁰ Brown goes on to claim that if the aorist tense is the original reading, then the implication is that "the readers are not yet Christian."¹¹ Brown's assumptions are by no means exclusive to Catholics, as even some evangelicals have made similar claims.¹² Even leading representatives of Free Grace theology have derived the same conclusions from this grammatical distinction, as Radmacher and Derickson state in their commentary on John's Upper Room Discourse, "In John 20:31, John uses the present subjunctive of believe. The present subjunctive normally has the sense of continuing something already in process. Thus, John is writing so that his readers will continue to believe, not so that they can become believers. John is telling his readers that he wants to keep their faith alive and vibrant rather than that he is trying to lead them to faith."¹³ Does this grammatical distinction between the present and the aorist really carry such semantic significance?

There may indeed be some difference in meaning based on a distinction in tenses, but not apart from contextual factors. In terms of frequency, some Greek grammarians might reason that the present tense would be a more meaningful choice by

⁷ Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 238-44, esp. 242-43 where Porter explains verbal aspect, which is his forte.

⁸ Silva, "Approaching the Fourth Gospel," 21. Brownson also concludes regarding the purpose of John's Gospel being evangelism of unbelievers versus edification of believers: "Is the Fourth Gospel evangelistic, or is it written to nurture the faith of Christians? I believe that the issue cannot be settled by appealing to text-critical or linguistic arguments. . . . Rather, one must look at the narrative strategies in John as a whole" (James V. Brownson, "John 20:31 and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel," *Reformed Review* 48 [1995]: 214).

⁹ Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary: A Comparison of the Words of the Fourth Gospel with Those of the Three* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905), 75-76; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 506.

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1056.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² G. Theodore Martinez, "The Purpose of the Gospel of John" (Th.M. thesis, Talbot School of Theology, 1990), 77-78, 87.

¹³ Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* (Salem, OR: Charis, 2001), 345.

the writer, John, if it is the original reading¹⁴ since the aorist subjunctive occurs at least three times as often as the present subjunctive in the New Testament.¹⁵ Fee says, “the aorist is what an author would be expected to use if he had no specific ‘kind of action’ in mind. Thus, it occurs in ἵνα clauses in this Gospel on a regular basis and very often has no further significance at all.”¹⁶ There is also some degree of aspectual difference between the present and aorist subjunctives. The primary difference is that the *viewpoint* of the action in the present tense generally “focuses on the internal make-up of the occurrence without regard for end-points, while the aorist views the occurrence as a whole from beginning to end without regard for internal details.”¹⁷ Greek tenses do not inherently determine a verb’s actual, objective kind of action (*Aktionsart*), whether linear or punctiliar. Instead, tense forms indicate the subjective portrayal of that action or state by the writer (aspect).

But even if the original reading of πιστεύω in 20:31 is the aorist subjunctive (πιστεύσῃτε), this fact by itself would not necessarily indicate an initial faith, which would be the *ingressive* use of the aorist. Some might reason that the aorist here is a *constative* aorist, which is the most common use of the aorist.¹⁸ If the aorist here is constative, then the action of believing is simply being viewed as a whole, in summary fashion, without respect to the beginning or ending points of belief.¹⁹ This would not necessarily imply that an ongoing, repetitive faith is entailed with the constative aorist, as Buist Fanning explains that the action with the constative aorist “is simply viewed in its entirety without regard for duration, repetition, or other *Aktionsart* features and with no emphasis on beginning or endpoint alone. The occurrence in these cases is often a single specific act, and the aorist is the simplest way to make reference to it.”²⁰ In contrast to the constative aorist, the *ingressive* or *inceptive* aorist would place the emphasis on the beginning of belief or entrance into a state of belief.²¹ This is the category of usage that people usually have in mind when noting the distinction between a present tense in 20:31 versus an aorist. But if the aorist subjunctive (πιστεύσῃτε) is the original reading in 20:31, and it is simply a constative aorist, then any supposed sharp semantic distinction is diminished between the present tense, supposedly indicating continual belief of already existing believers, and the aorist tense, indicating the initial belief of new believers in Christ.²²

¹⁴ Carson, “Syntactical and Text-Critical Observations,” 698, 704.

¹⁵ Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 323.

¹⁶ Fee, “On the Text and Meaning,” 36.

¹⁷ Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 390.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 395.

¹⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 557.

²⁰ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 395.

²¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 558.

²² In terms of *Aktionsart* and affected meaning, the problem becomes somewhat more complex. It is compounded by the question of whether πιστεύω is properly an action verb or a stative verb. For those who consider it stative, they will be more prone to accept the *ingressive* aorist use here. The *ingressive* use of the aorist subjunctive is more common for stative verbs than action verbs (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 393).

The Greek tenses do not determine by themselves the kind of action expressed by a verb, whether it is a continual or brief action, such as the difference between habitual and initial belief. That distinction depends on the nature of the verb and contextual features.²³ The present tense-form of πιστεύω does not inherently denote continual belief.²⁴ In the Gospel of John, the present tense is used to portray several events that are one-time occurrences by their very nature. The Second Coming of Christ is spoken of in the present tense (14:2–3, 18, 28), along with the Ascension (20:17), as are the disciples going fishing one night (21:3).²⁵ Not only can the present tense be used to describe one-time, nonrepeatable events occurring in the *present*, such as the Crucifixion, or *future* events from the disciples' standpoint such as the Ascension and Second Coming, but the present tense even portrays *past*, completed, instantaneous events such as Christ's coming to earth at the Incarnation (6:33, 50). In fact, the present, aorist, and perfect tenses may all be used to describe the same action. All three tenses occur in the same context in John 6 to describe the same singular, historical event of Christ's incarnation (vv. 33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58).²⁶ In each of these examples from John's Gospel, it can readily be seen that the inherent nature of the verb plus contextual factors determine whether the action of the verb is momentary or continual, not the verb's tense. Thus, any semantic significance based strictly upon the tense distinctions of πιστεύω in 20:31 should not be pressed.²⁷

Further proof that the present tense of πιστεύω in 20:31 does not necessarily point to already existing believers, nor the aorist tense to unbelievers, can be seen in John's usage of these tenses with πιστεύω elsewhere in his Gospel. Such an artificially fine distinction breaks down once all occurrences of πιστεύω are examined in John. Though the present tense is used for those who are already believers (16:30–31), and the aorist tense is used for those who are unbelievers (1:7; 9:36; 10:38 [MT]; 11:42; 19:35 [MT]), the present subjunctive of πιστεύω is also used for unbelievers (John 17:21; 19:35 [CT]) while the aorist indicative (2:22; 20:8) and aorist subjunctive (11:15, 42; 13:19; 14:29) are used to describe those who are already believers. John 6:29–30 shows that no distinction between believers and unbelievers should be made based on differing tenses:

²³ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 214-16.

²⁴ Ricardo G. Campos, "The Abused Present Participle: Πιστεύων (the one who believes) in John," paper presented at the Southern California Grace Evangelical Society Conference, August 27, 2005; Michael Makidon, "Did They Believe?" <http://www.scriptureunlocked.com/papers/pisteuo.pdf> (accessed August 8, 2009).

²⁵ Such examples of the present tense used for one-time, future events do not imply that these involve a present process that is continually transpiring until its termination at some future time; rather, these examples show that the instantaneous action of the verb *has not yet even begun*, though it is expected to occur imminently (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 223-24).

²⁶ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989), 211-12.

²⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 90, 661-62; idem, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1987): 640-41; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 582 n. 6; J. Carl Laney, *John*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 370-71; Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 40, 856; Elmer Towns, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1990), 16, 355-56.

John 6:28–30

- 28 Then they said to Him, “What shall we do [ποιῶμεν], that [ἵνα] we may work [ἐργαζώμεθα] the works of God?”
- 29 Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that [ἵνα] you believe [πιστεύητε] in Him whom He sent.”
- 30 Therefore they said to Him, “What sign will You perform then, that [ἵνα] we may see it and believe [πιστεύσωμεν] You? What work will You do?”

In 6:29, the Lord Jesus addresses a multitude of *unbelievers* and instructs them to believe in Him as the One sent from God; but He uses the present subjunctive of πιστεύω. Why did He not use the aorist subjunctive, if the aorist necessarily indicates initial belief while the present tense indicates continual belief?²⁸ While it is true that in the previous verse, (6:28), the unsaved Jews use the present tense (ποιῶμεν) in posing their question to Christ, this would not necessarily require the Lord to respond by using the present tense in verse 29.²⁹ To show that the tense distinction does not always hold, after the Lord Jesus uses the present tense of πιστεύω in verse 29, the unbelieving Jews in verse 30 switch back to the aorist subjunctive of πιστεύω in their reply to Christ. The Gospel of John simply does not use the present and aorist tenses to make such a fine theological distinction between believers and unbelievers. Carson’s conclusions on this point are appropriate.

In short, without wanting for a moment to deny that there is a semantic distinction between the aorist and the present of πιστεύω, the evidence emphatically shows that it is not exegetically possible to tie one tense to unbelievers who are coming to faith, and the other to believers who are going on in their faith in some durative sense. Both tenses can be applied by John to both unbelievers and believers.³⁰

Any attempt to identify John’s audience, purpose, and the nature of faith based simply on the distinction in tense forms of πιστεύω in 20:31 is futile and unpersuasive since it is based on a common misunderstanding of Greek verbal aspect and *Aktionsart*.

²⁸ Hamid-Khani claims that Christ uses the present subjunctive in 6:29 to show that both initial and continuing belief are required for eternal life (Saeed Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ: A Theological Inquiry into the Elusive Language of the Fourth Gospel*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 120 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000], 164). But this conclusion reads too much into the use of the present tense, as the next section of this chapter will show.

²⁹ See, for example, the tense contrast between the present tense of ποιέω in the Philippian jailor’s question in Acts 16:30 and the aorist tense of πιστεύω in Paul and Silas’ response in verse 31.

³⁰ Carson, “Syntactical and Text-Critical Observations on John 20:30–31,” 708.

INSTANTANEOUS VERSUS PERSEVERING BELIEF

Misconceptions abound concerning the distinction between the present and aorist tense-forms of πιστεύω in the fourth Gospel. This tense distinction is often used as justification for the view that perseverance in faith is a requirement for final salvation and proof of genuine, initial saving belief. However, the mere fact that πιστεύω occurs in the present tense does not by itself indicate a continual act or state of believing. The following quotes reveal that whether a person holds to Calvinism, Arminianism, or neither, the misconception is prevalent that the present tense-form of πιστεύω makes continual belief necessary for eternal life.

But it is not a biblical view of faith to say that one may have it at the moment of salvation and never need to have it again. The continuing nature of saving faith is underscored by the use of the present tense of the Greek verb *pisteuō* (“believe”) throughout the gospel of John (cf. 3:15–18, 36; 5:24; 6:35, 40; 7:38; 11:25–26; 12:44, 46; 20:31; also Acts 10:43; 13:39; Romans 1:16; 3:22; 4:5; 9:33; 10:4, 10–11). If believing were a one-time act, the Greek tense in those verses would be aorist.³¹

Do I Have a Present Trust in Christ for Salvation? Paul tells the Colossians that they will be saved on the last day, “provided that you *continue in the faith*, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard” (Col. 1:23). . . . In fact, the most famous verse in the entire Bible uses a present tense verb that may be translated, “whoever continues believing in him” may have eternal life (see John 3:16).³²

In the New Testament, when belief is said to lead to eternal life, as is the case here, the tense expressing continuous action is always used while the tense expressing a single action is never used. The stress is thus placed on continuous faith rather than on an isolated moment of faith.³³

It misses the mark to say that one only needs faith for salvation and then never needs it again. The very word “faith” in the Greek New Testament indicates ongoing belief in Christ. The Greek verb for faith, *pisteuo*, is usually found in the continuous present tense in the New Testament. *Pisteuo* is in only a very few cases found in the aorist, indicating one-time

³¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr. (Calvinist), *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 172.

³² Wayne Grudem (Calvinist), *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 803. Besides John 3:16, Grudem is also mistaken in his interpretation of Colossians 1:23 as requiring ongoing belief in order to prove the genuineness of one’s initial faith in Christ and obtain final salvation. See Thomas L. Stegall, *Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure? A Biblical Study of the Perseverance Versus Preservation of the Saints* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016), 282–88.

³³ George Allen Turner (Arminian) and Julius R. Mantey, *The Gospel According to John*, Evangelical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 99. (Though coauthored with Mantey, Turner wrote the portion of the commentary quoted above.)

action. Therefore, the overall pattern of the use of *pisteuo* in the New Testament indicates that faith in a believer's life will be continuous and vital.³⁴

John is not concerned so much with the momentary, individual acts of sin as with the overall characteristic tendencies and inclinations of someone's life. John is not taking a snapshot, but a moving picture. His repeated use of the Greek present tense appears to bear this out. He focuses on the habitual character of the activity in view.³⁵

[I]n the overwhelming majority of passages like these, the “believing” is consistently presented as a progressive action (present tense in Greek). Thus, for example . . . *John 3:16*—“...that everyone who *is believing* (present participle) may *be having* (present subjunctive) eternal life.”³⁶

The result, to be sure, is security (“never die”) but in this passage [John 11:26] “living” and “believing” (progressive presents denoting a continuous state) are necessary prerogatives. In other words, perseverance in the present life from God is necessary to maintain the future certainty of life in the next age.³⁷

John, as is his custom, refers [in 1:12] to Christians as “the believing ones” (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν). English translations normally miss this important element of John's Gospel (the contrast between true, saving faith, which is almost always expressed through the use of the present tense indicating an on-going, living faith, versus false faith which is almost always placed in the aorist tense, making no statement about its consistency or vitality). It is literally, “even to those who are believing in His name” or “the believing ones [who believe] in His name.” The term “believing” is a present participle.³⁸

Similar statements and claims could be multiplied ad infinitum. The view that the present tense in New Testament Greek inherently indicates a continuous, habitual, linear action

³⁴ David Dunlap (neither), *Written Aforetime: Selected Articles from Bible & Life Newsletter from 1993–2009* (Land O' Lakes, FL: Bible & Life Ministries, 2009), 171. Dunlap is a Plymouth Brethren writer who strongly advocates the necessity of the perseverance of the saints for final salvation while also rejecting other major tenets of Calvinism. See David Dunlap, *Limiting Omnipotence: The Consequences of Calvinism—A Study of Critical Issues in Reformed and Dispensational Theology* (Port Colborne, Ontario: Gospel Folio, 2004).

³⁵ Sam Storms (Calvinist), *Kept for Jesus: What the New Testament Really Teaches about Assurance of Salvation and Eternal Security* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 167.

³⁶ Robert E. Picirilli (Arminian), *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism & Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 201.

³⁷ Grant R. Osborne (Arminian), “Soteriology in the Gospel of John,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), 251.

³⁸ James R. White (Calvinist), *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal to Norman Geisler's Chosen But Free* (Amittyville, NY: Calvary, 2000), 185.

or state is a deeply ingrained misconception. Despite the popularity of this view, it is a well-known fallacy to Greek language scholars who correctly conclude that the use of the present tense does not automatically indicate an ongoing action or state;³⁹ and similarly the use of the aorist tense-form does not automatically denote a once-for-all action or state.⁴⁰ Greek tense-forms do not inherently determine a verb's function or actual, objective kind of action (*Aktionsart*), whether linear or punctiliar. Instead, tense forms indicate the subjective portrayal of that action or state by the writer (aspect).⁴¹ A biblical writer may choose to portray a momentary, instantaneous action using the present tense-form to bring the reader more vividly into a scene, or he may choose to zoom out and use the aorist tense-form to more broadly and remotely portray an action that is continuous and repeated but presented as a summary statement. This difference in subjective portrayal between the present and aorist tenses is often illustrated by two different vantage points for viewing a parade. The present tense-form effectively places the reader on the street curb to see the parade passing right in front of him, while the aorist tense-form would be used for a helicopter or bird's-eye view of the parade.

The view that the Greek present tense inherently indicates a continuous, habitual, linear action is too often invoked in an attempt to prove that perseverance in belief, and effectively keeping oneself in a "state of grace," is required for final salvation. But is this what John's Gospel teaches?

John 20:31 mentions believing twice in connection with the possession of eternal life—once as an active-voice, subjunctive-mood verb ("that you may believe") and once as a present-tense participle ("and that believing"). Since believing is referred to twice in this key verse and John's Gospel uses πιστεύω 98 times (far more than any other book of the Bible),⁴² the meaning of belief in John's Gospel merits further consideration before examining the other components of the book's purpose statement.

³⁹ David L. Mathewson, "The Abused Present," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23.3 (2013): 343-63.

⁴⁰ Frank Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 222-31.

⁴¹ Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 105-33; idem, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 19-25; Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 26-27; Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, 84-85; Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek New Testament*, 75-109; Richard A. Young, *Intermediate Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 105-7. For the current state of Greek verbal aspect studies, see *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Steven E. Runge and Christopher J. Fresch (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), esp. 1-160.

⁴² According to the Nestle-Aland 27th edition Critical Text, the forms of the Greek verb and participle for πιστεύω occur 241 times in the New Testament (figures for the Robinson-Pierpont Majority Text and Scrivener Textus Receptus vary slightly). Ninety-eight of these occur in the Gospel of John. This means that over 40 percent of all New Testament occurrences of πιστεύω as a verb or verbal part of speech are found in John's Gospel alone, demonstrating that the fourth Gospel is worthy of its description as the "Gospel of Belief." Consequently, some scholars see the theme of belief versus unbelief as the central motif of John's Gospel. See R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 97; W. H. Griffith Thomas, "The Plan of the Fourth Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (October 1968): 314.

PRESENT, SUBSTANTIVAL PARTICIPLE OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ

The present-tense, articular-participle construction for “believe” occurs frequently in the fourth Gospel.⁴³ This is the construction that occurs in the most popular evangelistic verse in the Bible, John 3:16: “whoever believes [ὁ πιστεύων] in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” When the definite article (ὁ) is used with the present-tense participle form of “believe” (πιστεύων), the combination is known as a present, articular, substantival participle construction. In Greek, the present tense, articular participle commonly functions as a substantival noun or descriptive title, so that a phrase like “he who believes” (ὁ πιστεύων) simply means “the believer,” without denoting anything specific about the nature of believing, its duration, or even the time when it occurred. The belief may occur at a point in time or repeatedly over a period of time, but the Greek tense does not inherently indicate this information. Though substantival participles in Greek are normally articular, they do not need to be articular in order to function substantivally as nouns. But the addition of the article definitely nominalizes the participle, turning it into a noun in function. Since tense is a function of verbs and the articular-participle construction is substantival as a virtual noun phrase, it practically and functionally has a zero-tense value, just like nouns or articles themselves. For this reason, a substantival-participle construction such as ὁ πιστεύων is best understood as simply a generic title or description, meaning “he who believes,” “the believing one,” “whoever believes,” or even just “the believer.”

Even if an action occurs once, that solitary act can identify the entire person and serve as a descriptive title for that person. For example, Adam’s one act of sin was enough to identify him thereafter as “a sinner” and all his descendants as “sinners,” just as Romans 5:17–19 declares:

17 For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. 18 Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. 19 For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.

A similar point is made in James 2:10–11, which states that a person who breaks God’s law only once is “guilty of all.” The person who violates God’s law is known as a “transgressor,” regardless of whether he broke God’s law once or a thousand times.

10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. 11 For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

⁴³ John 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:35, 40, 47; 7:38; 11:25, 26; 12:44, 46; 14:12. See also 1 John 5:1, 5, 10.

According to these passages, all it takes is one sin for a person to be justly counted as a “sinner” or “transgressor” in God’s sight. Virtually all perseverance advocates agree with this point about what constitutes a sinner. Most will also agree that, positively speaking, in our society a man’s one-time donation is enough to identify him thereafter as a “benefactor.” But if perseverance advocates acknowledge these examples to be true, why do they deny that one act of belief is enough to constitute a person a “believer” in God’s sight? If all it takes is one act of sin to become a “sinner” or one donation to become a “benefactor,” then all it takes is one act of belief to become a “believer” (ὁ πιστεύων).

The conclusions of Greek grammarians are consistent with this view of ὁ πιστεύων. Nigel Turner explains this use of the present tense, articular participle, saying that in these grammatical constructions the “action (time or variety) is irrelevant and the participle has become a proper name; it may be under Hebraic influence, insofar as the Hebrew participle is also timeless and is equally applicable to past, present and future.”⁴⁴ The present tense, articular participle ὁ πιστεύων found throughout John’s Gospel is best understood, therefore, as fitting the gnomic use of the present tense. According to Wallace, this use of the present tense involves generic subjects and most often occurs with “generic statements to describe something that is true *any* time.”⁴⁵ Other generic, gnomic-type statements using the same grammatical construction that are commonly used by John include “he who hears” (ὁ ἀκούων), “he who loves” (ὁ φιλῶν or ὁ ἀγαπῶν), and “he who does” (ὁ ποιῶν). The Johannine expression “he who believes” (ὁ πιστεύων) definitely qualifies as a generic subject or statement.⁴⁶ Regarding the generic nature of the gnomic present, Fanning says the “sense of a generic statement is usually an *absolute* statement of what each one does once, and not a statement of the individual’s customary or habitual activity.”⁴⁷ Thus, for a group of people who fit the description of ὁ πιστεύων, such as in John 3:36, Fanning says this describes “a group doing an act a single time, rather than repeatedly.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Nigel Turner, “Syntax,” Vol. III, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, ed. James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 150-51.

⁴⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 523.

⁴⁶ In his popular Greek grammar, Wallace considers the use of ὁ πιστεύων in passages like John 3:16 to be a customary or habitual present-tense usage based on his *theological* conclusion that John’s Gospel stresses continual belief, while admitting that *grammatically* “this could also be taken as a gnomic present” (*Greek Grammar*, 522). Wallace states that “when a participle is *substantival*, its aspectual force is more susceptible to reduction in force” and that “many substantival participles in the NT are used in generic utterances. The πᾶς ὁ ἀκούων (or ἀγαπῶν, ποιῶν, etc.) formula is always or almost always generic. As such it is expected to involve a *gnomic* idea. Most of these instances involve the present participle” (ibid., 615). Yet Wallace, who holds to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, interprets the same present, articular participle construction of ὁ πιστεύων exceptionally, as meaning “he who [continually] believes.” His reason for treating ὁ πιστεύων differently is that allegedly in John’s Gospel “there seems to be a qualitative distinction between the ongoing act of believing and the simple fact of believing” (ibid., 522. See also, 523 n. 26; 616 n. 9; 621 n. 22). By claiming this, Wallace is essentially admitting that his interpretation of ὁ πιστεύων is theologically driven rather than a purely grammatical conclusion. See Fred Chay and John P. Correia, *The Faith that Saves: The Nature of Faith in the New Testament* (n.p.: Grace Line, 2008), 47-53.

⁴⁷ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 217.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 216-17.

This usage of the present-tense, articular participle is quite common in the New Testament. The following ten examples are grammatically identical to ὁ πιστεύων (“he who believes”) and demonstrate that this construction does not inherently refer to continual, habitual, persevering belief.

- When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor. Then Judas, His betrayer [ὁ παραδιδούς], seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. (Matt. 27:1–3)

Here in Matthew 27:3, the present-tense, articular participle ὁ παραδιδούς functionally becomes a noun or title for Judas—“the betrayer” or “he who betrays.” The construction here should not be translated, “he who is betraying” or “he who is continuing to betray” since Judas’s act of betrayal was a one-time, past event by this point in Matthew 27. He was even remorseful afterward for this sinful act, though he was still not repentant in the sense of changing his mind by believing in Jesus as the Messiah and Savior. Judas’s single act of betrayal earned him the infamous title in Scripture of “the betrayer” or “he who betrays,” even after his one-time deed was accomplished.

- Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who destroy the temple and build it in three days [ὁ καταλύων . . . καὶ . . . οἰκοδομῶν], save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” (Matt. 27:38–40)

Here in Matthew 27:40, the crowd gathered around Jesus at His crucifixion mocks Him by recounting His prophetic prediction from the beginning of His public ministry when He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). As John 2:20–22 goes on to explain, this statement referred to His crucifixion and bodily resurrection. Ironically, Jesus proved Himself to be the true Christ and Son of God by *not* coming down off the cross but staying there to die and pay for mankind’s sin. But in Matthew 27:40 (and in Mark 15:29), the unbelieving crowd jeeringly calls Jesus “the one who destroys . . . and . . . builds” (ὁ καταλύων . . . καὶ . . . οἰκοδομῶν). This use of the present tense-form of the participle with the article clearly shows that Jesus was not habitually or continually destroying and building (i.e., dying and rising), since His death and resurrection were singular events that each took place within the stated timespan of “three days.”

- Now as they sat and ate, Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, one of you who eats with Me will betray Me.” And they began to be sorrowful, and to

say to Him one by one, “Is it I?” And another said, “Is it I?” He answered and said to them, “It is one of the twelve, who dips [ὁ ἐμβαπτόμενος] with Me in the dish.” (Mark 14:18–20)

Mark 14:20 uses the present-tense, articular-participle construction “he who dips” (ὁ ἐμβαπτόμενος) to identify Judas Iscariot as the betrayer. There are two reasons why the Lord could not possibly have meant “he who continually or habitually dips.” First, the context establishes that the dipping took place during one meal, one particular evening. Second, the parallel passage in John’s Gospel clarifies even further that Jesus was referring to only one particular dipping gesture that evening. John 13:26 says, “‘It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.’ And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon.”

- Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed [τὸ ἐκχυννόμενον] for many.” (Mark 14:23–24)

In Mark 14:24, the Lord Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper and refers to His sacrificial blood that will be “shed” the next day on the cross. The present-tense, articular-participle construction τὸ ἐκχυννόμενον cannot possibly refer to a continual, habitual action since Christ’s “shedding” of His blood occurred once and for all as a finished event the following day when He died on the cross.

- Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born [τὸ γεννώμενον] will be called the Son of God.” (Luke 1:34–35)

In Luke 1:35, the Lord Jesus is described as that Holy One “who is to be born” (τὸ γεννώμενον). The present tense-form of the substantival, articular participle obviously cannot mean that Jesus is being “continually or habitually born” since birth by its very nature is a one-time, momentary event.

- Whoever divorces his wife and marries [ὁ ἀπολύων . . . καὶ γαμῶν] another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

In Luke 16:18, the substantival expression “whoever divorces . . . and marries” contains two participles (ἀπολύων and γαμῶν) in their present tense-form preceded by the same article (ὁ). These present-tense, articular

participles function substantivally and cannot possibly be denoting continuous, habitual action for two reasons. First, the very nature of the act of divorce is momentary or punctiliar as a legal, judicial decision. Second, the acts of divorce and marriage are opposite of one another and cannot occur concurrently and continuously. It is not possible to be continuously and habitually divorcing one's wife, just as it is impossible to be continuously and habitually marrying one's wife. Divorce and marriage are momentary, instantaneous acts.

- The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away [ὁ αἴρων] the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

John 1:29 records Jesus' introduction to Israel and the beginning of His public ministry. The forerunner and herald of the Messiah, John the Baptist, correctly identifies Jesus, using the title, "The Lamb of God." The additional phrase "who takes away [ὁ αἴρων] the sin of the world" modifies and explains "Lamb of God." Thus, the entire construction "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" becomes a proleptic statement at the beginning of John's Gospel and Jesus' public ministry, indicating the Lord's future accomplishment before it happened. Jesus was not at that moment taking away the sin of the world, but since it was certain He would do so in the sovereign plan of God three years later, John used the nominal phrase ὁ αἴρων ("he who takes away")—a present-tense, articular participle—to describe Jesus before the actual moment when our sins were laid on Him as the sacrificial Lamb and taken away by His work at Calvary (John 19:30; Col. 2:14).⁴⁹

- "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes [ὁ πιστεύων] in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?' She said to Him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come [ὁ ἐρχόμενος] into the world.'" (John 11:25–27)

This passage contains two significant uses of the present-tense, articular-participle construction. In the second instance, Martha describes Jesus as "he who comes [ὁ ἐρχόμενος] into the world." Since Jesus had already come into the world at this point in John's narrative, interpreting the present tense here with linear *Aktionsart* ("he who is continually coming" into the world) results in an historical anachronism and ignores the fact that this phrase is being used as a messianic title for the One who fulfilled centuries of prophetic prediction and anticipation by Old Testament saints.

⁴⁹ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John: A Complete Analytical Exposition*, rev. ed. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1965), 32; Robert L. Reymond, *The Lamb of God: The Bible's Unfolding Revelation of Sacrifice* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006), 85-88.

See also the use of ὁ ἐρχόμενος in Matthew 11:3, where it is clearly a messianic title.⁵⁰

- Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs [ὁ κρεμάμενος] on a tree”). (Gal. 3:13)

Galatians 3:13 contains another use of a present-tense, articular participle functioning as a substantival noun-phrase where Christ is described as the One “who hangs” (ὁ κρεμάμενος) upon the cross. Once again, the reference to Christ’s crucifixion indicates that this event was not a continual, habitual action but a one-time, momentary event. The Old Testament passage quoted in Galatians 3:13 also confirms this conclusion, for it states that those who were cursed and hanged on a tree were not to remain there overnight: “his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God” (Deut. 21:23).

- By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed [ὁ ὀλοθρεύων] the firstborn should touch them. (Heb. 11:28)

In this description of Moses and the Israelites keeping the Passover by faith, the present-tense participle form of the verb ὀλοθρεύω (“destroy”) is used with the article to form a substantival, articular-participle construction (ὁ ὀλοθρεύων). Though it contains the present tense-form, the phrase “he who destroyed” is clearly not indicating an action occurring in the present which is why it is translated in the past tense. Nor is the statement “he who destroyed the firstborn” indicating an act of destruction that is continual or habitual since this is an unmistakable reference to a single, unparalleled event of destruction by God in Israel’s ancient past, viz. the tenth plague against the Egyptians recorded in Exodus 11–12.

These ten New Testament examples of the present-tense, articular participle are sufficient to show that a phrase such as “he who believes” (ὁ πιστεύων) in John’s Gospel does not necessarily indicate continuous, habitual, persevering faith. Many similar examples from the New Testament could be given, but these ten are selected

⁵⁰ The title ὁ ἐρχόμενος is especially pronounced in John 7:25–44 where it occurs four times as the crowd in Jerusalem muses over Jesus’ possible messianic status (Mavis M. Leung, *The Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John: Jesus’ Death as Corroboration of His Royal Messiahship* [Portland, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011], 160). For use of this title as messianic, see Michael F. Bird, *Are You the One Who Is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); Robert M. Bowman, Jr., and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 181; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 324; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 319.

specifically for two reasons. First, each example is framed by contextual clues or markers that give information about the time of action and/or kind of action completely apart from the grammatical form of the present-tense, articular participle itself. Second, these examples are chosen because they do not involve the word πιστεύων and are therefore theologically neutral with respect to the issue of perseverance in the faith.⁵¹ Although these ten examples are non-theological with respect to faith, they provide ample proof that the grammatical construction in the phrase “he who believes” (ὁ πιστεύων) does not inherently indicate continuous, linear belief. Instead, identical grammatical constructions function as substantival nouns without reference to time or even kind of action. Therefore, the nominal phrase ὁ πιστεύων describes one who either has believed at some point in the past, or who believes at some point in the present, or who will believe at some point in the future, without denoting anything in itself about ongoing belief.⁵²

Those who teach that the present tense must indicate continual or habitual belief often make a similar unfounded claim regarding the use of the aorist tense of πιστεύω. They sometimes say that there are no examples of πιστεύω in the aorist tense in eternal salvation contexts⁵³ or that such instances occur so infrequently compared to the present tense that we must conclude that the New Testament writers used the present tense predominantly to make a theological point about the ongoing nature of true “saving faith.”⁵⁴ But both of these claims are demonstrably false.

In terms of frequency of usage, of the 98 occurrences of πιστεύω in John’s Gospel, 32 are in the aorist tense.⁵⁵ Though the present-tense uses of πιστεύω in John outnumber the aorist, it is only by a ratio of two to one, which is hardly significant enough to justify a major theological distinction based on differing tense-form usage. Furthermore, the aorist tense-form of πιστεύω is used several times in key evangelistic, salvation passages in John’s Gospel.

- John 1:7: “This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe [πιστεύσωσιν].” This verse declares that the main purpose of John the Baptist’s ministry was to bear witness to the Savior so “that all through him might believe.” This is an evangelistic use of the aorist form of πιστεύω.
- John 2:11: “This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed [ἐπίστευσαν] in

⁵¹ For all other New Testament passages containing the present-tense, articular-participle form of the verb πιστεύω used as a substantival participle, see Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:23, 42; John 3:15, 16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:35, 40, 47; 7:38; 11:25, 26; 12:44, 46; 14:12; 17:20; Acts 2:44; 10:43; 13:39; 22:19; Romans 1:16; 3:22; 4:11, 24; 9:33; 10:4, 11; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 14:22; Galatians 3:22; Ephesians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:7; 2:10, 13; 1 John 5:1, 5, 10, 13; 1 Peter 2:6, 7.

⁵² For further discussion on the *Aktionsart* of πιστεύω, see Chay and Correia, *The Faith that Saves*, 45-53.

⁵³ Turner and Mantey, *Gospel According to John*, 99.

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 621 n. 22.

⁵⁵ John 1:7; 2:11, 22, 23; 4:39, 41, 48, 50, 53; 6:30; 7:31, 39, 48; 8:24, 30; 9:18, 36; 10:42; 11:15, 40, 42, 45; 12:38, 42; 13:19; 14:29; 17:8; 19:35; 20:8, 25, 29, 31.

Him.” This verse refers to Jesus’ first sign-miracle in the Gospel of John, where He turns water into wine. In response to this sign, 2:11 says, “His disciples believed in Him.” According to the purpose statement for the entire book in 20:30–31, the miraculous signs done by the Lord were recorded in John’s Gospel to lead readers evangelistically to “believe” in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and have eternal life.

- John 8:24: “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe [πιστεύσητε] that I am, you will die in your sins.” Here the Lord Jesus warns His audience that a failure to identify Him as the “I am” (the God of Israel) would result in dying in one’s sins—dying unsaved. This is clearly evangelistic.
- John 12:42: “Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed [ἐπίστευσαν] in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue.” This verse uses the aorist tense for “believed” to describe genuine believers, who in the immediate context (12:37–40) are contrasted with unbelievers.
- John 19:35: “And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe [πιστεύσητε].” John 20:31: “but these are written that you may believe [πιστεύσητε] that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” All but five surviving Greek manuscripts have the aorist tense-form of “believe” in 19:35 and 20:31. These two verses are the only places in the entire book where John the narrator breaks through the story to directly address the readers, using the second-person pronoun “you.” In doing so, he gives an evangelistic invitation to the readers to “believe,” using the aorist tense.

Besides these significant uses of πιστεύω in the aorist tense in eternal salvation contexts in John’s Gospel, several other verses use aorist-tense verbs for “received” (1:12), “drinks” (4:14), and “eat” (6:53),⁵⁶ all as synonyms for belief in Christ.⁵⁷ John 1:12 is particularly significant since it uses both the aorist and present tenses: “But as many as received [ἔλαβον] Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe [τοῖς πιστεύουσιν] in His name.” The phrase “those who believe” (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν) is another instance of the present-tense, substantival participle of πιστεύω; but it stands in appositional relationship to those who

⁵⁶ Gibson, “Eating Is Believing?” 5-15.

⁵⁷ Gaebelein, *Gospel of John*, 135.

“received” (ἔλαβον),⁵⁸ which is an aorist-tense verb. This effectively equates the aorist-tense verb with the present-tense participle πιστεύουσιν. The claim that the present tense portrays ongoing belief in contrast to the aorist tense is disproven by this verse since it semantically equates the action of receiving (aorist tense) Christ with believing (present tense) in His name.

Michael Bird provides a more accurate and up-to-date perspective on the significance of tenses as they relate to John’s depiction of the act or state of believing:

The tense of the verb alone will not tell you whether the type of belief is initial or continual. The tense-form, either aorist or present, does not give us any grounds for supposing that John is talking about belief caused by evangelism (i.e. conversion) or belief reinforced through teaching (i.e. discipleship). The evangelist can use either tense-form of πιστεύω to signify coming to faith or continuing in the faith. . . . The present tense-form highlights the general state of believing, not the persistence of belief.⁵⁹

Since tense forms do not inherently indicate kind of action, context and lexical meaning must be considered to determine the type of action intended by the verb. In John’s Gospel, three critical passages illustrate the nature of belief in Christ for eternal life. These passages depict believing by the acts of looking, drinking, and eating.⁶⁰ In each instance, the nature of belief is not based on verb tense but on context and the inherent nature of the verb’s action.

BELIEVING ILLUSTRATED BY LOOKING (3:14–15)

In John 3, Christ uses a basic Old Testament object lesson from Numbers 21:5–9 to explain to the religious Pharisee, Nicodemus, how to be born again. In John 3:14, Christ refers to Numbers 21, where many Israelites complained about Moses’s leadership and God’s provision for them as they wandered in the wilderness. Consequently, the Lord judged the Israelites with serpents so that many died. In Numbers 21, God gives to Moses the remedy for this snake problem:

Numbers 21:8–9

8 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.”

⁵⁸ Charles C. Bing, “The Condition for Salvation in John’s Gospel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9 (Spring 1996): 31.

⁵⁹ Michael F. Bird, *Jesus Is the Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 136.

⁶⁰ John also uses the metaphors of coming to Christ (5:40; 6:35, 37, 44, 65; 7:37), entering through a door (10:9), and the act of accepting or receiving (1:12; 5:43) to depict the nature of belief in Christ for eternal life as a momentary event rather than a continual process. Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, GraceLife Edition (Burleson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992), 130 n. 45, 134 n. 61, 143 n. 108.

- 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

From this episode in Israel's history, the Lord Jesus illustrates for Nicodemus what it means to believe in Him for everlasting life. He says to Nicodemus, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes [ὁ πιστεύων] in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14–15).

Just as the Israelites had to acknowledge their sinful, snake-bitten condition and look in faith to the bronze serpent, which was God's symbol of judgment upon their sin,⁶¹ unbelievers today must look in faith to Christ-crucified as God's provision for their own snake-bitten, sinful condition.⁶² All that was required of the Israelites was one look of faith and they were instantaneously and permanently healed. They were not required to keep on looking at the brass serpent for the rest of their lives in order to get healed, and then to stay healed, or to prove that they were initially healed.⁶³ According to this example in John's Gospel, when a lost sinner places his faith in Christ for salvation, at that instant, he receives God's gracious gift of eternal life and new spiritual birth from above (5:24).⁶⁴

However, some perseverance advocates cannot let the simplicity of Christ's statement in 3:14–15 stand by itself. One author transforms the simple look of faith described by Christ into a human work.

A more careful study of Numbers 21 reveals that Jesus was not painting a picture of easy faith. . . . In order to look at the bronze snake on the pole, they had to drag themselves to where they could see it. They were in no position to glance flippantly at the pole and then proceed with lives of rebellion.⁶⁵

This caricature completely distorts the biblical account of Numbers 21 and Jesus' use of it in John 3 as an illustration of faith in Him for eternal life. Nowhere does Numbers 21 say that the Israelites "had to drag themselves" to where they could see the bronze serpent. In fact, the reason for setting the serpent on a pole (vv. 8–9) was to elevate it so that all could see it, thereby picturing Christ's own lifting up on the cross to make salvation available to all, just as it says in John 12:32–33: "And I, if I am lifted up from

⁶¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, "John," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 1:296.

⁶² Michael D. Stallard, "Sin and Classical Free Grace Theology," in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 350.

⁶³ Lloyd A. Olson, *Eternal Security: Once Saved; Always Saved* (Mustand, OK: Tate, 2007), 40-42; Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 121-22.

⁶⁴ Robert Gromacki, *Salvation Is Forever* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1989), 88.

⁶⁵ MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, 46.

the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.’ This He said, signifying by what death He would die.”⁶⁶

Second, the Israelites’ look at the raised-up bronze serpent in Numbers 21 was deliberate in response to God’s prescription spoken through Moses. There was nothing “flippant” or superficial about it. Facing one’s sin and its judgment in the symbol of the serpent and then accepting God’s prescribed remedy and substitute required at that moment personal accountability, humility, and trust—not strenuous activity.

Third, the Israelites actually did “proceed with lives of rebellion” against the Lord after their look of faith at the bronze serpent in Numbers 21. In fact, the wilderness generation of Israelites was notorious for its ongoing unbelief, idolatry, and rebellion against the Lord, despite having initially believed in Him and His Word. Read the Bible’s own description of that generation in Exodus 14:31: “Thus Israel saw the great work which the Lord had done in Egypt; so the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and His servant Moses.” This is consistent with the testimony of the psalmist who says that the wilderness generation initially believed God’s Word but afterwards departed from Him: “Then they believed His words; they sang His praise. They soon forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel, but lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tested God in the desert” (Ps. 106:12–13). Consequently, a few chapters after the incident of the brass serpent in Numbers 21, the book of Numbers goes on to say that the Israelites “began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab . . . and bowed down to their gods,” so that “Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel” (Num. 25:1–3). Those who died in that plague were 24,000 Israelites (v. 9). This tragic account demonstrates that genuine believers do not necessarily persevere to the end of their lives in faith and holiness (1 Cor. 11:28–32). However, this account also illustrates that God in His sovereignty and grace is still willing to save (Ex. 4:31; 14:31) and heal (Num. 21:5–9), simply on the basis of a one-time look of faith, knowing full well in His omniscience that rebellion and sin leading to death may transpire afterwards.⁶⁷

The incident in Numbers 21 is used by the Lord in John 3 to illustrate the true requirement for eternal life—a simple look of faith or trust in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross in dying a substitutionary death for one’s sins, rather than relying upon one’s own human goodness or works. This solitary act of trust in Christ and His finished work would have been humbling for a moral and religious man such as Nicodemus, but it was necessary. Whether a person is moral (like Nicodemus in John 3) or immoral (like the Israelites in Numbers 25 and the Samaritan woman in John 4), the sole condition for eternal life today is the same—a single act of belief in Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ John F. Hart, “John,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 1615.

⁶⁷ Michael D. Halsey, *The Gospel of Grace and Truth: A Theology of Grace from the Gospel of John* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015), 208.

⁶⁸ Thomas L. Constable, *Expository Notes on John* (Garland, TX: Sonic Light, 2016), 73; Hart, “John,” 1615.

BELIEVING ILLUSTRATED BY DRINKING (4:13–15)

When the Lord Jesus encountered the sinful, Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar, He used the analogy of drinking physical water to picture believing in Him for eternal life:

John 4:13–15

- 13 Jesus answered and said to her, “Whoever drinks [ὁ πίνων] of this water will thirst again,
 14 but whoever drinks [ὁς πίη] of the water that I shall give him will never [οὐ μὴ] thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”
 15 The woman said to Him, “Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.”

In this passage, Christ equates believing in Him with drinking from a well. Drinking in John’s Gospel is a metaphor for believing (6:35). Older commentators and grammarians sometimes note the contrast in tenses between the present in verse 12 (ὁ πίνων) and the aorist in verse 13 (ὁς πίη) as evidence of a distinction between continuous drinking and a one-time act.⁶⁹ But the distinction in grammatical form is unnecessary to make the point about different kinds of action since the context itself makes this clear. People had to *keep drinking* from the well of Sychar to satisfy their physical thirst, and thus they would “thirst again.” In contrast, Jesus offered the woman *a drink*, which would leave her spiritual thirst quenched for eternity,⁷⁰ so that she would “never [οὐ μὴ] thirst” again.⁷¹ This was not one lifelong, continuous drink that perseveres to the end. Gromacki captures the essence of Christ’s teaching in John 4, stating that a person “just has to have one spiritual drink of Christ and he will have spiritual life. There is a contrast in thirsts. Men are always thirsty for natural water, but Jesus said that *one* spiritual drink will forever quench man’s spiritual thirst.”⁷² This understanding of taking a single drink for eternal life is consistent with the salvation invitation found at the very end of the Bible, where the Lord issues one final gracious appeal: “Whoever desires, let him *take* the water of life *freely*” (Rev. 22:17).

BELIEVING ILLUSTRATED BY EATING (6:31–35)

In John 6, the Lord Jesus contrasts the Israelites’ continual eating of manna in the desert with receiving Him by faith as the Bread of eternal life:

⁶⁹ Robertson says, “With this difference in the tenses used (πίνων, keep on drinking, πίη, once for all).” A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 5:63.

⁷⁰ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 211; Wiersbe, “John,” 300.

⁷¹ Olson, *Eternal Security*, 50.

⁷² Gromacki, *Salvation Is Forever*, 89. See also, Hart, “John,” 1617.

John 6:31–35

- 31 Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”
- 32 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven.
- 33 For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”
- 34 Then they said to Him, “Lord, give us this bread always [πάντοτε].”
- 35 And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes [ὁ πιστεύων] in Me shall never thirst.”

The contrast could not be more evident. First, the Jews failed to realize that Christ was the Bread from heaven. Then they mistakenly thought that repeated consumption of this Bread was necessary to sustain life as with the Israelites’ collection of manna in the desert for forty years (Ex. 16; Josh. 5:12). Their confusion is seen in verse 34 where they ask Christ to “always” (πάντοτε) give them this Bread. The Greek adverb πάντοτε means “always” (NKJV), “evermore” (KJV), or “at all times.”⁷³ In verse 34, it modifies the verb “give,” showing that the Jews who followed Jesus assumed this Bread must be constantly, repetitiously given and constantly, repetitiously received in order to meet their need. They were still thinking of their ancestors who had to consume manna daily because of their unsatisfied physical hunger. Yet, in verse 35, Christ promises that if they would believe in Him, they would “never hunger.” The Jews missed Jesus’ point that the receiving of eternal life and satisfaction of spiritual hunger were not received by repeated consumption of spectacular “Wonder Bread” but instead by a solitary act of eating, or believing in the right object, the Lord Jesus Christ—the Bread of eternal life.⁷⁴

Regarding the metaphor of eating as a picture of believing in Christ for eternal life, there is an ironic comparison between the first Adam (Gen. 3:6) and “the last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45), Jesus Christ. Once again Gromacki insightfully states, “How many times did Adam have to eat to bring condemnation upon himself and the human race? Only once! One eating brought death. So it is with salvation; one eating brings eternal life.”⁷⁵ Yet as clear as Christ’s teaching is in John 6 about the single act of believing, some authors, such as A. W. Pink, use John 6 to teach the necessity of continual appropriation of Christ in order to inherit final salvation:

God has purposed the eternal felicity of His people and that purpose is certain of full fruition, nevertheless it is not effected without the use of

⁷³ One lexicon defines πάντοτε as “duration of time, with reference to a series of occasions—‘always, at all times, on every occasion.’” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:641, §67.88.

⁷⁴ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 211; Robert P. Lightner, *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 54; Wiersbe, “John,” 312.

⁷⁵ Gromacki, *Salvation Is Forever*, 90.

means on their part, any more than a harvest is obtained and secured apart from human industry and persevering diligence. God has made promise to His saints that “bread shall be given” them and their “water shall be sure” (Isa. 33:16), but that does not exempt them from the discharge of their duty or provide them with an indulgence to take their ease. The Lord gave a plentiful supply of manna from heaven, but the Israelites had to get up early and gather it each morning, for it melted when the sun shone on it. So His people are now required to “labour for the meat which endureth unto everlasting life” (John 6:27).⁷⁶

Jesus is not teaching in John 6:27 that the Jews should work for eternal life or that faith in Him involves working. He uses the term “labor” (v. 27) because the Jewish crowd had been traveling around the Sea of Galilee to diligently “seek” Him out (v. 26) because of the sign-miracle He performed of multiplying the loaves and fishes (vv. 1–15). Yet in their pursuit of a miracle worker, they seek or labor for the wrong thing. They misunderstand Christ’s reference to “labor” (v. 27) and think in terms of works, saying, “What shall we do that we may work the works of God?” (v. 28). Therefore, Jesus corrects them in verse 29 by telling them that what God is requiring of them is not to “work” but to “believe” in Him: “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”⁷⁷ Morris offers a helpful clarification of this passage, stating,

Some people once asked Jesus what they must do “to work the works of God” (6:28), a question that clearly showed that they thought that their salvation depended on their working works that would be acceptable to God. But Jesus told them that “the work of God” (the singular is important) is that they “believe in him whom he has sent” (6:29). The way into God’s salvation is not the way of human merit or human achievement of any sort, but rather of trust in the one whom God sent.⁷⁸

According to the Gospel of John—the Gospel of Belief—believing in Christ is described as a non-meritorious look, drink, or act of eating. In these illustrations, the Lord Jesus Christ consistently portrays faith in Himself for eternal salvation as a simple, instantaneous act rather than an ongoing activity.⁷⁹

ΠΙΣΤΕΥ[Σ]ΗΤΕ AND ΠΙΣΤΕΥΟΝΤΕΣ IN JOHN 20:31

Returning to the use of πιστεύω in John’s purpose statement, the twofold use of πιστεύω in 20:31 fits with an instantaneous moment of new or inceptive belief⁸⁰ since its appeal to

⁷⁶ A. W. Pink, *The Saint’s Perseverance* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2001), 65–66.

⁷⁷ Lightner, *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, 52; J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 237.

⁷⁸ Leon Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 129.

⁷⁹ Constable, *Expository Notes on John*, 129; Richard W. Christianson, “The Soteriological Significance of ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ in the Gospel of John” (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1987), 59.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Christianson, 41–42.

believe is toward one who does not yet possess everlasting life, who has not yet been born again. According to 20:30–31, Jesus’ signs are presented so that the reader “may believe that [πιστεύσητε ὅτι] Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing [πιστεύοντες] [he or she] may have life in His name.” The two occurrences of πιστεύω in verse 31 do not set forth two separate, sequential acts of faith. Rather, when a person believes the correct biblical *content about Jesus*, that person has also believed in the *person of Jesus*. That is, when a person believes “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” that person has also believed “in Him” and therefore possesses “life in His name.”

The present participle πιστεύοντες is an adverbial participle of means or an instrumental participle.⁸¹ The participle of means is sometimes “called an *epexegetical* participle in that it *defines* or *explains* the action of the controlling verb,”⁸² which, in 20:31, is the preceding subjunctive verb πιστεύ[σ]ητε (“that you may believe”). In addition, “the participle of means is almost always contemporaneous with the time of the main verb.”⁸³ This means that in verse 31 the subordinate participial clause “and that believing [πιστεύοντες]” is merely a further explanation of the act of believing that (πιστεύσητε ὅτι) Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. This is soteriologically significant since some writers err by interpreting the two uses of πιστεύω in verse 31 as two separate acts of faith, with the first (i.e., belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God) being a prerequisite to the supposed second step of faith that actually results in regeneration (i.e., believing in Him for eternal life).⁸⁴

BELIEVING AND VOLITION

The grammatical form of πιστεύσητε (“you may believe”) in John 20:31 leads to another significant point about the nature of faith in John’s Gospel. In verse 31, πιστεύσητε is in the active voice (John’s readers must choose to believe) and subjunctive mood (John’s readers should believe, not that they necessarily will). John’s use of πιστεύω always contains an implicit appeal to man’s volition. In 98 total occurrences of this term throughout the book, it is striking that every one is in the active voice.⁸⁵ Corresponding to this, John never uses the noun form πίστις in his Gospel, which indicates nothing about the nature of πιστεύω necessarily including action or works, as claimed by leading Catholic Johannine scholar Raymond Brown: “That John prefers the verb *pisteuein* to the noun shows that the evangelist is not thinking of faith as an internal disposition, but as an

⁸¹ A. L. Lukaszewski & M. Dubis, *Lexham Syntactic Greek New Testament: Expansions and Annotations* (John 20:31), Logos Bible Software (2009).

⁸² Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 629.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Edwin Aaron Ediger, *Faith in Jesus: What Does It Mean to Believe in Him?* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow, 2012), 22-23, 218. Ediger holds to a form of the “promise-only” saving message. He errs by separating belief in the propositional truths of the gospel concerning Christ’s death and resurrection (which supposedly does not result in salvation) from belief in the person of Jesus Himself for eternal life (which is “the moment of transition from condemnation to eternal life,” *ibid.*, 23). But the syntax of John 20:31 does not support such a distinction.

⁸⁵ The fact that John could have used the passive voice of πιστεύω but chose not to is observed by the occurrence of πιστεύω in the passive voice elsewhere in the New Testament (Rom. 3:2; 1 Cor. 9:17; Gal. 2:7; 1 Tim. 1:11; Titus 1:3), where it is often translated “entrusted.”

active commitment.”⁸⁶ The nature of faith is not determined by either the noun or verb form since both are used in Scripture for genuine, saving faith.⁸⁷ John’s choice to use the verb form exclusively, with the active voice in particular, may indicate only that he sought to emphasize the evangelistic appeal to his reader’s volition in choosing to believe in Jesus Christ. The volitional aspect of believing throughout the Gospel of John is also evidenced by the eight occurrences of πιστεύω in the imperative mood, where the imperative has the force of a command to believe (4:21; 10:37-38; 12:36; 14:1 [twice]; 14:11 [twice]). The book consistently appeals to man’s will and assumes that he is able to believe, but only because of God’s pre-evangelistic work of drawing people to Himself (1:9; 6:44, 65; 12:32; 16:8–11).⁸⁸ John’s Gospel is emphatic that people must still choose to respond to Jesus Christ by believing. People are never made to believe in a deterministic sense such as Calvinism’s doctrine of irresistible grace or effectual calling.

Consistent with these observations about πιστεύω is John’s use of θέλω. On three occasions throughout his Gospel, John uses this term in reference to the human will or volition toward Jesus Christ. In 5:40, Jesus admonishes the Jews who trust in Moses but not Him, “But you are not willing [θέλω] to come to Me that you may have life.” By implication, if they were willing, they would come to Christ. In 7:17, Jesus proclaims, “If anyone wills [θέλη] to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.” The implication once again is that positive volition toward the Lord results in knowledge of the truth, but negative volition perpetuates spiritual blindness toward Christ (8:43–47; 9:39–41; 12:35–40). In John 12, the Greeks who approach Philip may be representative of future believing Gentiles during the church age, as they say to Philip, “Sir, we wish [θέλομεν] to see Jesus” (12:21; cf. 1:46). One more fitting Johannine occurrence of θέλω comes from the book of Revelation, where John uses the term in God’s final call to the lost—His last gracious evangelistic invitation in the Bible: “And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will [ὁ θέλων], let him take the water of life freely” (22:17, KJV).

At this point, Reformed proponents may object to the preceding discussion of the will, insisting that man’s total depravity means his total inability to believe,⁸⁹ and therefore John’s Gospel teaches that regeneration must precede faith.⁹⁰ Ostensibly, John 1:13 supports this Calvinist doctrine because it says believers are “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”⁹¹ However, upon closer observation, this verse actually says man is incapable of *regenerating* himself through his own will, not incapable of *believing* through his own will. It says that believers are reborn

⁸⁶ Brown, *Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 512.

⁸⁷ Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 170-71.

⁸⁸ Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 126-30; C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel, 2002), 196-204, 238-43.

⁸⁹ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 14; David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963), 24-25.

⁹⁰ Duane Edward Spencer, *TULIP: The Five Points of Calvinism in the Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 89.

⁹¹ John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God’s Grace* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2013), 35; Spencer, *TULIP*, 89; White, *Potter’s Freedom*, 182-86.

by God's will rather than the human will. It does not say, "who *believe*, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Thus, 1:13 speaks of man's inability to spiritually give birth to himself. The miracle of regeneration can be accomplished only by God (3:3–8). Moreover, when 1:13 is taken in context, it is clear that belief in Christ's name in verse 12 precedes the regeneration spoken of in verse 13. According to the passage, belief precedes regeneration, not vice-versa. Receiving and believing (v. 12) precede being "born" (v. 13).

In addition, John 3:14–16 also shows the order of belief preceding regeneration since it explains that the Israelites in Numbers 21 first had to look in faith at the brass serpent on the uplifted pole and then they would be physically healed. The order is clearly "look and live," not "live and look."

BELIEVING, WORKS, AND GRACE

Though belief throughout John's Gospel is active in the sense that it involves man's will, it is also passive in the sense that it depends on the work and promise of Christ, rather than relying on one's own work or fidelity. In John's theology, belief in Christ for eternal life is the nonmeritorious, instrumental means of salvation,⁹² just as it is elsewhere in Scripture, such as Romans 3:27–28 and especially Romans 4:5: "But to him who *does not work, but believes* on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted to him for righteousness." Clearly, believing is not a work. Faith is perfectly consistent with grace and the assurance of salvation, which come only by trusting in Christ rather than one's own good works: "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all" (Rom. 4:16). Though John's theology is more implicit than Paul's overt statements of salvation by grace through faith apart from works (Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:5), there are at least eight lines of evidence within John's Gospel to show that believing in Christ is antithetical to working for eternal life.

First, in the Prologue, John informs his readers that there will be depictions of "grace" forthcoming. After introducing Jesus Christ as "full of grace and truth" (1:14), and speaking of "grace in place of grace" (χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος) and how "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (vv. 16–17), the word "grace" (χάρις) disappears from the book. But this does not mean grace itself disappears, for it is woven all throughout the storyline. Grace, along with the other main thematic elements of John's Gospel, are all contained in seed form in the Prologue, but they sprout, grow, and develop as the story progresses.⁹³ Not surprisingly, there are many unmistakable portraits of God's unmerited

⁹² Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 57.

⁹³ Kimberly D. Booser, "The Literary Structure of John 1:1–18: An Examination of Its Theological Implications concerning God's Saving Plan through Jesus Christ," *Evangelical Journal* 16 (Spring 1998): 19–22; William J. Dumbrell, "Grace and Truth: The Progress of the Argument of the Prologue of John's Gospel," in *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honor of J. I. Packer*, ed. Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 116–18; Ruth B. Edwards, "XAPIN ANTI XAPITOS (John 1.16): Grace and the Law in the Johannine Prologue," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (1988): 3–15; Barclay M. Newman, Jr., "Some Observations Regarding the Argument, Structure and Literary Characteristics of the Gospel of John," *Bible Translator* 26 (April 1975): 235; Simon Ross Valentine, "The Johannine Prologue—a Microcosm of the Gospel," *Evangelical*

favor throughout the book, including (but not limited to) Jesus telling a religiously blind Pharisee how to be born again (3:1–16), offering the water of life to a Samaritan woman (4:1–26), forgiving a woman caught in adultery (8:1–11), and, of course, dying for the sins of the world (1:29; 3:14–16; 6:51–53; 19:30). Therefore, it only stands to reason that, in a book containing waves upon waves of “grace” (1:16) and 98 uses of “believe,” believing itself would be harmonious with grace.

Second, believing in Christ is synonymous with receiving Him: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (1:12). John’s Gospel speaks of eternal life as the “gift of God” (4:10) that man must receive. Giving in John’s Gospel is always unidirectional—from God to man—never vice versa.⁹⁴ Nowhere are people told to “give their lives to Christ” in order to be born again. Instead, God wants to give mankind the gift of eternal life. On man’s part, the act of receiving a gift, by its nature, though volitionally active, is nonmeritorious since gifts are free to the recipient, not earned.⁹⁵ The word for “gift” (δωρεά) in 4:10 means “freely given—‘without cost, as a free gift, without paying.’”⁹⁶ If believing is receiving (1:12), and receiving Christ and the gift of God is nonmeritorious, then believing is also nonmeritorious.

Third, running throughout John’s Gospel is the theme of “work” that the Father gave the Son to accomplish or “finish” (4:34; 5:20, 36; 7:21; 9:4; 10:25, 32, 37–38; 14:10–11; 15:24; 17:4; 19:28, 30). While John clearly emphasizes “work” or “works” as Christ’s role, unregenerated mankind’s role is simply to “believe” as seen in the 98 occurrences of πιστεύω. This contrast demonstrates that the one responsibility God has given to the lost to be saved is simply to believe since Christ has already accomplished the work necessary for salvation. The antithesis between working and believing is highlighted by John’s depiction of believing as the act of looking to Christ’s work—to His lifting up on the Cross (3:14–16). Additionally, John 6 is set within the context of the Passover (6:4),⁹⁷ where Jesus appeals to the Jews to personally appropriate His flesh and blood (6:51–53).⁹⁸ This fulfilled the redemptive picture of Jews at the Exodus believing God’s promise and personally applying the blood of the substitutionary, slain Passover lamb for their deliverance from destruction and judgment (Ex. 12:1–13).⁹⁹ According to

Quarterly 68.3 (1996): 300-301; Jan G. van der Watt, “The Composition of the Prologue of John’s Gospel: The Historical Jesus Introducing Divine Grace,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (Fall 1995): 327-31.

⁹⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 39.

⁹⁵ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 56-57.

⁹⁶ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:568, §57.68.

⁹⁷ Of the four Gospel writers, John is the only one to mention that these events occurred in the shadow of the approaching Passover feast. C. T. Ruddick, Jr., “Feeding and Sacrifice: The Old Testament Background of the Fourth Gospel,” *Expository Times* 79 (1968–1969): 340.

⁹⁸ Newman, “Some Observations Regarding the Argument, Structure and Literary Characteristics of the Gospel of John,” 237.

⁹⁹ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 268-69; Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 596; Paul M. Hoskins, “Deliverance from Death by the True Passover Lamb: A Significant Aspect of the Fulfillment of the Passover in the Gospel of John,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (June 2009): 296-98; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:690.

John, belief in Christ for eternal life does not look to one's own work, but looks away from self to the sacrifice of the Savior as one's substitute.

Fourth, John 5:38–47 contrasts belief in Christ with trust in one's own works. In John 5, Jesus addresses the Jews in Jerusalem (v. 14) who want to kill Him for healing on the Sabbath and declaring Himself equal with God (v. 18). Jesus says they trust (ἠλπικατε, lit., “have set your hope”) in Moses (v. 45) rather than believing in Him (vv. 38, 44, 46, 47). “Moses” here is shorthand for Moses' law. The name “Moses” and the law are routinely connected to one another throughout the book (1:17, 45; 7:19, 22–23; 8:5). The Jews were trusting in their law-keeping to be righteous¹⁰⁰ in hopes that Moses would be their advocate or mediator (Ex. 32) to gain acceptance into the kingdom.¹⁰¹ Instead, Moses and his law must be their judge (Rom. 2:12–13) since they themselves were sinners, and to “keep the whole law and yet stumble in one point” is to be “guilty of all” (Jas. 2:10).¹⁰² This interpretation is supported by the judicial context of John 5, where the word “accuses” in verse 45 (κατηγορήσω) is a forensic term.¹⁰³ The context of John 5 also shows that the entire confrontation was precipitated by the legalistic zeal of the Jews for keeping the Sabbath (vv. 9–18). The details of John 5 harmonize well with other biblical statements about first-century Jewish attempts to be justified before God by works of the law rather than grace alone (Matt. 5:20; Rom. 9:30–10:4; Gal. 3:10–13; Phil. 3:1–9).

Fifth, John 6:28–29 is another passage showing the antithetical relationship between believing in Christ and working for eternal life. In verse 28, the Jews say to Jesus, “What shall we do, that we may work [ἐργαζώμεθα] the works of God?” In verse 29, Christ replies, “This is the work of God, that you believe [πιστεύητε] in Him whom He sent.” Catholics see in these verses the notion that saving faith is an obedient, working faith.¹⁰⁴ Some Calvinists see the additional notion that this faith is God's gift to the elect (i.e., a person's belief is really God's work).¹⁰⁵ But even John Calvin rejected this interpretation.¹⁰⁶ Christ here simply sought to correct the Jews' misplaced priority on

¹⁰⁰ Lightner, *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, 43.

¹⁰¹ In Second Temple literature, Moses was portrayed as Israel's ongoing legal advocate and intercessor (*Assumption of Moses* 11.17; *Jubilees* 1.19–21).

¹⁰² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 138.

¹⁰³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 81.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, *Gospel According to John, I–XII*, 513.

¹⁰⁵ MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, 33.

¹⁰⁶ Regarding those who use verses 28–29 to teach that works are necessary for eternal life, Calvin says: “It is idle sophistry, under the pretext of this passage, to maintain that we are justified by works, if faith justifies, because it is likewise called a *work*. First, it is plain enough that Christ does not speak with strict accuracy when he calls faith a *work*, just as Paul makes a comparison between *the law of faith* and *the law of works* (Rom. 3:27). Secondly, when we affirm that men are not justified by *works*, we mean *works* by the merit of which men may obtain favour with God. Now *faith* brings nothing to God, but, on the contrary, places man before God as empty and poor, that he may be filled with Christ and with his grace. It is, therefore, if we may be allowed the expression, a passive work, to which no reward can be paid, and it bestows on man no other righteousness than that which he receives from Christ.” And regarding faith itself being God's gift, Calvin continues to comment about John 6:29: “Those who infer from this passage that *faith* is the gift of God are mistaken; for Christ does not now show what God produces in us, but what he wishes and requires from us.” John Calvin and W. Pringle, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010).

working for God, for they had yet to meet the one requirement God places upon every unregenerate person—believing in Christ. Though the Jews of 6:28–29 were occupied with physical food and their own works, believing in Christ would meet their far greater spiritual need for eternal life. Blum explains this point further:

The people recognized that Jesus was saying God had a requirement for them. They would do God’s requirement if He would inform them what it was. They believed that they could please God and thus obtain eternal life by doing good works (cf. Rom. 10:2–4). Jesus’ response to their question was a flat contradiction of their thinking. They could not please God by doing good works. There is only one work of God, that is, one thing God requires. They need to put their trust in the One the Father has sent. Because of their sin people cannot please God by doing good works for salvation (Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:5). God demands that people recognize their inability to save themselves and receive His gift (Rom. 6:23).¹⁰⁷

In John 6:28–29, the Lord Jesus calls upon these “work-oriented Jew[s], who had always sought acceptability with God through work,”¹⁰⁸ to cease working and simply believe in Christ for eternal life. This interpretation of verses 28–29 is confirmed later in the dialogue in verse 36, where Jesus reproves them for their unbelief: “But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe.” When had Jesus previously told these Jews that they were unbelievers? Nowhere explicitly. But earlier in verses 28–29, Jesus implicitly commanded them to cease working for divine favor and simply believe in Him for eternal life.

A sixth evidence that believing in Christ is a nonmeritorious condition for eternal life in John’s Gospel is the repeated use of the word “believe” (πιστεύω) by itself. Even without any explicitly antithetical statements about faith versus works, like in Paul’s epistles, the Gospel of John’s 98 uses of πιστεύω by itself constitute a sufficiently stated condition. If an employee were to be given instructions on how to fulfill a particular task the same way dozens of times¹⁰⁹ consecutively, that employee would certainly not deduce that something more was required.

A seventh reason for belief being nonmeritorious according to John’s Gospel is because John never uses qualifying terminology for πιστεύω to indicate false or insufficient belief. For example, nowhere in John do we find adjectives and adverbs applied to faith or believing like those that are popular in Christendom today, such as: genuine faith, working faith, living faith, committed faith, spurious faith, false faith, saving faith, or really believe, sincerely believe, truly believe, and so forth.¹¹⁰ This point

¹⁰⁷ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 295.

¹⁰⁸ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 263.

¹⁰⁹ Not all 98 occurrences of πιστεύω in John are used soteriologically as the human condition for salvation, such as Jesus not entrusting Himself to men (2:24) or the Pharisees not believing that a man was truly born blind and later healed by Jesus (9:18). Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 47.

¹¹⁰ Bing, “The Condition for Salvation in John’s Gospel,” 32; Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 128.

is strengthened further by the fact that John is not stingy with his use of qualifiers elsewhere, such as “true” (ἀληθινός), “truly” (ἀληθίης), or “living” (ζῶν), to describe the authenticity of certain things or actions: “true Light” (1:9), “true worshipers” (4:23), “true bread” (6:32), “living water” (4:10), “living bread” (6:51), “spoke truly” (4:18), “truly Jesus did” (20:30), and so forth.¹¹¹

While John uses no modifying adjectives or adverbs to denote genuine saving faith, some Catholic and evangelical Reformed scholars claim John distinguishes true faith from false faith by certain syntactic constructions of πιστεύω. For example, Catholic scholar Raymond Brown concludes that John’s most common construction of πιστεύω + εἰς¹¹² marks a true, working, commandment-keeping faith that goes beyond trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ as the requirement for eternal life:

Thus, *pisteuein eis* may be defined in terms of an active commitment to a person and, in particular, to Jesus. It involves much more than trust in Jesus or confidence in him; it is an acceptance of Jesus and of what he claims to be and a dedication to respond to God’s demands as they are presented in and by Jesus (1 John iii 23). This is why there is no conflict in John between the primacy of faith and the importance of good works. To have faith in Jesus whom God sent is *the work* demanded by God (vi 29), for to have faith implies that one will abide in the word and commands of Jesus (viii 31; I John v 10).¹¹³

Reformed proponent Kenneth Gentry makes a similar claim to support the doctrine of Lordship Salvation, contending that the frequent Johannine πιστεύω + εἰς construction denotes submissive, saving faith in contrast to πιστεύω + an object in the dative case, which is supposedly nonsaving faith.

¹¹¹ Christianson, “The Soteriological Significance of ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ in the Gospel of John,” 48-49.

¹¹² It is often stated that John’s use of πιστεύω + εἰς is unique within Greek literature of the Koine Period. Raymond Brown writes, “There is no real parallel for this usage in LXX or in secular Greek” (*Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 512). Leon Morris goes so far as to say, “It is a Johannine distinctive” (*Jesus Is the Christ*, 180 n. 20). This supposed uniqueness leads many Johannine scholars and commentators to conclude that John must have had a special meaning or theological significance for this construction. But Botha has found a few examples in nonbiblical Greek to the contrary (J. E. Botha, “The Meanings of *Pisteuō* in the Greek New Testament: A Semantic-Lexicographical Study,” *Neotestamentica* 21 [1987]: 228). He concludes, “The fact that *pisteuō eis* is used often in John is meaningful only in that it reflects his personal style and preference. There is no real difference between *pisteuō eis* and other constructions wherein *pisteuō* can also occur—it is only convention of language and nothing more” (ibid., 229).

¹¹³ Brown, *Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 513. Jarvis also claims that the πιστεύω + εἰς construction indicates commitment and perseverance in addition to “personal trust and reliance” (Elizabeth Jarvis, “The Key Term ‘Believe’ in the Gospel of John,” *Notes on Translation* 2 [1988]: 47), as does Harris, who contends that this construction “involves not only recognition and acceptance of the truth but also adherence and allegiance to the truth as embodied in Jesus (Jn 14:6) and dedication to living by his teaching (Jn 8:31)” (Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 237). See also, Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., “Translating Believe in the Gospel of John,” *Bible Translator* 30 (April 1979): 207.

The very act of placing faith into Christ must imply submission to Him—or else it could not be said that one’s trust rested fully ‘in Christ.’ . . . Knowing this, the person coming to Him must certainly recognize his own humanity, finiteness, and sinfulness, and must be willing to subject his will to Christ’s at the moment he trusts in Him.¹¹⁴

Many people may claim to believe Christ (in the sense of *pisteuo* plus the dative case without a preposition), but this is a far cry from truly placing one’s trust wholly *in* Him.¹¹⁵

The conclusions of those such as Brown and Gentry are patently false. All of John’s πιστεύω constructions are used to depict belief in Christ that results in eternal life. The following table shows every construction of πιστεύω in the Gospel of John, and within each category are clear, indisputable examples of belief resulting in eternal life (e.g., 1:12; 3:18b; 5:24; 20:31a; 11:26b).¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 22-23.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁶ The fact that the total number of occurrences of πιστεύω in the table exceeds 98 is due to textual variants represented by the Critical Text (CT) and Majority Text (MT) readings. John 3:15 presents a unique usage of πιστεύω where the Critical Text reading probably is not saying “whoever believes in [πιστεύω + ἐν] Him should not perish but have eternal life” but “whoever believes [πιστεύω] may in [ἐν] Him have eternal life,” where the prepositional phrase “in [ἐν] Him” is not the object of believing but the sphere of life (Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 179). This point is explained further in the next chapter in connection with the “name” of Christ.

Πιστεύω Constructions	References
πιστεύω + εἰς (37x)	1:12; 2:11, 23; 3:16, 18a, 18c, 36; 4:39; 6:29, 35, 40, 47 (MT); 7:5, 31, 38, 39, 48; 8:30; 9:35, 36; 10:42; 11:25, 26a, 45, 48; 12:11, 36, 37, 42, 44b, 44c, 46; 14:1b, 1c, 12; 16:9; 17:20
πιστεύω absolute (30–31x)	1:7, 50; 3:12a, 12b, 15(?), 18b; 4:41, 42, 48, 53; 5:44; 6:36, 47 (CT), 64a, 64b, 9:38; 10:25, 26; 11:15, 40; 12:39, 47 (MT); 14:11b (CT), 29; 16:31; 19:35; 20:8, 25, 29a, 29b, 31b
πιστεύω + dative (18x)	2:22; 4:21, 50; 5:24, 38, 46a, 46b, 47a, 47b; 6:30; 8:31, 45, 46; 10:37, 38a, 38b; 12:38; 14:11b (MT)
πιστεύω + ὅτι (15x)	4:21; 6:69; 8:24; 9:18; 10:38c (MT); 11:27, 42; 13:19; 14:10, 11a; 16:27, 30; 17:8, 21; 20:31a
πιστεύω + accusative (2x)	2:24; 11:26b
πιστεύω + ἐν (1x)	3:15? (CT)

Table 2. Πιστεύω Constructions in John's Gospel

What these constructions demonstrate is that John uses great variety of expression with πιστεύω.¹¹⁷ However, this does not mean that these constructions represent different or contrasting theological meanings.¹¹⁸

An eighth reason for the nonmeritorious nature of faith throughout John's Gospel is the existence of believers who demonstrate faulty and failing faith at times, but who are never said to possess false, spurious, or nonsaving faith. In the context of 12:42–

¹¹⁷ Johannes P. Louw, "On Johannine Style," *Neotestamentica* 20 (1986): 8.

¹¹⁸ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 18; Christianson, "The Soteriological Significance of ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ in the Gospel of John," 200-202; J. B. Hixson, "The Nature of Saving Faith," in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 144; Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 188-89.

43, believers in Christ are contrasted with unbelievers, yet those who “believed in Him” (ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτόν) did not publicly confess Him because they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.¹¹⁹ These genuine believers demonstrate that it is possible to be a “secret believer” who is more concerned about one’s own reputation than the Lord’s.¹²⁰

There are further examples of characters in John’s Gospel with genuine but faltering and uncommitted faith. Peter declared that he would continue following Jesus even to the point of death (13:37), yet on that same night he publicly denied the Lord three times (19:15–27). Joseph of Arimathea believed in Christ but followed Him only “secretly, for fear of the Jews” (19:38). The disciples spent eight days after the Resurrection hiding indoors (20:19, 26) “for fear of the Jews” (v. 19). Even though Christ personally commissioned the disciples to publicly proclaim the gospel (20:21–23) as fishers of men, instead they returned to the business of fishing on the Sea of Galilee (21:1–3). The motif in John’s Gospel of faith that is genuine, but secret and faltering, supports the conclusion that eternal life is conditioned only upon instantaneous faith rather than the steadfastness and productivity of faith.

BELIEVING AND ASSURANCE

In John’s Gospel, there is an integral relationship between faith in Christ for eternal life and the personal assurance of the believer that he or she presently possesses salvation. From the moment of initial faith in Christ, believers know that they have everlasting life. This conclusion is based on several factors in the Gospel of John.

First, John’s Gospel emphasizes the propitiatory, sacrificial work of Christ as the basis for eternal life, rather than one’s own works. If salvation rests upon the work of Jesus Christ, and this work is declared “finished” (19:30),¹²¹ then it stands to reason that no more work is left for the believer to accomplish to make satisfaction for his or her sins, and the sinner can receive salvation freely as a gift of God’s grace (4:10). In John 6, Christ conditions eternal life on belief in His sacrifice, which is spoken of metaphorically in Passover imagery as eating His flesh and drinking His blood (6:53), and He also promises eternal life as a result: “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (6:54). Personal assurance of salvation based

¹¹⁹ Even though 12:42 says they “believed in Him,” even using the ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτόν construction, many still interpret these people as lacking genuine, saving faith because of their lack of commitment and good works (Brown, *Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 513; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 374). Brown calls the people described in 12:42-43 “Crypto-Christians,” who were not real Christians, “for in John’s judgment, by not publicly confessing Jesus, they were showing that they did not really believe in him” (Raymond E. Brown, “‘Other Sheep Not of This Fold’: The Johannine Perspective on Christian Diversity in the Late First Century,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97.1 [1978]: 12).

¹²⁰ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 47; Debbie Hunn, “The Believers Jesus Doubted: John 2:23-25,” *Trinity Journal* 25 (Spring 2004): 24-25.

¹²¹ The redemptive and propitiatory significance of Christ’s cry of τετέλεσται in John 19:30 is explained in the next chapter.

on Christ's work is also seen in John's first epistle: "I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" (1 John 2:12).¹²²

This is contrary to the doctrine of Roman Catholicism, which says it is a sin of presumption to be convinced in this lifetime that one is assuredly saved from hell.¹²³ This is understandable, given that Catholicism claims salvation is conditioned on faith plus works, for how can someone ever know if he has done enough work to qualify for heaven? Catholicism claims that certainty of heaven is for a select few and is obtainable "by special Revelation only."¹²⁴ However, John's Gospel provides this revelation to all who are willing to simply believe in Christ for eternal life rather than trusting in themselves and their own works.

Second, John's Gospel contains repeated promises guaranteeing eternal life to those who believe in Christ (3:15, 16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:39–40, 47, 51, 53–54, 58; 10:28–29; 11:25–26; 20:31).¹²⁵ Since these promises constitute the unchanging Word of God, they are certain to be fulfilled. The believer may rest assured that since God has promised eternal life to those who believe, believers can know, based on the authority of God's Word and the finished work of Christ, that they possess eternal life.¹²⁶

Third, individuals throughout John's Gospel knew immediately that they believed in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (4:39–42; 6:69; 9:38; 11:27). These believers did not have to wait for fruit, good works, and perseverance to the end to know that they had truly believed and therefore possessed eternal life. In contrast, the Reformed theology of the Westminster Confession declares that a genuine believer may have to wait for assurance: "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it."¹²⁷

But according to John's Gospel, assurance of eternal life is the birthright of every believer from the moment of initial belief (1:12–13; 3:18; 5:24). John 1:12–13 states, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Since the new birth or being a child of God

¹²² The next chapter explains this verse in greater detail, showing that the forgiveness of sins is by means of Christ's work, and His work is included in His "name."

¹²³ Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, 13th ed. (London: Herder, 1955), 255.

¹²⁴ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1974), 244.

¹²⁵ Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 247–48.

¹²⁶ Unfortunately, many professing Christians down through church history have had the promises of eternal life immediately available to them but their theology obscured the clarity and simplicity of God's Word, so that they lacked personal assurance of salvation. Among Puritans of the Reformed tradition, many lacked assurance upon their deathbeds. One Reformed author candidly admits the real problem plaguing so many Puritans: "The Puritan doctrine of assurance is a form of salvation by works. A doctrine of works is necessarily also a doctrine of doubt." David J. Engelsma, *The Gift of Assurance* (South Holland, IL: Evangelism Committee of the Protestant Reformed Church, 2009), 12.

¹²⁷ Westminster Confession, chapter XVIII, article III, "Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation," in *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 6th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 3:637.

is conditioned only on belief in Christ's name, and since the new birth is instantaneous rather than a process,¹²⁸ assurance that one is a child of God is available from the point of initial belief. Thus, to those who are already believers (1 John 5:13a), John declares: "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God. . . . Beloved, now [vûv] we are children of God" (1 John 3:1–2a).¹²⁹ The adverb vûv denotes the present reality of believers being children of God.¹³⁰ John 3:18 demonstrates the same point with the use of the adverb "already" (ἤδη): "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already [ἤδη], because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." If the result of unbelief is a state of present condemnation, then by implication the result of believing in the Son of God is a present state of lacking condemnation (i.e., being justified before God).¹³¹

John 5:24 further establishes that the assurance of salvation is the birthright of every believer:¹³² "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has [ἔχει] everlasting life, and shall not come [ἔρχεται] into judgment, but has passed [μεταβέβηκεν] from death into life." The contrast in verb tenses in this verse is temporally and theologically significant and should not be downplayed, as Newman and Nida implore: "It is essential to keep the contrast between verb tenses in this verse. . . . Throughout John's Gospel there is always a tension between present and future."¹³³ In verse 24, three tenses or phases of salvation are indicated by the verbs—present, future, and past.¹³⁴ The present tense "has" (ἔχει) supports the truth that eternal life is a present possession.¹³⁵ The present tense-form of ἔρχομαι in verse 24 is used as a futuristic present tense,¹³⁶ especially common in Johannine literature.¹³⁷ Regarding the perfect tense-form of μεταβαίνω, some Greek scholars like Porter go so far with Greek verbal aspect theory as to drain the perfect tense-form of any temporal significance, viewing μεταβέβηκεν not as a past event but as possibly future, meaning, "is going to

¹²⁸ David R. Anderson, "Regeneration and the Order of Salvation," in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 237.

¹²⁹ Dennis M. Rokser, "Can You Know for Sure You Are Saved Forever?" in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 293, 307.

¹³⁰ Words that function as contextual (deictic) markers of present time include: vûv, ἄρτι, ἤδη, πάλιν, ὡς, τότε, πάντως, ἕως, μέχρι, ὅταν, πρίν (Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 101).

¹³¹ Present temporal indicators such as ἤδη do not necessarily indicate a point of time in the present but a space or state of present time (Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 101).

¹³² Rokser, "Can You Know for Sure You Are Saved Forever?" 304, 321, 340–42.

¹³³ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), 158.

¹³⁴ Dennis M. Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 79–80.

¹³⁵ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 214–15.

¹³⁶ Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 168 §323.

¹³⁷ Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary: A Comparison of the Words of the Fourth Gospel with Those of the Three* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905; reprint, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2006), 126–32.

pass from death to life.”¹³⁸ Fanning is more balanced in treating the relationship between aspect and time in Greek verbs, seeing μεταβέβηκεν in verse 24 as a completed action with the emphasis on the resulting state,¹³⁹ possibly as a gnomic perfect that still retains the basic sense of the perfect tense—an “existing result of an antecedent occurrence.”¹⁴⁰

The distinction in tenses in John 5:24 leads Köstenberger to conclude: “Jesus’ statement that believers ‘have’ eternal life in the here and now, having ‘crossed over from death to life’ already in the past (5:24; cf. 1 John 3:14), ran counter to contemporary Judaism, which considered the attainment of eternal life to be a future event.”¹⁴¹ Later in the chapter, Jesus addresses the same audience as in verse 24. These religious Jews were trusting in the works of the Law for salvation and consequently they did not possess assurance.¹⁴² “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think [δοκέτε] you have eternal life, and these are they which testify of Me” (5:39). The word δοκέτε here means “to regard something as presumably true, but without particular certainty—‘to suppose, presume, assume, imagine.’”¹⁴³ Trusting in one’s works for salvation, rather than the finished work and unfailing promises of Jesus Christ, never results in certainty of salvation. At best, the religious person can only *try and hope* for salvation but he does not *trust and know* that he possesses it.

In John’s Gospel, knowing (γινώσκω) and believing (πιστεύω) frequently occur together (4:42, 53; 6:69; 10:38 [MT]; 17:8; 19:35; cf. 1 John 5:13). Γινώσκω is used almost synonymously¹⁴⁴ or coordinately¹⁴⁵ with πιστεύω as John’s term for certainty or assurance that some aspect of divine revelation is true. Thus, Peter confesses, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe [πιστεύω] and know [γινώσκω] that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (6:68–69).

This coupling of knowledge with belief throughout John’s Gospel supports the definition of faith that Protestant theologians have traditionally articulated in terms of three elements: knowledge (*notitia*), assent or agreement (*assensus*), and trust or reliance (*fiducia*).¹⁴⁶ Knowledge is essential to belief since people cannot believe what they do not know. But simply knowing something is not equivalent to believing it. People may either accept that knowledge as being true or reject it as being false. Thus, the standard Greek-English New Testament lexicon gives the first possible meaning of πιστεύω as “to

¹³⁸ Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 267. See also, Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, 126.

¹³⁹ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 159-60.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 304. See also, Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek*, 65-66 and Olson, *Eternal Security*, 53.

¹⁴¹ Köstenberger, *John*, 188.

¹⁴² Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever*, 157-58.

¹⁴³ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:369, §31.29.

¹⁴⁴ Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary*, 125; Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 81-82.

¹⁴⁵ Otto Michel, “πίστις,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:603.

¹⁴⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 503-6; J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, rev. ed. (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 92-96.

consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one's trust."¹⁴⁷ This meaning is evident in John 4:50, where a nobleman simply takes Jesus at His word: "So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way."¹⁴⁸ Also, in John 10:24–25, there is an antithesis between believing and doubting, as the Jews surround Jesus and ask, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly" (v. 24). To which, the Lord immediately responds, "I told you, and you do not believe" (v. 25). This exchange illustrates a crucial point about biblical faith, namely, that it is the opposite of doubt.¹⁴⁹ Someone cannot simultaneously believe that something is both true and false (John 8:45–46; 19:35). Faith and doubt are mutually exclusive.¹⁵⁰ According to John and the rest of Scripture, believing is being sure, certain, or convinced that something is true. Though many proponents of Lordship Salvation speak in antithetical terms of "mere intellectual assent" versus true, working, saving faith,¹⁵¹ John does not treat belief that assents to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God as being deficient and nonsaving if it is uncoupled from works.

In John's Gospel, πιστεύω not only includes knowledge and assent but also the simultaneous element of trust, reliance, or dependence¹⁵² upon someone or something.¹⁵³ John 2:23–24 says that although "many believed [ἐπίστευσαν] in His name. . . Jesus did not entrust [ἐπίστευεν] Himself to them, because He knew all men."¹⁵⁴ Besides persuasion or certainty that something is true, πιστεύω can also mean "to entrust oneself to an entity in complete confidence,"¹⁵⁵ which is clearly its meaning in verse 24. In the context of John 2:23–25, Jesus does not "trust" man, even though some men just trusted or believed in Him. The example of John 2:24 shows that "trust" falls within the possible semantic range of meaning for πιστεύω.¹⁵⁶ This is also evident from passages where believers are the subjects of πιστεύω rather than Christ. In passages

¹⁴⁷ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 816.

¹⁴⁸ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 59.

¹⁴⁹ See also Matthew 21:21; Luke 24:38–41; Acts 26:28; Romans 4:21; 14:5, 22–23; and James 1:6.

¹⁵⁰ For further explanation of the antithetical relationship between faith and doubt, see the chapter, "When Does Belief Become Unbelief?" in Thomas L. Stegall, *Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure? A Biblical Study of the Perseverance Versus Preservation of the Saints* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016), 101–24.

¹⁵¹ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 380.

¹⁵² Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., "Translating Believe in the Gospel of John," *Bible Translator* 30 (April 1979): 207–8.

¹⁵³ This conclusion agrees with the portrayal of faith in other books of the Bible, such as Acts, where faith involves not only persuasion about Jesus Christ (17:4–5; 28:23–24) but also reliance upon Christ, as depicted by the repeated use of ἐπί with πίστις or πιστεύω (3:16; 9:35, 42; 11:17, 21; 13:12; 16:31; 22:19; 26:18, 20).

¹⁵⁴ English Bibles that translate πιστεύω in verse 24 as "entrust" include the English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, and New Revised Standard Version. "Entrust" is preferable to "commit" (King James Version, New King James Version), which may connote to modern English readers a pledge or promise to do something.

¹⁵⁵ Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 817.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 818.

involving the promise of eternal life versus condemnation, πιστεύω involves trust or reliance upon the promise of Christ in the sense of staking one's eternal destiny upon God fulfilling His word (5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25–26). Likewise, passages that speak of belief in Christ's work or "name" involve reliance upon that work or "name" for one's eternal destiny (1:12; 2:23; 3:18).¹⁵⁷

These observations lead to a few critical theological conclusions about the meaning of πιστεύω and assurance. First, knowledge of the gospel or John's evangelistic message must chronologically precede belief in that message, making it a prerequisite of and inherent to "saving faith." Though knowledge of the saving message may be semantically distinguishable from the other elements of faith (assent and trust), it is inseparable from genuine faith that results in eternal life.

Second, since being certain or convinced of God's promise of eternal life is inherent to faith in Christ for eternal life, personal assurance of salvation must also be integral to "saving faith." In other words, personal assurance of salvation is of the essence of "saving faith."¹⁵⁸ Robert Lightner agrees, stating, "We can go so far as to say that at the moment of faith they also have assurance or they simply haven't exercised faith."¹⁵⁹ If a professing believer in Christ has never had assurance, it means he or she has never believed and been born again. While assurance of salvation can be lost after the new birth as one's faith lapses, the fact remains that if one has never been sure of salvation it is because that person has never believed in Christ alone for eternal salvation.

Third, although assent and trust may be semantically distinguishable, they are practically inseparable and simultaneous when a person believes.¹⁶⁰ Several shades of lexical meaning exist for πιστεύω, whether it is believing that something is true, or trusting in something, or being a believer (i.e., one who holds the Christian faith), or entrusting something to the care of another.¹⁶¹ Admittedly, it is often difficult to decide which particular meaning is intended in each occurrence of πιστεύω.¹⁶² Though there are definite semantic and lexical distinctions with πιστεύω, this does not make these distinctions exclusive or contradictory of one another. Just as belief "that [ὅτι] Jesus is the Christ" (20:31) is semantically distinguishable from believing "in [εἰς] His name" (1:12; 3:18b), this does not make these statements incompatible with one another. In fact,

¹⁵⁷ The next chapter will explain how belief in Christ's words, or the promise of eternal life, is simultaneous with belief in Christ's person and work.

¹⁵⁸ This was also the position of John Calvin, who stated, "In short, no man is truly a believer, unless he be firmly persuaded that God is a propitious and benevolent Father to him, . . . and feel an undoubted expectation of salvation. . . . He is no believer, I say, who does not rely upon the security of his salvation" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.2.16).

¹⁵⁹ Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 240.

¹⁶⁰ Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1990), 60, 103-4.

¹⁶¹ Botha, "The Meanings of *Pisteuō* in the Greek New Testament," 237.

¹⁶² Botha concedes from his own study that "in some instances it was not clear that the lexical meaning was only one of these four. In some instances *pisteuō* could be used for either one of these four meanings, or for possibly two or three of these four. But it must be stressed that only one of the four meanings given above can function in a single context" (Botha, "The Meanings of *Pisteuō* in the Greek New Testament," 237).

they are simply alternative expressions for the one theological requirement to receive eternal life.

PERSEVERANCE & PERFORMANCE PROOF TEXTS

As one reads the Gospel of John with its 98 occurrences of πιστεύω, one is struck by the complete absence of any explicit statement requiring ongoing belief and good works as requirements for eternal life. While many who espouse this type of perseverance and performance soteriology agree that the purpose of John's Gospel is evangelism, they also see the book being evangelistic in the sense of warning against mere profession of faith in Christ. They say John is concerned with a special *kind* or *quality* of faith—a committed, enduring, fruitful, and working faith, as opposed to a false, spurious faith that falls short of regeneration.¹⁶³ This amounts to a works-based plan of salvation. Even if the works are attributed to God's sanctifying grace in the believer to do the works (which is also Catholicism's justification for adding works to faith for salvation),¹⁶⁴ perseverance and works are still deemed necessary to possess eternal life.¹⁶⁵ Carson, for example, speaks of the supposed "tension" in John's Gospel between positive assurances to believers of everlasting life and negative warnings of judgment to pseudo-believers:

How, then, is the tension between such warm assurance and such threatening potential for apostasy to be explained? The function of both sides of the argument provides a clue. The threats without exception are designed to foster persevering endurance; the assurances are designed to remove fears, increase faith, and remove all the posturing of self-sufficiency. The pattern therefore sounds much like what is made explicit in 1 John 2:19; Heb. 3:14; Matt. 24:13; Col. 1:21-3; and elsewhere in the New Testament. Men must hold themselves responsible to persevere, but if they do so, it is God's grace upholding them; while if they fall away they demonstrate that they were not true disciples in the first place.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 543-47; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 347-48; idem, "Johannine Perspectives on the Doctrine of Assurance," *Explorations* 10 (1996): 86-87; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 374, 381, 383-84; Gerald F. Hawthorne, "The Concept of Faith in the Fourth Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116 (April 1959): 122 n. 8, 126; Phillip Hook, "A Biblical Definition of Saving Faith," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (April 1964): 139; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:277; Köstenberger, *John*, 115-17, 261; Laney, *John*, 20-22, 371; William MacDonald, "John" in *Believer's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 333; Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 180; Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 83, 85, 146-47; idem, "Topics from the Gospel of John: Part IV: The Growth of Belief," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (October 1975): 357; Turner and Mantey, *Gospel According to John*, 401.

¹⁶⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Bloomington, OH: Apostolate for Family Consecration, 1994), 483, §1995; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert C. Broderick (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 541; *Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Truth* (El Cajon, CA: Catholic Answers, 1997), 23.

¹⁶⁵ MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, 198-99, 209; Thomas R. Schreiner, "Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (Spring 1998): 53.

¹⁶⁶ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 194-95. For a grace-based explanation of the other supposed proof texts cited by Carson (1 John 2:19; Heb. 3:14; Matt. 24:13; Col. 1:21-3), see Stegall, *Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure?* 224-28, 282-88, 330-36, 392-97.

Those who espouse this type of perseverance theology commonly cite six passages from John's Gospel to support the conclusion that all true believers follow Christ in faithful perseverance as His disciples (2:23–25; 3:19–21, 36; 5:29; 8:30–32; 15:1–6). Yet none of these passages contradicts, or stands in “tension” with, the condition for eternal life being the simple step of faith taught elsewhere in John's Gospel.

Untrustworthy Believers (2:23–25)

John 2:23–25 in the English Standard Version reads:

- 23 Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed [ἐπίστευσαν] in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.
 24 But Jesus on his part did not entrust [ἐπίστευεν] himself to them, because he knew all people
 25 and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Even though the apostle John records in verse 23 that “many believed” in Christ's name, proponents of perseverance soteriology typically demur and conclude instead that those who believed in Jesus' name had an insufficient, false faith.¹⁶⁷ But one chapter earlier, 1:12 stated that belief in Jesus' name results in regeneration. Likewise, in 3:18, belief in His name is equated with belief in the person of Christ, resulting in salvation from eternal condemnation. Thus, 2:23 is effectively enclosed by two promises that belief in Christ's name is the condition for eternal salvation.¹⁶⁸ John makes this same point in 1 John 5:13. So, are we really to believe that John had a different meaning for belief in Jesus' name in John 2 than he did in John 1:12, 3:18, and 1 John 5:13—everywhere else he used this expression?

Moreover, John 2:23 says that the object of their faith was “His name,” not the sign itself of turning water into wine.¹⁶⁹ Verse 23 also contains the most common construction from John's Gospel for saving belief in the person of Jesus Christ, namely, ἐπίστευσαν εἰς.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, to claim that those who believed in Christ's name in 2:23–25 did not have “real” faith begs the question, why does John actually say they “believed” or had “faith”? Why not simply say they “did *not* believe,” or they “did not *truly* believe,” or they had “false faith,” or “nonsaving faith” so as not to mislead the reader into thinking they actually did “believe”?¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Gentry, *Lord of the Saved*, 24; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 374–79; John MacArthur, *The Nature of Saving Faith*, GC 90–21; John Piper, “He Knew What Was in Man,” January 11, 2009; www.desiringgod.org/sermons/he-knew-what-was-in-man (accessed May 22, 2014).

¹⁶⁸ G. Michael Cocoris, *The Salvation Controversy* (Santa Monica, CA: Insights from the Word, 2008), 111; Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 111; Hunn, “The Believers Jesus Doubted: John 2:23–25,” 17.

¹⁶⁹ The next chapter on the object and content of faith demonstrates that a person's “name” stands for the person himself.

¹⁷⁰ Bing, “The Condition for Salvation in John's Gospel,” 35.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

Some perseverance advocates interpret the belief of those in 2:23 as inadequate faith because the people believed based on the signs Christ performed. Supposedly, “sign faith” is less than faith in Christ Himself.¹⁷² But how can this be reconciled with the purpose statement of the book in 20:30–31, where John explains that he intentionally recorded Jesus’ signs in order to lead people to believe in Christ for eternal life? Bing explains: “Faith prompted by signs is seen elsewhere in John (1:47–49; 2:11; 4:52–53; 10:41–42; 11:42, 45; 20:26–29). Jesus even encouraged faith based on signs (1:50–51; 10:37–38; 14:11) and the apostle John expected signs to induce faith (12:37; 20:31). The ultimate miraculous sign, the resurrection, was expected to prompt faith as well.”¹⁷³ In John’s Gospel, sign faith that equates to faith in Christ’s name (2:23) is “saving faith.”¹⁷⁴

The mere fact that Christ did not entrust Himself (2:24) to those who believed in His name (v. 23) does not mean these people had nonsaving faith. Eternal life in John’s Gospel is never conditioned on Jesus believing in sinners, as though people must become trustworthy objects of Christ’s faith to receive eternal life. Instead, regeneration is conditioned on a person’s faith in Christ as the only reliable, trustworthy object. After all, in John 2, there were very few faithful (“trustworthy”), mature believers because it was still very early in the Lord’s public ministry. Thus, John 2:23–25 demonstrates the possibility of being a true believer in Jesus Christ but not a faithful one with whom the Lord could share and entrust His public ministry.¹⁷⁵

Believers Who Do the Truth (3:19–21)

- 19 And this is the condemnation, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the Light, because their deeds were evil.
- 20 For everyone practicing evil [πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων] hates the Light and does not come [ἔρχεται] to the Light, lest his deeds should be exposed.
- 21 But he who does the truth [ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν] comes [ἔρχεται] to the Light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.

This passage is often interpreted as teaching that people can escape eternal “condemnation” (vv. 18–19) only by not “practicing evil” (v. 20) and doing good “deeds . . . done in God” (v. 21).¹⁷⁶ But is this passage really teaching that good works are

¹⁷² Brown, *Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 126-27; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 378-79; Köstenberger, *John*, 115-17; Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 206-7; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth, 3 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 1:358.

¹⁷³ Bing, “The Condition for Salvation in John’s Gospel,” 35.

¹⁷⁴ Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 111-12; Hunn, “The Believers Jesus Doubted: John 2:23-25,” 17.

¹⁷⁵ Cocoris, *Salvation Controversy*, 112; Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 111-12.

¹⁷⁶ Borchert, *John 1–11*, 186; Wayne Grudem, *“Free Grace” Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 53-54; Brown, *Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 134-35;

necessary for eternal life and that all true believers will have a pattern of good deeds in their lives? Is it teaching that a person must stop “practicing” sin before he or she can receive eternal life? And does verse 21 mean that a person’s deeds done before coming to the Light are counted as “good” works by God? In order to answer these questions from verses 19–21, it is essential to understand first their context in John’s developing narrative and their role in the book’s evangelistic purpose.

Contextually and *narratively*, verses 19–21 function as John’s concluding application to the lesson of chapter 3 on Nicodemus’s encounter with Jesus Christ. John 3:1–21 should be viewed as one literary unit where an *inclusio* is formed by references to the darkness of nighttime in which Nicodemus came to Jesus (vv. 1–2) and the dualistic contrast of darkness versus light in verses 19–21.¹⁷⁷ Verses 19–21 present two contrasting types of people current during Jesus’ 3-year earthly ministry who serve as types of people in any generation. Those in verses 19–20 hated and rejected Christ, particularly the religious leaders. The truth-doers in verse 21 respond to Jesus Christ differently than those in verses 19–20 by coming to Christ to know the truth about Him. This was the case with Nicodemus (v. 2), who came to Jesus in sincerity of heart, even though he was still in literal darkness (v. 2) and the figurative darkness of unbelief (v. 12). When verse 21 says, “He who does the truth comes to the Light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God,” John as the narrator is referring retrospectively to Nicodemus’s life.¹⁷⁸ In the narrative of John’s Gospel, Nicodemus serves as a representative type of person who does the truth by coming to the Light for eternal life and then afterwards eventually does positive deeds for the Lord that become manifest to others (7:50–51; 19:38–39). The contrast between these two types of people in verses 19–21 is used by John throughout his narrative to illustrate either a potentially negative or positive response on the part of the reader toward Jesus Christ.

Theologically, John 3:19–21 is not teaching that people must stop practicing sin before they can come to the Light and receive eternal life, for John’s Gospel teaches that everyone is a sinner (7:7; 8:7, 34; 16:8)¹⁷⁹ in need of new birth (3:3, 5, 11–12, 14–15), even those like Nicodemus who “do the truth” (v. 21). God knows that all people are

Sujaya T. James, “Discipleship and Free Grace in John’s Gospel and His Epistles: An Evaluation of Zane Clark Hodges’s Approach” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003), 50–64; MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, 47; Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 13; Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in Salvation in the Synoptic Gospels*, Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series 4 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 307 n. 85.

¹⁷⁷ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:573; Rick R. Marrs, “John 3:14–15: The Raised Serpent in the Wilderness: The Johannine Use of an Old Testament Account,” in *Johannine Studies: Essays in Honor of Frank Pack*, ed. James E. Priest (Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University Press, 1989), 140 n. 30.

¹⁷⁸ Hodges attempts to connect the type of person described in verse 21 with verses 22–36 and John the Baptist rather than Nicodemus (Zane C. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 4: Coming to the Light—John 3:20–21,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (October 1978): 317–21). But this interpretation seems forced and does not adequately account for the prepositional phrase “After this” (μετὰ ταῦτα) in verse 22, which John characteristically uses (5:1, 14; 6:1; 7:1; 21:1; Rev. 4:1; 7:9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1) to mark a transition to a new topic or scene (Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 194; Bernard, *Gospel According to St. John*, 1:civiii, 127).

¹⁷⁹ David T. Adamo, “Sin in John’s Gospel,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13.3 (1989): 221–24.

sinners, which is why He sent His Son into the world to die for sin (1:29) so that sinners might be saved (3:17 cf. 1 Tim. 1:15). John 3:19–21 does not teach that people will be condemned because they do not have a pattern of good works in their lives but because they do “not come to the Light” (v. 20), Jesus Christ,¹⁸⁰ by faith (vv. 12–18), so that their sins, which Christ already paid for (vv. 14–16; 19:30), might be forgiven. According to 3:20, people do not naturally come to Christ because it will expose their sin (v. 20), thereby manifesting their lost, condemned condition and need to be saved, which man in his pride naturally rebuffs (8:33; 9:41).

Much of the confusion about 3:19–21 and the misinterpretation that it requires good works for eternal life derives from a few false assumptions. First, many interpreters view verses 16–21 as the words of Jesus to Nicodemus.¹⁸¹ This assumption is made by many modern readers whose red-letter editions of the Bible print these verses in red to indicate that they are the words of Christ. But the evidence shows that verses 16–21 are the words of John as the narrator—a conclusion reached by the majority of interpreters who address the issue.¹⁸² For instance, elsewhere in John’s writings, the term *μονογενής* (“only begotten,” v. 16) is never used in direct discourse by the Lord Jesus, but only by John as the writer (John 1:14, 18; 1 John 4:9). The same is true with the statement “believe in the name of the Son of God” in John 3:18. This statement in its various expressions never occurs elsewhere on the lips of the Lord Jesus but is used only by John (John 1:12; 2:23; 1 John 3:23; 5:13). Furthermore, the events described in John 3:16–19 not only include Christ’s incarnation but His death and people’s rejection of Him, which are portrayed with verb forms that are normally used in past-referring contexts. Verse 19 says that men “loved” (*ἠγάπησαν*, aorist indicative of *ἀγαπάω*) darkness and that their deeds “were” (*ἦν*, imperfect indicative of *εἶμι*) evil. John could have said men “love” darkness and that their deeds “are” evil. These details are all consistent with John the narrator speaking in verses 16–21 from a post-cross perspective.

¹⁸⁰ The New American Standard Bible rightly capitalizes “Light” as a reference to Jesus Christ. Verses 19–21 consistently contain the article before “light” (*τὸ φῶς*), in keeping with Christ being called “the Light” elsewhere in John’s Gospel (1:7–9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35–36).

¹⁸¹ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1958), 1:718-19; Brown, *Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 136-37, 149; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 303; Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 394-96; Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 4: Coming to the Light—John 3:20–21,” 319 n. 8; Robert N. Wilkin, “John,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin, 2 vols. (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1:376.

¹⁸² Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906; reprinted, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), viii; J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 1:117; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 203-4; Robert H. Gundry and Russell W. Howell, “The Sense and Syntax of John 3:14–17 with Special Reference to the Use of *οὕτως . . . ὥστε* in John 3:16,” *Novum Testamentum* 41 (1999): 38; Köstenberger, *John*, 113-14; Lightner, *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, 21; Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 66; John O’Rourke, “Asides in the Gospel of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 21 (1979): 210-14; Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 228; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 5:50; W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Gospels: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Four Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 453; Merrill C. Tenney, “The Footnotes of John’s Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 117 (October 1960): 361; Towns, *Gospel of John*, 81; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 54-55.

Why is this significant? Because the correct interpretation of this passage is truly “a matter of perspective,” that is, a retrospective vantage point. As the narrator of the story, John writes with hindsight, knowing what will transpire in Nicodemus’s life after chapter 3. Verse 21 alludes to Nicodemus’s initial faith, as one who “does the truth” in the sense that he “comes to the Light,” and to the fact that he “does the truth” by his subsequent discipleship¹⁸³ and “deeds . . . done in God” (7:50–51; 19:38–39). Thus, verse 21 describes more than the sole condition for eternal life, which was already stated seven times in verses 12–18 as simply *believing* in Jesus Christ. Verse 21 describes coming to Christ by faith *plus* doing deeds done in God.

A second false assumption about this passage is that the statement “have been done in God” (v. 21) means that good deeds done by people before they believe in Christ are approved and rewarded by God. One commentator who views verses 16–21 as Jesus’ words to Nicodemus even goes so far as to claim about verse 21, “In a curious reversal of later Christian theology, Jesus makes the point that people prove their good works by their faith!”¹⁸⁴ While this interpretation surely goes too far, it raises the question of whether verse 21 is referring to Nicodemus doing the truth when he came to Jesus earlier in chapter 3, while he was still in unbelief (v. 12), and whether this deed may be described as having “been done in God.”¹⁸⁵

Cornelius was unsaved before Peter preached the gospel to him (Acts 11:14), yet prior to his salvation he was described as “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (10:2), so that an angel said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God” (10:4, 36). How is the example of Cornelius compatible with the clear teaching of Scripture elsewhere that supposedly righteous deeds done before regeneration are really counted by God as “dung” (Phil. 3:8, σκύβαλον) and “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6) and that the unregenerate cannot please God (Rom. 8:8) without faith (Heb. 11:6) in Christ? In the case of Cornelius, he was positively responding with his own volition to the truth and light he had available to him as he was being drawn, enlightened, and convicted by God (John 1:9; 6:44; 12:32; 16:8–11).¹⁸⁶ To those who respond positively to the light they already possess, like Cornelius, God sees and remembers their works as an expression of “a noble and good heart” that is ready to receive His Word, so that He sends them the gospel by which they will be saved when they believe it (Luke 8:15). But simply because God sends the gospel to those whose works demonstrate a soft and receptive heart does not mean He will also give them an eternal reward for their deeds done prior to the new birth, because their works still emanate from an unregenerate nature. The teaching of Jesus Christ Himself in John 6:28–29 is clear that people cannot work for Him until they believe in Him. Therefore, when 3:21 says that the truth-doer’s “deeds have been done in God,” this statement is best interpreted as John looking back

¹⁸³ Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 11.

¹⁸⁴ J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 59-60.

¹⁸⁵ The prepositional phrase ἐν θεῷ (“in God”) occurs only here in all of John’s writings, and thus it is difficult to know precisely what John meant by deeds done “in God.”

¹⁸⁶ Similar examples in Acts include the Ethiopian eunuch (8:27), Lydia (16:14), and the Bereans (17:10–12).

retrospectively on the good works done in Nicodemus's life *after* he believed and was born again. The matter of perspective—a retrospective viewpoint—is critical to correctly interpreting this passage.

At this point, the Greek present-tense construction in verse 21, ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (“he who does the truth”), must also be clarified. As read in English, the present tense of this construction, coupled with the ending of verse 21 (“his deeds have been done in God”), may give the impression that Nicodemus's deeds “done in God” were done *before* he came to the Light, Jesus Christ, by faith.¹⁸⁷ This leads one commentator to conclude, “If ‘coming to the light’ refers to believing in Jesus, then eternal salvation is only for the one who already ‘does the truth’ (v 21)!”¹⁸⁸ However, ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν is a present-tense, articular, substantival-participle construction, which functions in Greek as a timeless noun phrase. As stated earlier in this chapter, substantival, articular participles often function as descriptive titles, without indicating anything about the frequency of an action or when it occurs. For example, when Herod heard about Jesus, he said, “John the Baptist [Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτίζων] is risen from the dead” (Mark 6:14). To emphasize present time, one could translate this, “John the Baptizer is risen from the dead.” But the present-tense, articular, substantival-participle construction ὁ βαπτίζων does not indicate that John was still presently baptizing when Herod spoke this, for John was dead! Rather, Herod used the present tense-form “the Baptizer” as a timeless title when he referred retrospectively to John's past baptizing work. In the same way, ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (“he who does the truth”) in John 3:21 does not indicate anything about the precise time when Nicodemus's or any other truth-doer's deeds were done in God. But in Nicodemus's case, we know from the rest of John's Gospel that his deeds were done in God after chapter 3, even though John referred to Nicodemus with the timeless, present-tense title, “he who does the truth.”

A third misconception that must be clarified is that the description “he who does the truth” in verse 21 refers only to doing good deeds. While John clearly teaches elsewhere that someone may “do the truth” (1 John 1:6) by walking in the light as a disciple of Christ and having fellowship with Him (1 John 1:3–2:2), he also teaches in his Gospel that a person may “do the truth” initially by receiving Christ's words as truth. In John 18:37, the Lord Jesus tells the unbelieving Roman governor Pilate, “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” Those who are “of the truth” hear Christ's words in the sense of receiving them and believing them.¹⁸⁹ In John 3:21, those truth-doers who are

¹⁸⁷ There is nothing significant about the fact that the phrase “have been done” (ἔστιν εἰργασμένα) is a perfect-periphrastic construction. The emphasis is simply on the completion of the act, with only the implication of its resulting state (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 297, 319). Thus Fanning writes, “The point is that the action has *actually* occurred: it *has* taken place at least once” (ibid., 298).

¹⁸⁸ Wilkin, “John,” 1:377. Even though Hodges also denies that “comes to the light” refers to believing in Christ, he seems to equivocate on this point: “It is at this point that Jesus now speaks of ‘coming to the light’ (3:20–21). But this expression does not really need to be a synonym for ‘believing’ in this context. Instead it may just as well be taken as a way of describing the decision to disassociate oneself from the prevailing darkness and to associate oneself with the newly appearing light. Of course, faith underlies such a decision and one who does not have faith in Christ can scarcely be expected to make it” (Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 4: Coming to the Light—John 3:20–21,” 320).

¹⁸⁹ Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary*, 114–20. Jesus says in John 8:47, “He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.” Elsewhere in John's Gospel, Christ

“of the truth” come to Christ and receive Him by faith. In 6:35 and 7:37–38, Jesus uses the word “comes” (ἔρχομαι) as a synonym for “believes.”¹⁹⁰ This can also be seen in the parallelism between 3:18 and 3:20–21. In 3:18, the difference between salvation and condemnation is whether a person “believes” in Christ or “does not believe.” A few verses later, John makes the same point by using the synonym “comes” (ἔρχομαι) instead of “believes.” Verse 20 says that the unsaved person who practices evil “does not come [ἔρχεται] to the Light,” but in contrast verse 21 says, “he who does the truth comes [ἔρχεται] to the Light.” Based on the accounts about Nicodemus later in John’s Gospel, the clear implication of verse 21 is that Nicodemus was a truth-doer who came to Christ by faith sometime after his conversation with Jesus in chapter 3.

A fourth false assumption about verse 21 is that it is describing one who “habitually performs”¹⁹¹ or “practices”¹⁹² good deeds done in God either to receive eternal life or as the evidence of genuine “saving faith.” Some commentators appeal to the present tense of the verb “do” (ποιέω) in verse 21 as though it denotes continual action.¹⁹³ But the phrase “he who does the truth” (ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν) is a gnomic present-tense, articular-participle construction like ὁ πιστεύων. As previously explained, the construction ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν functions as a general descriptive title for a person who at any point “does the truth,” without pinpointing *when* the action of doing the truth occurs or *how frequently* it occurs.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, this grammatical construction itself does not prove that the phrase “does the truth” means habitual action that extends from initial faith in Christ to the end of each believer’s life.

Similarly, it is sometimes wrongly assumed that because verses 19–20 describe *unbelievers* as those “practicing evil” (ὁ φαύλα πράσσω), then the following verse must also be describing believers as those who *practice* deeds of truth.¹⁹⁵ But there is a significant lexical distinction between verses 20 and 21. John does not use “practice” (πράσσω) for the believer who is described in verse 21, as if to say, “But he who *practices* the truth comes to the Light.” Rather, John uses ποιέω in verse 21 for believers who “do” the truth, in contrast to πράσσω in verse 20 for unbelievers who “practice” evil.¹⁹⁶ Trench explains the difference between these terms: “ποιεῖν brings out more the object and end of an act, πράσσειν the means by which this object is attained, as, for instance, hindrances moved out of the way, and the like; and also that the idea of continuity and repetition of action is inherent in πράσσειν . . . but not necessarily in

says it is possible to hear His words and either believe (5:24) or not believe (12:47). But in 8:47 and 18:37 the implication is that hearing Christ’s words is synonymous with *truly* hearing them, i.e., *believing* them.

¹⁹⁰ Charles C. Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship* (n.p.: Grace Theology Press, 2015), 122.

¹⁹¹ Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 235.

¹⁹² Barrett, *Gospel according to St. John*, 218.

¹⁹³ Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 119, 122.

¹⁹⁴ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 209.

¹⁹⁵ Barrett, *Gospel according to St. John*, 218; Brown, *Gospel According to St. John, I-XII*, 149.

¹⁹⁶ The significance of John’s distinctive word choice between verses 20 and 21 is underscored by the fact that in his Gospel he uses ποιέω 110 times, but he uses πράσσω only one other time (John 5:29) in the entire Johannine corpus.

ποιεῖν . . . which may very well be the doing once and for all.”¹⁹⁷ This distinction in terms fits with the interpretation that a person “does the truth” initially by coming to the Light, Jesus Christ, by faith alone, even if that person may not afterwards “do the truth” by subsequent good deeds as part of discipleship.

What is the point, then, of the strong emphasis on “deeds” in verses 19–21, if good deeds are not required for eternal life? There are a few important reasons for the sharp antithesis between the types of people described by their works in verses 19–20 and verse 21. First, these verses further the plot development of John’s Gospel in terms of the conflict between good and evil. Verses 19–21 constitute the conclusion to the entire pericope of chapter 3 about Nicodemus, a Pharisee (3:1), and the need for all Pharisees to be born again (3:7). The word “Pharisee” in 3:1 is only the second occurrence in the book after 1:24. To this point in John’s narrative, there is barely a hint of trouble between the Pharisees and the Lord. But it is coming. Thus, in verses 19–21, the reader is cued to the approaching dramatic conflict that will escalate throughout the book, culminating in the Cross. The next reference to the Pharisees in 4:1 signals again to the reader that there is a problem but still does not specify what it is. When John mentions the Pharisees in 4:1, Jesus immediately changes course and leaves Judea for Galilee in 4:3. Why? The reader is not told. But with the next reference to the Pharisees in 7:32, the reader is explicitly informed that this group is scheming with the chief priests “to take Him.” From this point on, the reader clearly understands that the Pharisees are determined to kill Jesus. Thus, the description in 3:19–20 of men who love darkness, practice evil, and hate the Light explains the spiritual reason for the antagonism of the Pharisees that permeates the rest of the book (8:1–6, 37, 40, 44, 59; 11:46–50, 57; 12:19; 15:22–25; 18:3).

But the people described in 3:19–21 are by no means limited to the Pharisees. Verse 20 contains the three key terms “evil” (φᾶυλος), “hates” (μισέω), and “deeds” (ἔργα), which parallel Jesus’ description of the entire “world” in 7:7: “The world . . . hates [μισέω] Me because I testify of it that its works [ἔργα] are evil [πονηρός].” Therefore, the “world” shares the same status before God as the Pharisees—all are condemned and under His wrath because of unbelief (3:18–20, 36). Yet, just because the description of 3:19–20 applies to someone in the “world” does not mean that people cannot “come to the Light” (3:21) and receive eternal life, “for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. . . . that the world through Him might be saved” on the sole condition of belief in Him (3:16–18). This is why John’s Gospel includes people like those described in 3:19–20 who are hardly doing the truth before they come to the Light (4:1–26; and by implication, 8:1–11); yet they do come to the Light by faith and fit the description of a “truth-doer” (3:21). The fact is everyone in the world is considered by God an “enemy” and “ungodly” before they are reconciled to Him through faith in His Son Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:6–10).

This leads us back to Nicodemus and another reason for “deeds” being emphasized in John 3:19–21. Just as verses 19–20 describe both the unbelieving Pharisees and the world, verse 21 describes Nicodemus and other believers like him, so that the contrast between the two broad categories of people in these verses serves John’s twofold purpose for the book of evangelism and edification. Chapters 3 and 4 of the book

¹⁹⁷ Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 361.

present several positive examples of people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. This includes Nicodemus (3:1–21), the Samaritan woman (4:1–26), the Samaritan townspeople (4:39–42), and the nobleman (4:46–53). But out of this group, only Nicodemus is mentioned by name later in the book (7:50; 19:39). John chose Nicodemus as an example of one who comes out of religious darkness “to the Light,” so “that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God” (3:21).¹⁹⁸ While Nicodemus is a representative of the person in verse 21, he is also a more ambiguous positive role model than other clear-cut, positive examples of truth-doing believers (like the eleven disciples, who believe in Christ and openly follow Him until His arrest in John 18). Nicodemus’s initially unclear testimony may have been used intentionally by John for his own persuasive purposes of causing the reader to ask himself “whether he belongs in verse 20 or verse 21.”¹⁹⁹ Thus, evangelistically, Nicodemus provides an example of a religious person who came to Christ; and second, in terms of edification, Nicodemus also provides a pedagogical and ultimately encouraging portrait of a believer who struggles with human approbation before finally succeeding in open discipleship.

With Nicodemus in view in 3:21, John sees Nicodemus’s life from chapter 3 to 19 collectively and retrospectively when he says as the narrator in 3:21 that “he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” Nicodemus initially came to Jesus in chapter 3 as a sincere but unbelieving and unregenerate (3:12) truth seeker. After his initial unbelief, he eventually displayed faith in Christ by his deeds as he defended Christ publicly (7:48–50) and risked his own welfare to assist in the Lord’s burial (19:38–42).²⁰⁰

While neither reference to Nicodemus after chapter 3 explicitly states that he believed in Christ, both John 7 and 19 imply this.²⁰¹ John 7:46–52 states:

- 46 The officers answered, “No man ever spoke like this Man!”
 47 Then the Pharisees answered them, “Are you also deceived?
 48 “Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him?
 49 “But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.”
 50 Nicodemus (he who came [ὁ ἐλθὼν] to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them,
 51 “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?”
 52 They answered and said to him, “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.”

¹⁹⁸ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:533, 573.

¹⁹⁹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 210. See also, Julette M. Bassler, “Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108.4 (1989): 644.

²⁰⁰ Keener says, “In the course of the Gospel, however, Nicodemus, who came out of darkness into light (3:2, 21), moves from secret discipleship (3:1–2; 7:50–52) to true, complete discipleship (19:39–42)” (*Gospel of John*, 1:533).

²⁰¹ Zane C. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 2: Untrustworthy Believers—John 2:23–25,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (April 1978): 149–50.

In verse 48, the Jewish leaders ask, “Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him?” They are quite certain that none have. But the reader suspects otherwise,²⁰² as two verses later, Nicodemus, the “Pharisee” and “ruler of the Jews” (3:1), timidly attempts to defend Jesus. In verse 50, the verb for “came” is the aorist articular-participle form of ἔρχομαι. John hints to the reader that Nicodemus may have been a “secret believer” by this point (cf. 12:42)—one who had already “come” (ἔρχομαι) to Christ for regeneration.²⁰³ In 6:35 and 7:37–38, coming to Christ is the condition for eternal life, where the words “come” (ἔρχομαι) and “believe” (πιστεύω) parallel one another and are used synonymously. The need to “come” to Christ for salvation, using the term ἔρχομαι, is a characteristic Johannine teaching (5:40; 6:35, 37, 44, 45, 65; 7:37–38; Rev. 22:17). Thus, in John 7:48–50, Nicodemus appears as a believer who is acting positively in faith, albeit timidly, on behalf of Christ.²⁰⁴

The next and last reference to Nicodemus in the book occurs in 19:38–39:

- 38 After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus.
- 39 And Nicodemus, who at first came [ὁ ἐλθών] to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds.

Once again, John reminds his readers that the Nicodemus of verse 39 is the same one who “came” (ὁ ἐλθών – aorist articular-participle of ἔρχομαι) initially to Jesus “by night” in John 3. But here in 19:39, Nicodemus openly identifies with Christ at the height of His public rejection, providing an honorable burial for the Lord’s body.²⁰⁵ Since Nicodemus is ministering alongside Joseph of Arimathea, who is called a “disciple” (v. 38), the clear implication is that Nicodemus is also a disciple²⁰⁶ and therefore a believer whose good deed of honoring Christ in His burial is being “done in God” (3:21).²⁰⁷

John 12:42–43 provides another clue that Nicodemus became a believer in Jesus Christ prior to assisting in the Lord’s burial: “Nevertheless even among the rulers [ἀρχόντων] many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess

²⁰² Bassler, “Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel,” 640.

²⁰³ Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 2: Untrustworthy Believers—John 2:23–25,” 150 n. 12; Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 177.

²⁰⁴ Morris offers this fitting character sketch of Nicodemus: “We may, I think, fairly infer that he had a love for the truth, but that he was a rather timid soul. In the end he came right out for Jesus, and that at a time when all the disciples forsook Him. Which is saying a lot for a timid man” (*Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 210).

²⁰⁵ The heart of Nicodemus toward the Lord Jesus is revealed by the unusually lavish amount of myrrh and aloes he brought for the Lord’s body—from 75 to 100 pounds, according to John 19:39. See Jürgen Zangenberg, “‘Buried According to the Custom of the Jews’: John 19,40 in Its Material and Literary Context,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 873-92.

²⁰⁶ Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 825-26.

²⁰⁷ F. P. Cotterell, “The Nicodemus Conversation: A Fresh Appraisal,” *Expository Times* 96 (1985): 238; Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 2: Untrustworthy Believers—John 2:23–25,” 149-50.

Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.” Who were the “many” among the “rulers” (ἀρχόντων) of the Sanhedrin²⁰⁸ who believed? We are never told explicitly. Besides Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the only other rulers or members of the Sanhedrin even mentioned by name in John’s Gospel are Caiaphas the high priest (11:49) and his father-in-law Annas (18:13). But these men are clearly not believers in Jesus. Yet John says that “many” of the rulers secretly believed in Jesus but did not confess Him publicly for fear of persecution. If Nicodemus and Joseph do not fit the description of 12:42–43, then who does? Evidently, by the point of chapter 19, the reader is expected to catch the implication that Nicodemus and Joseph were among the “many” of verses 42–43. John as the narrator already identified Nicodemus as being both a ruler and a Pharisee (3:1)—and by implication a ruler and a Pharisee who may already believe (7:48, 50). Though Joseph is never called a “ruler” in John’s Gospel, he is identified as such in Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:50, with Luke adding that he was “a good and just man.” Both Nicodemus and Joseph fit well the description of John 12:42–43 as rulers who believed in Jesus but for an extended period of time during the Lord’s earthly ministry failed to openly follow Him, until the end, when their public deeds were clearly seen as having “been done in God.”

John 7:48–50, 12:42–43, and 19:38–39 help clarify the meaning of John 3:21. John 3:21a says, “he who does the truth comes [ἔρχομαι] to the Light.” This serves first and foremost to describe Nicodemus as one who initially came by faith to Jesus Christ, the truth Himself (14:6), and later acted as a truth-doer (7:50; 19:39). John 3:21b says, “that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” This describes retrospectively Nicodemus’s life after his regeneration. He represents one who not only comes (ἔρχομαι) to Christ by faith sometime after 3:12 and is born again but one whose subsequent deeds have been “done in God” and are now “clearly seen” in public and no longer “at night” (3:2).²⁰⁹ Therefore, John 3:21 should not be understood as a description of everyone who truly believes in Christ for regeneration but of those who “do the truth” in a twofold sense of coming to the Light/Christ by faith for regeneration and also doing good deeds. Verse 21 simply does not say what many interpreters assume, viz., “he who comes to the Light *will do* deeds done in God.” Though Nicodemus eventually served Christ publicly, neither his own example nor the present-tense description of truth-doers in verse 21 prove that all believers necessarily manifest their faith by good works. Nicodemus’s example stands in contrast to that of the eleven believing disciples, who more consistently identified with Christ; and 12:42–43 also shows that some people may be “secret” believers for extended periods of time.

Disobedience of Unbelief (3:36)

The English Standard Version reads at John 3:36: “Whoever believes [ὁ πιστεύων] in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey [ὁ ἀπειθῶν] the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Other English Bibles also translate ὁ ἀπειθῶν in

²⁰⁸ The term ἄρχων here refers to a member of the Sanhedrin. Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 140.

²⁰⁹ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 204-5; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 629; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:573; Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 178.

this verse as essentially “the one who does not obey.”²¹⁰ While this translation of the present-tense, articular-participle form of the verb ἀπείθω is not wrong, it is imprecise, and can be better translated “the one who refuses to believe.” Some proponents of Lordship Salvation and perseverance soteriology see in the translation “obey” in 3:36 support for their teaching that genuine initial faith in Christ for salvation always manifests itself afterwards by an obedient life.²¹¹ For example, George Turner claims:

The fact that John used [*apeithōn*] as the opposite of “believe” suggests that to him saving faith in Christ also included obedience to Christ. The person that did not believe to the extent of *becoming* obedient was not born again and naturally did not have eternal life. The present participles for both believing and disobeying imply continuance in: not a single act of life, but rather a procedure in and a relationship to.²¹²

This interpretation of ἀπείθω in verse 36 is inaccurate for several reasons. First, it practically makes eternal life conditioned on faith plus obedience, rather than faith apart from works, which is the clear teaching of John and the rest of Scripture. Lordship Salvation proponents will argue that they are not teaching eternal salvation by faith *plus* obedience or works (the Roman Catholic view) but by a faith *that* obeys or works. Thus, Turner technically says “saving faith in Christ . . . *included* obedience to Christ.”²¹³ But the supposed distinction between the Lordship and Catholic view is really immaterial, for according to the Lordship Salvation view works are still necessary for a sinner to be counted righteous ultimately in God’s sight at so-called final justification.²¹⁴ For example, popular Reformed scholar and author Thomas Schreiner states, “The New Testament clearly teaches that bare faith cannot save and that works are necessary for final justification or final salvation.”²¹⁵ This is a flat contradiction of Romans 4:5–6: “but to him who *does not work but believes* on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness *apart from works*.” God cannot require for justification

²¹⁰ These include the American Standard Version (ASV), New American Standard Bible (NASB), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the Roman Catholic New American Bible (NAB).

²¹¹ Grudem, “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 53-54; idem, “Perseverance of the Saints,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 180; MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, 33 n. 30, 47, 53, 174, 178.

²¹² *Gospel According to John*, 102.

²¹³ The conclusions of J. E. Botha’s word study of πιστεύω contradict popular notions of “saving faith.” He concludes that this term often means agreement that something is true, or trust in someone or something, but not obedience or works (“The Meanings of *Pisteuō* in the Greek New Testament,” 236). While faith may result in works, and faith may be one form of obedience (such as compliance with God’s command for the lost to believe the gospel), works and ongoing obedience are separate from “saving faith” and not inherent to it. Botha’s study also confirms that faith includes the elements of knowledge, mental assent, and trust, but not works.

²¹⁴ John Piper, “The Justification Debate: A Primer,” *Christianity Today* (June 2009): 35.

²¹⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 191.

(whether initial or “final”) both *a faith that works* and *a faith that does not work* or *apart from works*. These two positions are mutually exclusive.

Second, the Lordship Salvation view misinterprets the significance of the present participles for “believe” and “obey” in this verse. While both ὁ πιστευῶν and ὁ ἀπειθῶν are present-tense, substantival participles, it was demonstrated earlier in this chapter that the present tense-form in Greek does not inherently denote continuous action. The tense forms of these words in verse 36 indicate absolutely nothing about a *pattern* of obedience or disobedience. Instead, the meaning of ὁ ἀπειθῶν must be determined by the context.

Third, the immediate context of the verse itself contrasts ὁ ἀπειθῶν with ὁ πιστευῶν. This shows that John is speaking of a particular form of disobedience in verse 36, namely, unbelief. Since the opposite of ὁ ἀπειθῶν is ὁ πιστεύων in verse 36a, ὁ ἀπειθῶν in verse 36b must refer to willful *unbelief*. For this reason, some English Bibles translate ὁ ἀπειθῶν in this verse as the “one who does not believe.”²¹⁶

Fourth, the intermediate context of chapter 3 supports ὁ ἀπειθῶν referring to a particular form of disobedience—unbelief. Earlier in the same chapter, verse 18 already stated that the opposite of belief in God’s Son is unbelief: “He who believes [ὁ πιστεύων] in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe [ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων] is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”²¹⁷ The same parallelism occurs in verse 36.

Fifth, the larger context of John’s Gospel supports the interpretation that ἀπειθῶ in verse 36 refers to a particular form of disobedience, namely, unbelief in God’s Son. The Gospel of John repeatedly uses πιστεύω as the only condition for salvation, yet the only occurrence of the root word πείθω in the entire book is in verse 36, where ὁ ἀπειθῶν is the mirror opposite of ὁ πιστεύων. This confirms that John intended ἀπειθῶ here to be understood as a particular type of disobedience; that is, a refusal to believe.

Lastly, support for the meaning of “does not obey” in verse 36 as willful unbelief comes from the rest of the New Testament where the root word πείθω is used several places interchangeably with πιστεύω to describe one form of obedience, namely, belief. Thus, the second edition of the standard New Testament Greek-English lexicon states regarding ἀπειθέω:

[S]ince, in the view of the early Christians, the supreme disobedience was a refusal to believe their gospel, ἀ[πειθέω] may be restricted in some passages to the m[eaning] *disbelieve, be an unbeliever*. This sense, though greatly disputed (it is not found outside our lit[erature]), seems most probable in J 3: 36; Ac 14: 2; 19: 9; Ro 15: 31, and only slightly less prob. in Ro 2: 8; 1 Pt 2: 8; 3: 1, perh[aps] also vs. 20; 4: 17; IMg 8: 2. M-M.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ These include the King James Version (KJV), New King James Version (NKJV), and the Roman Catholic Douay-Rheims translation.

²¹⁷ Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever*, 77 n. 6.

²¹⁸ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 82. Unfortunately, this entry was edited by Danker in the 3rd edition of this lexicon published in

Some English translations of John 3:36 capture better the nuance of ὁ ἀπειθῶν being disobedience in the form of unbelief, translating the substantival participle as the “one who refuses to believe.”²¹⁹ God has only one command for the lost to fulfill in order to be saved, and that is simply to “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31). Fulfilling this sole condition involves an act of the will. Thus, when anyone chooses to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation, this is described in Scripture as obeying the gospel (Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8–10).²²⁰ Choosing to believe in Christ is called “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26), where “faith” is in the genitive case and functions as a genitive of apposition, meaning “the obedience which is faith.”²²¹ In other words, there is one type of obedience that saves: belief in Jesus Christ or believing the gospel of Christ. Conversely, to choose not to believe or to refuse to be persuaded to believe in God’s Son is the one form of disobedience that results in eternal condemnation.²²² Therefore, we may conclude about the meaning of ἀπειθῶ in John 3:36 that to “not obey the Son” is simply a matter of choosing not to believe “the testimony of God to His Son as found in the gospel.”²²³

Resurrection Rewards for Good and Evil (5:29)

Jesus declares in 5:28–29: “the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” Naturally, commentators ranging from Roman Catholic to Reformed assume Jesus to be saying here that the *reason* people experience either the resurrection of life or condemnation is *because* they have done either good or evil. Verse 29 is interpreted as teaching that good works are either the “condition”²²⁴ for eternal life, “cause” of eternal life,²²⁵ or the necessary proof of genuine “saving faith.”²²⁶

2000, evidently without any lexical evidence or basis for doing so, making the alteration appear theologically motivated. For further explanation, see Michael D. Makidon, “Soteriological Concerns with Bauer’s Greek Lexicon,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 17 (Autumn 2004): 16-17.

²¹⁹ These include the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) and the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible and New Jerusalem Bible.

²²⁰ Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever*, 77 n. 6.

²²¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 1:66-67; Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 82; Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 21; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 14-15; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 50; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 13; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), 55; William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, n.d.), 11.

²²² Chay and Correia, *Faith that Saves*, 72.

²²³ W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 93 n. 42.

²²⁴ Robert A. Sungenis, *Not By Faith Alone: The Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship, 1997), 186, 216, 486.

²²⁵ Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works?*, 216, 307 n. 85, 312, 322.

²²⁶ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 258; Grudem, “Free Grace” *Theology*, 54; Köstenberger, *John*, 189-90.

But each of these interpretations assumes Jesus is saying something that He does not. He never says in verse 29 that people will have a resurrection of life *because* they have done good, as if He were saying, “the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—some to the resurrection of life because they have done good, and some to the resurrection of condemnation because they have done evil.”

Such interpretations also err by assuming that one’s status as being either eternally saved or condemned is finally settled at one’s resurrection. But according to passages such as John 3:18, 36, and 5:24, one’s status as either eternally saved or condemned is determined in this lifetime, not at resurrection, based on whether a person believes in Jesus Christ or not. According to Scripture, people are not resurrected from the dead in order to determine whether they are saved or lost, but to reward them for their works. Thus, Scripture repeatedly connects the return of Christ and the resurrection of the righteous with rewards (Matt. 16:24–27; Luke 14:12–14; 1 Cor. 4:1–5; 2 Tim. 4:6–8; Heb. 11:35; 1 Peter 5:4; Rev. 3:11; 22:12), not the bestowal of the gift of eternal life.²²⁷

When Jesus speaks in John 5:29 of the resurrection of life for those who have done good, He is not prescribing the means or condition for inclusion in the resurrection of life. He already explained that a few verses earlier in 5:24. Instead, the statement “those who have done good” in verse 29 describes one category of people—believers, who are the only ones capable of doing good, rewardable works.²²⁸ Verse 29 describes two contrasting resurrections—the resurrection of the lost (unbelievers “who have done evil”) and the resurrection of the just (justified believers “who have done good”). Chronologically these two distinct resurrections are separated by a thousand years (Rev. 20:1–15). Only believers in Christ, who have been regenerated by grace alone, are capable of doing qualitatively “good” works that earn a positive reward from the Lord (Isa. 64:6; Rom. 8:8–9). Thus, only believers, who are already guaranteed in this lifetime a future resurrection to life (John 6:37–40; 11:25–27), will receive a positive reward from the Lord for the good works they have done after their new birth (1 Cor. 3:10–15; 2 Cor. 5:9–10; Col. 3:22–24). Conversely, when unbelievers are resurrected a thousand years later at the Great White Throne, their resurrection will be one of condemnation, where everyone judged on that occasion will have been under divine condemnation already; but on that day they will be rewarded negatively in accordance with their evil deeds (Rev. 20:11–15). John 5:29 harmonizes with the testimony of Scripture elsewhere that resurrections always deal with rewards, not determining whether people are saved or lost.

Believers Who Abide for Discipleship (8:30–32)

The Gospel of John teaches that it is possible for a genuine believer not to continue in Christ’s word as His disciple.

30 As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.

31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.

²²⁷ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 305.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

John 8:30–32 is often misinterpreted, especially by proponents of Reformed theology, as an example of false, professing faith in Christ that does not continue to obediently follow Christ and His word in discipleship (vv. 31–59).²²⁹

The broader context of this passage is often overlooked and is crucial for correct interpretation.²³⁰ Jesus is speaking to large crowds in the temple (8:20, 59) in Jerusalem who are gathered for the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2, 37). The crowds are already divided in their opinions about the identity of Jesus (7:43), and among them are scribes and Pharisees (8:2, 12–13) who are unbelievers and thus unsaved (7:48; 8:24).²³¹ In 8:33–59, Jesus responds to these unbelievers, rather than those whom He had just addressed in 8:30–32, who had just become believers but needed to continue in His Word to grow as His disciples.²³²

In the mixed crowd of believers and unbelievers, Jesus addresses the unbelievers in verses 33–36 who are opposed to Him and who mistakenly think He was speaking to them in verses 31–32 about being truly free by knowing the truth. This is why these unbelievers react vociferously by denying that they are slaves. These self-deceived and self-righteous unbelievers are the ones seeking to kill Jesus according to verses 37–40, not the believers addressed in verses 31–32. A failure to recognize this distinction results in “believers” who are supposedly “sons of the devil.” Alan Stanley represents this view, stating, “Jesus is talking to people who had ‘believed in him’ (v. 30) though this does not exempt Jesus from designating them ‘sons of the devil’ (v. 44). In other words, these so-called believers have not *remained* in Jesus’ word and are therefore not truly disciples—they belong to the devil.”²³³ However, those whose father is the devil (vv. 41–44) are not believers but are explicitly stated to be unbelievers: “Because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?” (vv. 45–46).

To interpret the unbelievers described in verses 33–59 as being the same people who were twice described earlier by John in verses 30–31 as believers not only ignores the context but creates an unnecessary and unscriptural contradiction between the testimony of John in verses 30–31 and the testimony of Jesus in verses 45–46.²³⁴ Furthermore, the conclusion that the people of verses 30–31 truly “believed” in Christ comes from John, the inspired narrator, not the unbelieving crowd’s own fallible profession or estimation of themselves.

²²⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 520; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 347-48; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 380; James, “Discipleship and Free Grace in John’s Gospel and His Epistles,” 127-35; Laney, *John*, 162-63; Morris, *Gospel According to John*, 454-56; Pink, *Saint’s Perseverance*, 76; Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief*, 146-49.

²³⁰ Olson, *Eternal Security*, 63-64.

²³¹ Robert Dean, Jr., “Abiding in Christ: A Dispensational Theology of the Spiritual Life, Part 1,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (January 2001): 40.

²³² Debbie Hunn, “Who Are ‘They’ in John 8:33?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (July 2004): 387-99.

²³³ Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works?* 256-57.

²³⁴ Bing, “The Condition for Salvation in John’s Gospel,” 36.

Some commentators have misinterpreted this passage based on an artificial syntactical distinction,²³⁵ claiming there are two distinct groups in verses 30 (genuine believers) and 31 (unsaved professing believers). This view distinguishes between the people who “believed on Him” (ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτόν) in verse 30 and were truly saved versus those in verse 31 who were supposedly unsaved because they merely “believed Him” (πεπιστευκότας αὐτό). The claim is made that the presence or absence of the Greek preposition εἰς makes all the difference between a belief that is genuine and one that is false. According to this view, the people in verse 30 believed “in” (εἰς) the person of Christ Himself, whereas the people in verse 31 merely believed His words and thus had something short of true “saving faith.”

However, this distinction between true believers in verse 30 and pseudo-believers in verse 31 is artificial and necessitated by a perseverance theology of salvation rather than Greek syntax. The word πιστεύω often appears in John’s Gospel without the preposition εἰς (or any preposition), yet the context indicates in some cases that genuine salvation is in view. John 5:24 is an example of the same construction of πιστεύω being used without a preposition where belief is in both God the Father and Christ’s word: “he who hears My word and *believes Him who sent Me* [πιστεύων τῷ πέμφαντί με] has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.” There is no dispute that this verse presents the true, sole condition for eternal life, which is a matter of taking Christ at His word since it is God’s word. A change in the syntax of πιστεύω between John 8:30 and 31 does not warrant a distinction between genuine believers in verse 30 and false believers in verse 31.²³⁶

John 8:30–32 is misinterpreted mainly because of the erroneous theological assumption brought to the text by many Catholics and Protestants that a person must persevere in faith as Christ’s disciple to have eternal life. Catholic commentator Raymond Brown declares, “For John, being a believer and being a disciple are really synonymous.”²³⁷ But according to John (and Luke), even though every true disciple of Christ is also a believer in Christ, not every true believer follows Christ as His disciple.²³⁸ While eternal salvation is free (Luke 7:42, 48, 50; John 1:16; 4:10), discipleship is costly (Luke 14:26b–33; John 13:34–35; 15:13–14; 16:2, 33). Consistent with this biblical distinction, the Lord Jesus uses a conditional statement in John 8:31 to address those who are already believers: “*If you abide in My word, then you are My disciples indeed.*” This is a third-class conditional statement in Greek, making it the condition of assumed possibility. In other words, these believers might or might not continue in Christ’s word.

²³⁵ Edwin Blum, “Gospel of John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 304-5; Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 665-66; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 117; Towns, *Gospel of John*, 173; W. E. Vine, *The Collected Writings of W. E. Vine*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 267; Westcott, *Gospel According to St. John*, 132-33.

²³⁶ Hunn, “Who Are ‘They’ in John 8:33?” 395.

²³⁷ Brown, *Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 512.

²³⁸ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 49; Cocoris, *Salvation Controversy*, 97-98; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 233-35; Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 113-14; Fred Lybrand, “The Distinction between Salvation and Discipleship,” in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 119-38; Stegall, *Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure?* 147-54.

The issue in John 8:30–32 is discipleship, not eternal salvation. In verse 31, “Jesus does not say those who continue in His word are *believers*; He says they are His disciples.”²³⁹ To muddle this distinction between a believer and a disciple changes the requirement for eternal life from simple *faith* in Christ to *faithfulness and continual good works*. The end result is a different gospel (Gal. 1:6–9) that is not the true gospel of salvation by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Believers Who Abide as Fruitful Disciples (15:1–6)

- 1 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.
- 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away [ἀῤρει]; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.
- 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.
- 4 Abide in Me [μείνατε], and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.
- 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.
- 6 If anyone [τις] does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather [συνάγουσιν] them [αὐτὰ] and throw [βάλλουσιν] them into the fire, and they are burned [καίεται].

The Gospel of John not only teaches that it is possible for a child of God not to continue as a disciple of Christ, it also teaches that it is possible for a believer not to abide in Him (15:1–6). This passage is similar to the previous discipleship passage in 8:30–32. Here the emphasis is on continuing in fellowship with Christ as the source of spiritual sustenance, which will result in fruitfulness and evidence of being Christ’s disciple. Not surprisingly, many commentators misunderstand Jesus here to be warning, in essence, to bear fruit or perish forever.²⁴⁰ Arminians normally interpret the Lord here as saying that salvation can be *lost* if Christians do not abide or stay connected with Christ. Calvinists, who do not believe salvation can be lost, typically interpret these verses as presenting a *test of the reality* of one’s faith in Christ.²⁴¹ They say genuine faith will be proven by a

²³⁹ Cocoris, *Salvation Controversy*, 97-98.

²⁴⁰ For example, John Piper states regarding verses 2 and 6, “But there is a kind of attachment to Jesus—a kind of disciple, a kind of believing—that is not saving. And the difference between the two is abiding and fruit-bearing” (“Glorifying God by Bearing Fruit in Union with Christ,” *Desiring God 2014 Conference for Pastors*, February 3, 2014). Elsewhere, Piper writes, “One final word on eternal security. It is a community project. And that is why the pastoral ministry is so utterly serious, and why our preaching must not be playful but earnest. We preach so that saints might persevere in faith to glory. We preach not only for their growth, but because if they don’t grow, they perish” (John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002], 110-11). Elsewhere Piper writes, “This final judgment accords with our works. That is, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives will be brought forward as the evidence and confirmation of true faith and union with Christ. Without that validating transformation, there will be no future salvation” (Piper, “The Justification Debate: A Primer,” 35). It is difficult not to see these statements as teaching essentially: bear fruit or perish in hell.

²⁴¹ James, “Discipleship and Free Grace in John’s Gospel and His Epistles,” 153; J. Carl Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (January 1989): 61-62, 65; Robert A. Peterson, “The

fruitful, persevering, or abiding life. Laney represents this view, writing about John 15:1–6, “the fruitless branches represent disciples who have had an external association with Christ that is not matched by an internal, spiritual union entered into by personal faith and regeneration.”²⁴² Laney continues, “The Gospel of John also presents the reader with an enigma of ‘belief’ that is not belief. In the progress of belief there is a stage that falls short of genuine or consummated faith resulting in salvation (2:23–25; 7:31; 8:31, 40, 45–46; 12:11, 37).”²⁴³

Do unfruitful branches that do not abide in Christ represent unbelievers who have only pseudo-faith in Christ? Or can genuine believers be capable of not abiding in Christ and thus be spiritually unfruitful? Before any theological conclusions can be reached, we must first carefully examine what this passage *is* saying and what it is *not* saying.

In the context of chapters 13–17, the Lord Jesus is preparing His disciples for spiritual service in an unbelieving, hostile world following His imminent departure. He will leave His disciples in this world, but that is no reason for the disciples to abandon their faith in Him. In the context, Christ is specifically addressing only the eleven, saved, believing disciples, who will form the apostolic foundation of Christ’s universal church (Eph. 2:20), through whom God will change the world forever by the preaching of the gospel. Judas Iscariot, the unsaved, unbelieving disciple has already departed at this point from the company of Jesus and the eleven disciples (13:30).²⁴⁴ Consequently, the Lord is not concerned here with testing the genuineness of the salvation of His eleven remaining disciples.²⁴⁵ Instead, He instructs them in the new spiritual relationships they will have with Him, the Holy Spirit, one another, and the world, following His ascension to the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.²⁴⁶ Christ’s purpose in John 15 is *to encourage* His disciples through the analogy of a Vine and its branches, not to warn them that they might still face the prospect of eternal condemnation based on their lack of fruitfulness.²⁴⁷

In verse 1, Christ is the true Vine, and the Father is the vinedresser. In verse 2, believers are represented by branches. While commentators unanimously agree that the *fruitful* branches represent regenerated believers, opinions differ regarding the identity of the *unfruitful* branches and the implications of the word ἀρπαι in verse 2, normally translated, “He takes away.” This word can be translated variously as either “He takes away,” “He lifts up,” “He picks up,” “He carries away,” or “He removes.”²⁴⁸ Halsey

Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages,” *Presbyterion* 17.2 (1991): 107-12; James E. Rosscup, *Abiding in Christ: Studies in John 15* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 185-210; Charles R. Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” *Grace Journal* 9 (Spring 1968): 10-20.

²⁴² Laney, *John*, 272.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 272-73.

²⁴⁴ Dennis M. Rokser, “Does God Want You to Produce Fruit or Bear It? (John 15:1–5), Pt. 1,” *Grace Family Journal* 17 (Summer 2015): 8-10; *idem*, *Shall Never Perish Forever*, 206, 289-90.

²⁴⁵ Dean, “Abiding in Christ,” 34-40.

²⁴⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947–48. Reprinted, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 5:140-43, 148-51.

²⁴⁷ John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 235.

²⁴⁸ Dean, “Abiding in Christ,” 47-49.

writes, “John deploys the word *airei* . . . twenty-four times in the Gospel of John and in eight instances, the translation is ‘lifts up’ (5:8–12; 8:59; 10:18).”²⁴⁹

Many perseverance advocates interpret ἀίρω *negatively* as a *warning*, meaning God “takes away”²⁵⁰ unbelieving professors to *eternal* judgment.²⁵¹ But this word can also be interpreted *positively* as an *encouragement* to fallen branches that God the Father, as the heavenly vinedresser, will tenderly care for His vineyard and “lift them up” to be in a position where they can be exposed to the sun and have the potential to be more fruitful, not cut them off and throw them into the fire simply because they are unfruitful.²⁵²

This interpretation is consistent with real viticultural practices of first-century vinedressers,²⁵³ despite denials by some proponents of Lordship Salvation. For example, Wayne Grudem claims, “No Free Grace publication that I could find produced any evidence from the ancient world that said that unfruitful vines or branches were lifted up. This means that the unusual Free Grace interpretation of this passage is a purely speculative argument with no supporting evidence.”²⁵⁴ He then quotes a few passages from Pliny²⁵⁵ which show that unfruitful branches were burned, and he concludes, “Pliny thus says the opposite of what Free Grace supporters argue.”²⁵⁶ But Grudem is apparently unaware of the following statement from Pliny’s *Natural History* and its significance for the Free Grace interpretation that ἀίρω in verse 2 does not mean “takes away” (i.e., in judgment).

There is left, also, beneath the cross-piece a shoot that is known as the reserve shoot, being always a young stock-branch, with not more than three buds upon it. This is intended to give out wood the next year, in case the vine by over-luxuriance should happen to exhaust itself. Close to it there is another bud left, no bigger than a wart; this is known as the “furunculus” [pilferer or little thief] and is kept in readiness in case the reserve shoot should fail.²⁵⁷

Free Grace proponent Gary Derickson comments on this statement by Pliny, writing in three separate publications, “Of significance is the number of non-fruiting branches left

²⁴⁹ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 270.

²⁵⁰ Grudem, “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 121-23; Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works?* 256.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Grudem, 124; *ibid.*, Stanley, 254, 257.

²⁵² Cocoris, *Salvation Controversy*, 91; Ryrle, *So Great Salvation*, 52; John A. Tucker, “The Inevitability of Fruitbearing: An Exegesis of John 15:6, Part 1,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 15 (April 2011): 67; *idem*, “The Inevitability of Fruitbearing: An Exegesis of John 15:6, Part II,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 15 (August 2011): 52-54, 61.

²⁵³ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 40; Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 326-29; Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 106-7; R. K. Harrison, “Vine,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:986.

²⁵⁴ “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 122.

²⁵⁵ *Natural History*, 17.35.

²⁵⁶ “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 123.

²⁵⁷ *Natural History*, 17.35.47–48.

on the vines.”²⁵⁸ Robert Dean is another adherent of Free Grace theology who writes in regard to Pliny’s statement above:

Thus the first century attestation is that there were two prunings a year. The first kept young nonfruiting branches on the vine, so they could be nourished and nurtured to produce fruit the following year, and a second pruning in the fall which removed all unwanted material from the vine including branches that either never had, or never would produce fruit. Thus literary and historical contexts combine to confirm the interpretation of the first branch being lifted up to prepare it for fruit production in the future.²⁵⁹

There are a few other problems with the typical Reformed, Lordship Salvation view that interprets the unfruitful branches of verse 6 as professing, false believers, who are taken away to eternal condemnation. First, this view does not accord with the flow of the passage. There is a progression in this passage from a branch that “does not bear fruit” (v. 2), to branches that “bear fruit” (v. 2), to branches that “bear more fruit” (v. 2), to branches that “bear much fruit” (v. 5). This progression indicates that it is the Father’s objective to foster greater growth and productivity, not to stymie potential future growth with a fatal act of condemnation. Most plant life in the natural realm actually begins life without fruit. Sufficient growth must take place before plants can become fruitbearing or sustain fruit. It would seem absurd for the Father to “cut off” (NIV) all branches in His eternal judgment that were not bearing fruit; otherwise few, if any, branches in Christ would ever begin to bear fruit.²⁶⁰

Another major problem that the takes-away-in-judgment view faces is the actual description of the unfruitful branches in verse 2. Christ describes them as “Every branch *in Me* that does not bear fruit.” If such unfruitful branches represent unsaved professors whose pseudo-faith is revealed by their unfruitfulness and failure to abide in Christ, then in what sense were these mere professors ever “in Christ,” if they were never saved to begin with? Some attempt to use the example of Judas Iscariot,²⁶¹ claiming that Judas represents a branch that had “real contact with Jesus” and thus fulfilled Christ’s description of a “branch *in Me* that does not bear fruit” (v. 2).²⁶² Nor is it convincing to cite similar examples of people who had “some degree of connection with Jesus, or with the Christian church.”²⁶³ The phrase “in Me” is used in the Gospel of John to describe *only* a true, positive, spiritual relationship Christ has with someone, such as with the Father or other believers (6:56; 10:38; 14:10 [twice], 11, 20, 30; 15:2, 4 [twice], 5, 6, 7;

²⁵⁸ Gary W. Derickson, “Viticulture and John 15:1–6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (January 1996): 46; idem, “Viticulture and John 15:1–6,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 18 (Spring 2005): 36–37; Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 328.

²⁵⁹ Dean, “Abiding in Christ,” 48–49.

²⁶⁰ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:299.

²⁶¹ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 515; Köstenberger, *John*, 455; Peterson, “The Perseverance of the Saints,” 108.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, Carson.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

16:33; 17:21, 23).²⁶⁴ *Not once* is this phrase used of someone who professed to have a spiritual relationship with Christ but did not.

Finally, the takes-away-in-judgment view creates a logical conundrum whereby believers are commanded to do what will certainly be true of them anyway. The disciples are commanded by Jesus in verse 4 to “abide in Me,” where “abide” (μείνατε) is an aorist, active, imperative verb. Yet, according to the Reformed doctrine of perseverance, it is guaranteed that the eleven disciples will abide in Christ since they possessed true, “saving faith.” However, the Reformed interpretation faces a problem in verses 6–7, where the conditional “if” statements present abiding in Christ as a mere *possibility*, not a certainty. Verses 6–7 begin with a third-class conditional “if” statement in Greek, meaning, “If you abide in Me—and you may or may not.”

But what is the consequence for not abiding in Christ? According to verse 6, Jesus says, “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (KJV). Is this a reference to judgment in hell? Among commentators, there are at least four different interpretations of verse 6.

View #1

Roman Catholics²⁶⁵ and Arminians²⁶⁶ typically interpret the terms “fire” and “burned” in verse 6 as a reference to judgment in hell for believers who *lose* their *salvation* because they do not abide in Christ. However, this interpretation contradicts Christ’s previous affirmations of eternal security in 5:24, 6:37, and 10:28, as well as the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace.

View #2

The second interpretation is that of Calvinism’s doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This view also interprets burning and fire in verse 6 as a reference to judgment in hell; but instead of a believer losing his or her salvation, these branches represent those who

²⁶⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:299; Dennis M. Rokser, “Does God Want You to Produce Fruit or Bear It? (John 15:1–5), Pt. 2,” *Grace Family Journal* 17 (Fall 2015): 8–10.

²⁶⁵ Robert A. Sungenis, *How Can I Get to Heaven?* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship, 1998), 177; idem, *Not By Faith Alone*, 278. Raymond Brown apparently views hell as one *possible* interpretation of the “fire” in 15:6, stating, “the author may be referring to the well-known fire of eschatological punishment” (*Gospel According to St. John, XIII-XXI*, 662). But not all Catholic commentators agree. Schnackenburg sees the “fire” as symbolic of separation from the church community rather than hell itself (Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth, 3 vols. [New York: Herder and Herder, 1968], 3:101), though such separation may eventually lead to hell upon death, according to Roman Catholic doctrine.

²⁶⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1969), 183–84; Osborne, “Soteriology in the Gospel of John,” 258; Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1961), 40–47.

were *never saved* in the first place because they did not have a true, “saving faith” that supposedly always results in fruitfulness and perseverance to the end.²⁶⁷

Both view #1 and #2 see in the statements “gather them” and “throw them into the fire” in verse 6 a reference to *God’s* judgment of unbelievers in *hell*. There are several reasons why such an interpretation is incorrect.

First, the verse does not say it is *God* who does the gathering, throwing, and burning of unfruitful branches. Verse 6 indicates that it is *men*.²⁶⁸ Though technically the word for “men” does not appear in the Greek text, both the verbs “gather” (συνάγουσιν) and “throw” (βάλλουσιν) are plural in number,²⁶⁹ meaning that those who do the gathering and throwing are plural; i.e., “*they* gather them,” hence the rendering, “*men* gather them” (KJV). If God were doing the judging, we would expect these verbs to be singular; i.e., “*He* gathers them.” Some have suggested that the plural is used in reference to God’s angels who act as His agents of judgment. But the holy angels are entirely foreign to the context of John 15 and the Upper Room Discourse; they are not mentioned once in John 13–17.

Second, the timing of these activities is in the *present*, not the *future*. All three verbs (“gather,” “throw,” and “burned”) are in the present tense and used of present time rather than future time. This cannot be a reference to holy angels gathering unsaved humanity to be cast into hell at the end of either the future tribulation (Matt. 13:39–42; 24:31; 25:31–46) or millennial kingdom (Rev. 20:11–15) since none of the verbs in verse 6 for “gather” (συνάγουσιν), “throw” (βάλλουσιν), and “burned” (καίεται) are *future tense*, which is the most consistently time-based tense in Greek. While it is true that the Gospel of John contains present-tense verbs used with a future sense (e.g., ἔρχομαι in 14:3), such is not the case here with συνάγω, βάλλω, and καίω.²⁷⁰

Third, it is technically not *people* who are said to be gathered for burning, but *branches*. John 15:6 begins with *people* not abiding but ends with *branches* that are gathered and burned.²⁷¹ The verse begins with a person, “If a man abide not in me” (KJV). The word for the one who does not abide in Christ (“a man,” KJV) is the Greek indefinite pronoun τις, which is masculine (or feminine) singular. It is not a neuter pronoun. However, verse 6 uses the neuter plural pronoun (αὐτὰ) to describe the things that are gathered for burning: “and men gather *them* [αὐτὰ].” The antecedent to the neuter pronoun “them” is logically the neuter noun “branch” (τὸ κλῆμα). Therefore, technically the things that are actually said to be gathered for burning are not *people* who do not abide in Christ but *branches*. Christ never actually states that men or people are burned.

Fourth, if the cutting off of fruitless branches and their being thrown into the fire represents God’s eternal judgment of unbelievers in hell, then there is no adequate explanation for the timing and order in verse 6 of casting off, withering or drying up, and then being thrown into fire. The withering occurs *after* being cast forth but *before* being

²⁶⁷ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 517; Grudem, “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 123-24; Laney, *John*, 274-75; John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Saved without a Doubt* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1992), 31-34; Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works?* 327-28.

²⁶⁸ Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever*, 206, 290.

²⁶⁹ Boice, *Gospel of John*, 1032; Towns, *Gospel of John*, 275.

²⁷⁰ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 179.

²⁷¹ Boice, *Gospel of John*, 1032.

gathered for the fire. Are proponents of the judgment-in-hell interpretation really prepared to accept the conclusion that God cuts people off from eternal life in this lifetime, so that they wither and dry up while they are still physically alive on the earth, and then after they die He casts them into hell? This would be the required order of events for verse 6, according to the judgment-in-hell interpretation. But according to this view, the timing of the cutting off as a branch and the withering process in this lifetime before being thrown into hell contradicts biblical testimony elsewhere that God still expects and desires all living people to repent, before it is too late (Luke 16:27–31; Acts 17:30; 1 Tim. 2:4–6; 2 Peter 3:9).

Fifth, when the term “fire” is used in Scripture as a reference to eternal judgment in hell, it is normally accompanied by some modifying words in the immediate context to indicate this, such as “unquenchable fire,” “everlasting fire,” or “lake of fire.” But this is not the case in verse 6.

For these five reasons, the first two interpretations of John 15:6 that conclude the branches are people being burned up in hell cannot be correct.

View #3

A third major view of John 15:6 interprets the phrase “cast out” to be a reference to temporal judgment on a genuine but disobedient believer as part of God’s earthly discipline rather than as a reference to eternal judgment in hell. According to this view, God’s discipline *may* lead to a premature physical death (1 Cor. 11:30–32), but the child of God will still enter heaven eternally saved.²⁷² This view sees the “burning” of verse 6 as a reference to the burning of believers’ worthless works at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10–15), where they will lose potential reward but not their salvation.²⁷³

View #4

The fourth view acknowledges that a genuine believer can be “cast forth” as a branch, spiritually “wither,” and even be fruitless in the Christian life, just like physical branches that become detached from actual vines. This interpretation does not see the reference to “burned” in verse 6 as something that *God* does as an act of judgment upon *people* (whether casting unbelievers into hell or causing sickness or physical death for persistently carnal believers). Instead, this view sees “burned” as simply an allusion by Christ to the literal, physical first-century viticultural practice of seasonal burning of fruitless, dried-up, discarded branches.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:298-300, 7:4; Joseph Dillow, “Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (January 1990): 52-53; Towns, *Gospel of John*, 275.

²⁷³ Boice, *Gospel of John*, 1031-32; Towns, *Gospel of John*, 275.

²⁷⁴ Cocoris, *Salvation Controversy*, 91; Constable, *Expository Notes on John*, 287; Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever*, 289-90; Tucker, “The Inevitability of Fruitbearing: An Exegesis of John 15:6, Part II,” 63-64; John F. Walvoord, “The Present Work of Christ, Part IV: The Present Work of Christ in Heaven (Part 2), Christ as the True Vine in Relation to the Branches,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (October 1964): 298-99.

Humanly speaking, such branches were no longer good for anything except to be used as kindling for fire. This is likely why verse 6 ends with *men* rather than God gathering the unfruitful branches and casting them into the fire. This also explains the consistent use of the present tense for the verbs “gathered” (συνάγουσιν), “thrown” (βάλλουσιν), and “burned” (καίεται). These actions are portrayed as a human process presently transpiring in Jesus and the disciples’ day.²⁷⁵ The burning of literal branches in their day also best explains why in verse 6 the withering occurs *after* branches are cast forth but *before* they are burned. Finally, this interpretation also explains why Jesus does not actually say it is *men* who are cast into the fire but *branches*. In 15:6, the Lord briefly alludes to a first-century viticultural practice to illustrate a spiritual point for His saved disciples about the possibility of being spiritually unfruitful believers. This is a discipleship issue (15:8), not an eternal salvation issue.²⁷⁶ Believers who do not abide in dependent fellowship with Jesus Christ, their spiritual Vine, will be fruitless and useless, like the branches that men were casting off and gathering in that day, which were useful at least for burning—not that the disciples themselves might be burned in some sense. One commentary summarizes well this fourth view.

Rather than being a warning of discipline or judgment, verse six is an illustration of uselessness in light of post-harvest, dormancy inducing, pruning. . . . Everything purged in early spring was either growing from a branch (sprigs and suckers), the branch not being removed, or from an undesired location on the trunk. Only at the end of the season would there be “branches” removed, piled up, and burned. In fact, Jesus may have chosen to allude to post-harvest cultural practices specifically because He did not want His disciples to mistakenly link fruitfulness or fruitlessness to divine discipline. Rather He wanted them to see the importance of abiding itself. In the vineyard, anything not attached to the vine is useless and discarded. A part of the discarding process at the end of the productive season is the burning of dry materials. The burning need not describe judgment, but is simply one of the steps in the process being described. It is simply what happens to pruned materials. Their uselessness, not their destruction, is being emphasized.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 856. Similarly, Murray states, “The picture is realistic (the parable depicts what happens on the farm) and is not applied to the judgment of Gehenna, rather it vividly portrays the uselessness of such as do not remain in the Vine” (George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1987], 273).

²⁷⁶ Luke 14:34–35 parallels John 15:6 and confirms this interpretation. In verse 34, Jesus likens believers to salt. In verse 35, He says salt may lose its flavor; in which case “it is neither fit for the land nor for the dunghill, but men throw [βάλλουσιν] it out.” The same Greek word for “cast” or “throw” occurs in the same present-tense form in Luke 14:35 as in John 15:6, depicting what men literally were doing in the first century with salt that was no longer useful in fulfilling its purpose. The context of Luke 14:34–35 is clearly discipleship (14:26–32), not eternal salvation, where Jesus tells those who had “come to” [πρός] Him (v. 26a) by faith (cf. John 6:35–37) that they could not “come after” [ὀπίσω] Him (v. 26b) in discipleship unless they would “count the cost” (v. 28). Unlike discipleship, salvation is free to the believer (John 4:10; Rev. 22:17) because the cost has been borne fully by Christ at Calvary (John 19:30).

²⁷⁷ Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 178.

What 15:1–6 is teaching, along with 2:23–25 and 8:30–32, is that genuine believers in Christ may *not* abide in a relationship of *fellowship* with Christ and thus not grow and be as fruitful as they should be, if they do not walk in daily dependence on the Lord. Nevertheless, a believer's *union* with Christ is permanent and eternally secure. But if believers fail to abide consistently in Christ, the result according to 15:4–6 will be spiritual dry rot, unfruitfulness, and uselessness.²⁷⁸ While it is true that this may be accompanied by divine discipline (1 Cor. 11:30–32; Heb. 12:5–11) and loss of potential reward (Ruth 2:12; 2 John 8; Rev. 3:11), as stated in view #3 and as other Scripture passages reveal, this is not the point of the Lord's vine and branches analogy.

CONCLUSION

Does John's Gospel teach that perseverance in faith and good works is necessary for eternal life? There are no passages in the Gospel of John that teach this widely held but erroneous view. Instead, eternal life is conditioned on a single, nonmeritorious step of faith in Jesus Christ (3:14–16; 4:13–15; 6:31–35).²⁷⁹ Faith alone in Christ alone is the only response consistent with receiving God's free gift of eternal life and the personal assurance of salvation. Though it is evident from John's secondary purpose of edification that God also wants believers to abide in His Son, even when believers fail to abide and cease to be fruitful as disciples, the gracious but ironclad promises of Christ toward them remain true: "the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (6:37) and "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand" (10:28). Free Grace theology's doctrine of the *nature* of "saving faith" agrees with the teaching of John's Gospel.

²⁷⁸ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 264-72.

²⁷⁹ This is confirmed by Christ's teaching elsewhere in the Gospels that it is possible to be regenerated but only "believe for a while" (Luke 8:13). Stegall, *Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure?* 228-34.

CHAPTER 6

THE OBJECT AND CONTENT OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ IN JOHN'S EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE

The previous chapter clarified the sole condition for eternal life stipulated in John's Gospel, namely, an instantaneous and non-meritorious act of faith in Jesus Christ. This chapter shifts the focus from the *nature* of faith for regeneration to the *content* of that faith according to John's Gospel. In terms of the required content to be believed, John 20:31 states that a person must believe that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God." This leads to the critical question, what does it mean to believe that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God"? This chapter and the following will demonstrate that, in the Gospel of John, belief in Christ's person, work, and promise of eternal life are essential for regeneration. That is, "To believe is to trust your eternal welfare to what Christ is and what He has done. That's what it means to believe."¹ To demonstrate this content of faith, each significant element of the purpose statement in 20:30–31 is examined, including the reference to "these," "signs," Jesus' "name" and the meaning of Him being "the Christ, the Son of God."

PLACEMENT & PERSPECTIVE OF JOHN 20:30–31

The placement of John's purpose statement in 20:30–31 and the perspective these verses represent are significant in grasping what it means to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." In John's first epistle, he placed his purpose statement at the beginning of the letter (1 John 1:3–4). But in John's Gospel, he waits twenty chapters into his narrative before explicitly stating his purpose for writing. Why? What is significant about the location of the purpose statement in John's Gospel? The next several sections of this chapter on the context, signs, and content of the purpose statement will show that John's placement is strategic in furthering his evangelistic purpose of leading his readers to "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." John waits in his narrative until after the Cross and Resurrection so that the reader may understand that Jesus' substitutionary death and bodily resurrection are inherent to the meaning of "Christ" and "Son of God."

On the one hand, John speaks of Jesus' life in the past tense in 20:30–31, effectively pointing the reader backwards to the Cross and Resurrection as accomplished events. On the other hand, John 1–20 is also prospective in its focus. John continually points the reader forward to the climactic events of the Cross and Resurrection and the

¹ John G. Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love: A Devotional Study of the Gospel of John* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 102.

purpose statement.² John employs prolepsis as a key rhetorical device designed to make his narrative prospective. The fourth Gospel contains several instances of grammatical prolepses in which a word, normally a substantive, is grammatically or syntactically not in the “right” place.³ But the Gospel of John is also permeated and characterized by rhetorical prolepses. These are figures of speech in which a future action is portrayed as if it were already accomplished.⁴ In the New Testament and John especially, the Greek non-future tense-forms are often employed to portray a future event or action as already accomplished. This type of prolepsis is recognized by virtually all Greek grammar books and the field of Johannine Studies.⁵ If, in chapters 1–20, John merely wanted to say that certain events such as Christ’s death and resurrection were future from the standpoint of His earthly life and ministry, then the future tense-form was readily available for John to employ; but it appears that non-temporally future verb tenses were used in the narrative for rhetorical, and even theological, effect.

In John’s Gospel, prolepsis has the “effect of collapsing or compressing narrative time,”⁶ so that pre-cross evangelistic scenes such as John 1:29–36, 3:13–16, and 6:51–53 project the reader forward in time to the Cross.⁷ One writer says the “many internal prolepses, promises or predictions, within the gospel . . . almost all . . . refer to the event of Jesus’ death and exaltation.”⁸ This gives John’s Gospel a distinctively forward thrust, so that the reader prospectively focuses on the approaching Crucifixion and Resurrection, while John as narrator simultaneously writes in retrospect (2:17, 22; 7:39; 12:16; 20:9), pointing back to the Cross and Resurrection as an accomplished

² Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 111.

³ F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 252, § 476; Nigel Turner, “The Style of John,” in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, by James H. Moulton, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 4:69-70; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 423; Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, rev. ed., ed. Gordon M. Messing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 488; Gilbert Van Belle, “Prolepsis in the Gospel of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 43 (October 2001): 334-47.

⁴ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 914-15.

⁵ Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, trans. Sidney Sowers (London: SCM, 1967), 270-91; John Spencer Hill, “τὰ βᾶτα τῶν φουνίκων (John 12:13): Pleonasm or Prolepsis?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101.1 (1982): 133-35; Beate Kowalski, “Anticipations of Jesus’ Death in the Gospel of John,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemericum theologiarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 591; Francis J. Moloney, “The Function of Prolepsis in the Interpretation of John 6,” in *Critical Readings of John 6*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 129-48; Adele Reinhartz, “Jesus as Prophet: Predictive Prolepsis in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 36 (1989): 3-16.

⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 68.

⁷ Anthony D. Hopkins, “A Narratological Approach to the Development of Faith in the Gospel of John” (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992), 172; F. J. Moloney, “The Johannine Son of Man Revisited,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar*, ed. G. Van Belle, J. G. Van Der Watt, P. Maritz, *Bibliotheca ephemericum theologiarum lovaniensium* 184 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 186.

⁸ William R. G. Loader, “John 1:50–51 and the ‘Greater Things’ of Johannine Christology,” in *Anfänge der Christologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 262.

historical event.⁹ The result for the reader is a centering effect upon Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as the climactic focal point of the book.¹⁰ The fourth Gospel's proleptic literary design provides evidence for its evangelistic purpose, as well as evidence for the work of Jesus Christ being essential to the content of faith for eternal life.

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF JOHN 20:30–31

The purpose statement of 20:30–31 contains several significant terms and concepts that are thematically related to the rest of John's Gospel and play a critical role in clarifying the message of the book. Besides the key words "believe" and "life" already studied, other terms and concepts that must be carefully considered include: (1) "these" and "signs"; (2) "you" as the audience addressed by John; (3) Jesus being "the Christ, the Son of God"; and (4) the significance of Jesus' "name." These terms and concepts must be examined first in their immediate context of John 20 and then correlated with the rest of John's Gospel in order to understand their meaning and the message of the book.

John 20:24–31

- 24 Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.
- 25 The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not **believe**."
- 26 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!"
- 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be **unbelieving**, but **believing**."
- 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"
- 29 Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have **believed**. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have **believed**."
- 30 And [μὲν οὖν] truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;
- 31 but these are written that you may **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that **believing** you may have life in His name.

The purpose statement of John 20:30–31 is integrally connected to the preceding "Doubting Thomas" pericope in 20:24–29. Though commonly known as the "Doubting Thomas" section of John's Gospel, this label is a misnomer since this section is actually

⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 28; Robert Theodore Hoferkamp, "The Relationship Between 'Semēia' and Believing in the Fourth Gospel," (Th.D. Thesis, Christ Seminary-Seminex, 1978), 173; Thompson, *Incarnate Word*, 114.

¹⁰ Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 11-12; Thompson, *Incarnate Word*, 111.

intended to show how Thomas went from unbelief to belief and became “Believing Thomas.”¹¹ As such, this section is really all about belief, and it provides the book’s climactic¹² and defining example of the content of belief in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God,” which involves believing in Him as the crucified-risen Lord who is able to guarantee eternal life to those who believe in Him.¹³ Though verses 30–31 form an obvious and fitting evangelistic conclusion to the preceding 20 chapters, they must not be viewed as completely disconnected from the immediately preceding verses of the Thomas pericope.

The first reason verses 30–31 are intended to be connected to the immediately preceding verses of the “Believing Thomas” account is based on syntax. In verse 30, the Greek particle $\mu\grave{\epsilon}\nu$ and conjunction $\omicron\upsilon\nu$ connect this verse with the preceding verses. This significant function is obscured by the majority of English translations that leave these important connectives untranslated. Though $\omicron\upsilon\nu$ occurs frequently in the fourth Gospel,¹⁴ it occurs in succession following $\mu\grave{\epsilon}\nu$ only once (19:24).¹⁵ When the conjunction $\omicron\upsilon\nu$ functions inferentially, as in 20:30, it “signals that what follows is the conclusion or

¹¹ William Bonney, *Caused to Believe: The Doubting Thomas Story as the Climax of John’s Christological Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 2, 28, 131, *passim*.

¹² C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 575; Bonney, *Caused to Believe*, 131, 169; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 661; Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 232; Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 96; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 443; E. P. Groenewald, “The Christological Meaning of John 20:31,” *Neotestamentica* 2 (1968): 139; Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 106, 126; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1211; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 648; Willis H. Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia in the Gospel of John: A Historical and Hermeneutical Perspective*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 186 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 163, 170; Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 272; Thompson, *Incarnate Word*, 111; Elmer Towns, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1990), 354; Gilbert Van Belle, “Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel: The Conclusion to the Gospel of John Revisited,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, Jan G. Van der Watt, and P. Maritz (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 452; J. G. van der Watt, “Double Entendre in the Gospel According to John,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert van Belle, J. G. van der Watt, and P. Maritz (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 479 n. 67; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 297.

¹³ G. Michael Cocoris, *The Salvation Controversy* (Santa Monica, CA: Insights from the Word, 2008), 22; Barnabas Lindars, “The Son of Man in the Johannine Christology,” in *Essays on John*, ed. C. M. Tuckett (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 38.

¹⁴ Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906; Reprint, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 164-70; Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 234-35, §451.

¹⁵ J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John*, International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 2:631; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII–XXI*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1055; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth, 3 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 3:336.

inference from what precedes.”¹⁶ Occurring together, the μὲν οὖν construction “denotes continuation,”¹⁷ and may be translated “so then”¹⁸ or “therefore,” as in the New American Standard Bible, which reads in verse 30: “*Therefore* [μὲν οὖν] many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of His disciples.”¹⁹

The second evidence that verses 30–31 cannot stand completely apart from the immediately preceding account of Thomas’s faith is the sevenfold repetition of πιστεύω in verses 24–31 and the thematic connection of believing, especially between verses 29 and 31. In verse 29, Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who will believe at some point in the future, saying, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” This statement is intended for John’s post-Calvary, post-resurrection readers, who will not have the opportunity to physically see the risen Christ like Thomas and the rest of the disciples but who will still have the opportunity to believe in Him. This prospect of believing without seeing carries over into verse 31, where John appeals directly to the reader with the second-person plural “you” to believe that Jesus is the Christ and have eternal life.

Since there is an undeniable syntactic and thematic connection between verses 24–29 and 30–31, it would be unnatural and forced to see a disjunction between the object of belief in verses 24–29 and the object of belief in verse 31. The close connection between verses 24–29 and 30–31 demonstrates that believing in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God” means believing in Him as the crucified-risen Lord, which is the content of faith clearly implied in the Thomas pericope by its five occurrences of πιστεύω in verses 25, 27, and 29. This crucial point about Jesus being “the Christ, the Son of God” is explained in greater detail after the following “signs” section.

“SIGNS” IN JOHN 20:30–31

The signs referred to in verses 30–31 are integrally connected to the evangelistic purpose and message of John’s Gospel. These signs must be considered with respect to their meaning, number, and relationship to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

¹⁶ Richard A. Young, *Intermediate Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 191.

¹⁷ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 630.

¹⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 581.

¹⁹ D. A. Carson’s conclusion on this construction is helpful: “The particles *men oun* connect vv. 30–31 with what precedes. The most common meaning of the second is ‘therefore.’ The flow of thought seems to be: Those who have not seen the risen Christ and yet have believed are blessed; *therefore* this book has been composed, to the end that you may believe. The first of two particles (*men*) is paired with *de* introducing v. 31. Together, they frame the thought of these two verses: *On the one hand*, there are, doubtless, many more signs Jesus did that could have been reported; but, *on the other hand*, these have been committed to writing so that you may believe.” D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 660-61.

John 20:20–31

- 30 And truly Jesus did many other **signs** [σημεία] in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;
- 31 but **these** [ταῦτα] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

The Gospel of John is structured around a series of miraculous²⁰ signs accomplished by the Lord Jesus to persuade readers that He is the Christ, the Son of God. These signs are a particular type of miracle referred to in verse 30 as σημεία. While the Synoptic Gospel writers employ more frequently the terms τέρας and δύναμις for miracles, John uses the word σημεῖον to emphasize the meaning and significance of each miracle rather than the effect of wonder and amazement it produces among those who observe the sign.²¹ “In comparison with the Synoptics John has related the miracles of Jesus with the emphasis upon the meaning of the miracle rather than the miracle itself.”²² The signs in John’s Gospel were specifically chosen because they carried particular meaning for the ministry of Jesus that John wanted to convey.²³ Each sign-miracle performed by Jesus in John’s Gospel revealed the Lord’s deity and true identity as the Christ, the Son of God.²⁴

Most students of John’s Gospel conclude that there are at least seven signs done by the Lord Jesus which John has selected around which to structure his Gospel. However, there is disagreement concerning which signs comprise these seven. There is a general consensus that the following list comprises these seven, with the possible exception of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee.²⁵

²⁰ Some interpreters distinguish two types of signs in John—the miraculous and the non-miraculous. This distinction is based on the fact that John is rooted heavily in Old Testament allusions and themes and נִסִּים was used in the Old Testament for both miraculous events (Isa. 7:11, 14) as well as ordinary events vested with prophetic, symbolic significance (Isa. 20:3). One commonly proposed non-miraculous Johannine “sign” is Jesus’ act of cleansing the Temple in John 2:14–17. Some count this as one of the seven signs in John 2–12 because it symbolically depicts Christ as the new, replacement temple and center of worship (George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word Publishing, 1987], 42; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 181; Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 300-303, 370; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 325-26, 332-34; idem, “The Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John’s Christology,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 [1995]: 87-103). However, this interpretation seems forced and doubtful since it would make this purported “sign” anomalous as the only non-miraculous sign among the seven. Nor is it even called a “sign” by John.

²¹ Merrill C. Tenney, “Topics from the Gospel of John: Part II: The Meaning of the Signs,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (April 1975): 146; W. H. Griffith Thomas, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part I,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (July 1968): 255.

²² David W. Wead, “The Literary Devices in John’s Gospel” (Th.D. dissertation, University of Basel, 1970), 18-19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 327; idem, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1988), 16.

²⁵ Köstenberger, *Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 323-25.

1. Turning water into wine at Cana²⁶ (2:1–12)
2. Healing a nobleman’s son in Capernaum while in Cana²⁷ (4:46–54)
3. Healing a lame man at the pool of Bethesda²⁸ (5:1–16)
4. Multiplying loaves and fishes to feed 5,000²⁹ (6:1–14)
5. Walking on the Sea of Galilee³⁰ (6:15–21)
6. Giving sight to a man born blind at the pool of Siloam³¹ (9:1–11)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead³² (11:1–45)

There is a recognizable pattern of sevens throughout John’s Gospel similar to the Book of Revelation. There are seven signs recorded in chapters 2–12, seven major discourses by Christ, and seven “I Am” (ἐγώ εἰμι) sayings.³³ But the total number of signs in John should not be limited to seven simply to conform to this pattern, as Von Wahlde states,

Whatever the conclusions regarding the appearance of “sevens” elsewhere in the Gospel, there seems to be no real intention to present only seven miracles. By clearly determining that there are more than seven

²⁶ John 2:11 says this was the “beginning of signs” (σημεῖα) chosen to be included by John. There were other signs done by Christ not explained by John. After the miraculous sign in Cana, John says Jesus performed “signs” (σημεῖα) in Jerusalem (2:23), which are never explained. In John 3:2, Nicodemus refers to Jesus having done “signs” (σημεῖα) as well, though the only sign performed by Jesus up to that point that John records is the miracle at Cana.

²⁷ The word “sign” (σημεῖον) is used to describe this miracle in 4:54 (also in 4:48).

²⁸ This miracle is technically not called a “sign” (σημεῖον) by John, though it may be included among the signs mentioned in the next chapter (6:2) where John says the Galilean crowd saw Jesus’ “signs” (σημεῖα) that He performed “on those who were diseased.” The new setting (Galilee vs. Jerusalem) may have included some Judean Jews witnessing the healing of the lame man at Bethesda (5:1–16), who then followed Jesus north to Galilee. The reference in 6:2 may also include the healings recorded in Matthew 8–9.

²⁹ This is called a “sign” (σημεῖον) in 6:14.

³⁰ This too is never technically called a “sign” (σημεῖον), but it is followed by the crowd referring to “signs” (σημεῖα) in 7:31 that Jesus had done previously. Köstenberger objects to this being one of John’s signs because it was done privately in the presence of the disciples rather than publicly (*Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 329-30). However, John 20:30 speaks only of “signs in the presence of His disciples.” No qualification is made, either in the purpose statement or anywhere else in John’s Gospel, to the effect that John’s intended signs were those also done in the presence of non-disciples. Furthermore, though the miracle of Jesus walking on water was witnessed only by the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, John 6:22–25 states that its effects were not missed by the multitudes who followed Jesus from town to town since they could not figure out how Jesus arrived at Capernaum.

³¹ This is called a “sign” (σημεῖον) by virtue of the Pharisees’ reference in 9:16 to this and other “signs” Jesus was doing.

³² This miracle is called a “sign” (σημεῖον) later in 12:18.

³³ Moisés Silva, “Approaching the Fourth Gospel,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1988): 26.

miraculous events in the Gospel, we remove a burden of forcing a symbolism where it was probably not intended.³⁴

Therefore, the “signs” referred to in 20:30 are not limited to the seven that are customarily recognized,³⁵ for Christ’s death and resurrection constitute at least an eighth sign.³⁶ This composite sign stands apart from all previous signs as completely unique and is the climactic sign of John’s Gospel.³⁷ David Wead writes, “Apart from the life and

³⁴ Urban C. von Wahlde, “The Samaritan Woman Episode, Synoptic Form-Criticism, and the Johannine Miracles: A Question of Criteria,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar*, ed. Gilbert van Belle, Jan G. van der Watt, and P. Maritz, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* 184 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 518.

³⁵ Köstenberger, *Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 324; Gilbert Van Belle, “The Meaning of σημεῖα in Jn 20, 30–31,” *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 74 (1998): 318-25.

³⁶ Gerald L. Borchert, “The Fourth Gospel and Its Theological Impact,” *Review & Expositor* 78:2 (Spring 1981): 254; Cocoris, *Salvation Controversy*, 22; Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* (Salem, OR: Charis, 2001), 306; Thomas H. Olbricht, “The Theology of the Signs in the Gospel of John,” in *Johannine Studies: Essays in Honor of Frank Pack*, ed. James E. Priest (Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University Press, 1989), 174; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 649; Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia*, 148-58; Donald Senior, “The Death of Jesus as Sign,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 271-91; G. Gilbert Van Belle, “Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel: The Conclusion to the Gospel of John Revisited,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, Jan G. Van der Watt, and P. Maritz (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), 441-43; Wead, “The Literary Devices in John’s Gospel,” 23-24. Others believe that Christ’s post-resurrection appearances should also be regarded as signs. See Harris, *Jesus as God*, 125 n. 97; Elmer Towns, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1990), 18-19. Other commentators see the Resurrection constituting an eighth or ninth sign (Homer A. Kent, *Light in the Darkness: Studies in the Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974], 223; Tenney, “Topics from the Gospel of John: Part II: The Meaning of the Signs,” 158; Thomas, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part I,” 256-58). Others deny that the Cross and Resurrection are signs (Raymond E. Brown, *Gospel According to John, I–XII*, Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1966], 530; Leon Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 21; Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to St. John*, 1:530).

³⁷ Richard Bauckham, “The Beloved Disciple as Ideal Author,” in *The Johannine Writings: A Sheffield Reader*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Academic, 1995), 64; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 661; Willis Hedley Salier, “The Obedient Son: The ‘Faithfulness’ of Christ in the Fourth Gospel,” in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 233 n. 36; idem, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia in the Gospel of John*, 142-3, 148-51.

Some interpreters speak of the raising of Lazarus as the “climactic” sign in John’s Gospel (Stephen S. Kim, “The Significance of Jesus’ Raising of Lazarus in John 11,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 [January 2011]: 54-55; Köstenberger, *Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 334; George Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* [Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1987], 182, 215; C. F. D. Moule, “The Meaning of ‘Life’ in the Gospel and Epistles of St. John,” *Theology* 78 [1975]: 117, 122). While this sign may indeed be the climactic sign of the seven in John 2–12, it should not be viewed as the climactic sign for the entire book. Otherwise, the significance of Christ’s death and resurrection is diminished to the point of being anticlimactic as the dénouement of the whole narrative.

death of Jesus no understanding of the Gospel is possible” and that the “final sign, the resurrection, is the crowning event of the Gospel.”³⁸

John’s Gospel may have been intentionally structured with seven signs in chapters 2–12 in order to highlight, emphasize, and distinguish the eighth sign.³⁹ In the eighth sign, the Lord Jesus showed Himself to be the Christ, the Son of God in a unique way. While His death and resurrection are not specifically called a “sign” in the crucifixion and resurrection section of John 19–21, they are indirectly called a single “sign” (σημεῖον) at the beginning of John’s Gospel. After purging the Temple of corrupt money-changers, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem asked Jesus for a “sign” to validate His authority to perform such a bold action. Jesus replies with an even bolder prediction of His death and resurrection.

John 2:18–22

- 18 So the Jews answered and said to Him, “What **sign** [σημεῖον] do You show to us, since You do these things?”
- 19 Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”
- 20 Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?”
- 21 But He was speaking of the temple of His body.
- 22 Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.

When called upon for a specific “sign” (σημεῖον) in 2:18, the Lord Jesus refers to *both* His death (“Destroy this temple”) and His resurrection (“and in three days I will raise it up”).⁴⁰ Accordingly, both His crucifixion and resurrection constitute at least one additional “sign” (σημεῖον) in the Gospel that should be counted among the “signs” (σημεῖα) mentioned in the purpose statement in 20:30–31. The context of the sign predicted by Christ in 2:18 is significant because it is framed by the references to the Temple and the Passover (vv. 13, 23), which cast their shadow upon Christ’s statement, “Destroy this temple” (v. 19).⁴¹ “Jesus predicts the demise of the current temple and

³⁸ Wead, “The Literary Devices in John’s Gospel,” 24. Van der Watt states that “the cross/resurrection-events are a revelatory sign (2:18ff.) of the unique presence of God incarnate among his people. As such, it functions as a central motif in the Gospel according to John, irrespective of efforts in the past to devalue the role of the cross in this Gospel.” Jan G. Van der Watt, “The Cross/Resurrection-Events in the Gospel of John with Special Emphasis on the Confession of Thomas (20:28),” *Neotestamentica* 37.1 (2003): 128.

³⁹ Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 383. Köstenberger makes this same point concerning the preeminence of the last sign, which he views as the raising of Lazarus since he does not consider Christ’s death and resurrection to be a sign (*Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 324).

⁴⁰ Roland Bergmeier, “Die Bedeutung der Synoptiker für das johanneische Zeugnisthema. Mit einem Anhang zum Perfekt-Gebrauch im vierten Evangelium,” *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 472.

⁴¹ Gerald L. Borchert, “The Passover and the Narrative Cycles in John,” in *Perspectives on John: Method and Interpretation in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Robert B. Sloan and Mikeal C. Parsons (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), 307-8.

seems to imply that his resurrected body will function as a new temple (John 2:19), providing further support for his death as an *atonement sacrifice*.⁴²

Another critical question regarding “signs” and the purpose and message of John’s Gospel is the breadth of meaning intended for the demonstrative pronoun “these” (ταῦτα) in 20:31. What is the scope of the signs referred to by ταῦτα in the clause of verse 31, “but these [ταῦτα] are written”? Some conclude that ταῦτα refers only to the signs of Christ’s crucifixion and post-resurrection appearances to the disciples in chapters 19–20⁴³ or just to His appearance in chapter 21.⁴⁴ The mention of Jesus’ signs being done in “the presence of His disciples” in 20:30 certainly includes the disciples witnessing the Lord in His resurrected body, and even one disciple being present to observe the Crucifixion (19:30–35).⁴⁵ But this does not necessarily preclude certain signs done earlier in the Gospel, such as in chapters 4–5, where no disciples are mentioned as being present for Jesus’ signs. Simply because the disciples are not explicitly mentioned on occasion does not rule out the possibility that they were still present.⁴⁶ To insist that the disciples were absent and did not observe Christ’s miracles on such occasions would be an argument from silence. Therefore, the mention of “these” signs (20:31) being done “in the presence of His disciples” (20:30) does not restrict the signs referred to in John’s purpose statement to the signs in chapters 19–21. The reference to ταῦτα in 20:31 may still refer broadly to all of the signs in the book.⁴⁷

If ταῦτα in 20:31 refers only to the events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection in John 19–21, then it might be concluded that the purpose of John’s Gospel and the meaning of Jesus being “the Christ, the Son of God” should be based only on these three chapters. But if ταῦτα points back to the rest of John’s Gospel leading up to the purpose statement in 20:30–31, then John’s purpose and the meaning of Jesus being “the Christ, the Son of God” should be drawn from all of John 1–20. John uses ταῦτα both broadly and narrowly in his Gospel. Of the roughly 70 occurrences of ταῦτα in the book, most are near-referring, but a few have a more remote or all-encompassing referent (7:4;

⁴² Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 400. See also, Paul M. Hoskins, *Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Temple in the Gospel of John*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006). Some might object that verse 19 does not include Christ’s death as part of an eighth sign because destroying the temple of Christ’s body was something done *to* Him, not *by* Him. It was something that the Jews would do, not Jesus Himself, in contrast to Christ’s explicit promise regarding His resurrection, “*I will raise it up.*” However, the Jews could not have fulfilled the first portion of Christ’s statement, “*destroy this temple,*” unless He permitted His own crucifixion at their hands since His death was under His complete, sovereign control (Isa. 53:10; John 10:17–18; Acts 2:23).

⁴³ Mitchell, *Everlasting Love*, 400.

⁴⁴ Hans-Christian Kammler, “Die ‘Zeichen’ des Auferstandenen: Überlegungen zur Exegese von Joh 20,30+31,” in *Johannesstudien: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des vierten Evangeliums*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 88 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 201–8; Paul Minear, “The Original Function of John 21,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983): 85–98.

⁴⁵ Van Belle, “Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel,” 441–43.

⁴⁶ Tenney, “Topics from the Gospel of John: Part II: The Meaning of the Signs,” 157.

⁴⁷ Colin Roberts, “John 20:30–31 and 21:24–25,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 38 (1987): 409; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 505–8; Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia*, 148–58; Van Belle, “The Meaning of σημεῖα in Jn 20, 30–31,” 314–20.

10:25; 14:12; 21:24). However, 20:31 does not merely refer to “these” (ταῦτα) signs, but in the context, to “these” (ταῦτα) signs being “written” in John’s “book” (20:30). The use of ταῦτα in 21:24 forms the closest parallel in the book to its use in 20:31. Both passages refer to what is “written” in the entire “book” (20:30; 21:25), which supports a broader meaning of ταῦτα in 20:31 that includes the signs and revelatory content about Jesus in chapters 1–20.⁴⁸ Therefore, the reference to “these” signs in John 20:31 should not be limited only to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. But if the signs mentioned in 20:30–31 refer back to chapters 1–20 (or more specifically to chapters 2–12 and 18–20), then does this mean each preceding sign-account contains a reference to John’s saving message?

Some proponents of Free Grace theology claim that each of John’s eight signs is sufficient today to lead a person to believe in Jesus as “the Christ,” which they say means believing in Him merely as the guarantor of eternal life.⁴⁹ Like the preceding seven signs, they view the eighth sign of Christ’s death and resurrection as *sufficient* to lead to belief in Jesus for eternal life but not *necessary* to believe for eternal life.⁵⁰ They distinguish between belief in the minimal “message of life” about Jesus as the guarantor of eternal life versus belief in His death and resurrection, which they view as facts supporting belief in the saving message of Jesus being the guarantor of eternal life. John Niemelä holds this view, claiming:

John indicates that the cross-and-resurrection, the eighth sign, is sufficient to cause one to believe that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, gives him eternal life and will resurrect him. . . . Now, if the cross-and-resurrection are sufficient to cause one to believe the message of life, then John has not confused believing the cross-and-resurrection with believing God’s promise of eternal life.⁵¹

Ken Wilson has also expressed doubt that belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection is necessary for eternal life, writing:

Although Witherington posits belief in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as essential for justification, this may be an unwarranted assumption.

⁴⁸ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 995; Roberts, “John 20:30–31 and 21:24–25,” 409–10; John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 279 n. 128; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 3:336–37; Van Belle, “The Meaning of σημεῖα in Jn 20, 30–31,” 318.

⁴⁹ Zane C. Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message,” 4; idem, “Assurance: Of the Essence of Saving Faith,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 10 (Spring 1997): 6–7; John Niemelä, “The Sign of the Cross—What Does It Signify?” Grace Evangelical Society Omaha Regional Conference, July 28, 2007; Robert N. Wilkin, *Secure and Sure* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2005), 33.

⁵⁰ Robert N. Wilkin, “John,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin, 2 vols. (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1:360, 476.

⁵¹ John Niemelä, “The Message of Life in the Gospel of John,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (July–Sept. 2001): 17.

Niemelä has argued convincingly that each sign was sufficient for belief. The plethora of verses confirming salvific belief after each sign further substantiates his claim (2:11; 4:53; 6:14; 7:31; 10:41–42; 11:45–48; 12:10–11, 37, 42; 20:8, 29). Since John 20:31 was written after these signs occurred, it would not appear logical to insist upon a progressive revelation requiring salvific belief to include all eight of the signs, even the cross and resurrection. The eleven disciples were justified prior to the resurrection. Believing that Jesus was the Messiah and God seems to have been sufficient.⁵²

These statements contain a few basic errors. First, the Gospel of John does not mention “salvific belief after each sign,” as others have also observed.⁵³ John records belief resulting from four of the seven signs in chapters 2–12 (2:11; 4:50, 53; 9:35–38; 11:45). There is no mention of belief in Christ stemming from the sign of the man healed from an infirmity after 38 years (John 5:1–18), or from the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1–14),⁵⁴ or from Christ walking on the Sea of Galilee (6:15–21).

Second, the Gospel of John never states what Niemelä and Wilson assume, namely, that each sign is sufficient to lead a person to believe adequate content about Jesus that results in eternal life. If this were the case, we should expect to see “eternal life” mentioned at least once in John 2–12 as the result of believing any one of the seven signs—but conspicuously this is never stated by John.

Third, Wilson claims that “it would not appear logical to insist upon a progressive revelation requiring salvific belief to include all eight of the signs, even the cross and resurrection.” But it is a false dichotomy to claim either that *all* eight signs are necessary to believe for eternal life (which all admit is unreasonable) or else belief in *any* sign must be sufficient for eternal life today. Another interpretative possibility is that, because of the uniqueness of the eighth sign of the Cross and Resurrection, belief in the eighth sign is not merely sufficient but necessary, for it defined Jesus and affected His identity as “the Christ, the Son of God” in a way the other seven signs did not.

⁵² Kenneth M. Wilson, “Is Belief in Christ’s Deity Required for Eternal Life in John’s Gospel?” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 12.2 (Fall 2006): 78.

⁵³ Debbie Hunn, “The Believers Jesus Doubted: John 2:23–25,” *Trinity Journal* 25 (Spring 2004): 16-17; Paul Minear, “The Audience of the Fourth Evangelist,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 351.

⁵⁴ John 6:14 is hardly an instance of “salvific faith,” where the crowd confesses, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” The multitudes still perceived Jesus to be just a man, like Moses, rather than God-incarnate (D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 125). The next verse implies that their belief in Jesus as a Moses-like Prophet was deficient (Marinus De Jonge, “Jesus as Prophet and King in the Fourth Gospel,” *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 49 [1973]: 167-8) since the people had an inadequate understanding of Jesus’ identity and mission: “Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone” (v. 15). The people wanted Jesus as their king to provide for their physical and temporal needs versus their far greater spiritual and eternal need for a King who would first lay down His life for them as their sacrificial substitute for sin (Mavis M. Leung, *The Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John: Jesus’ Death as Corroboration of His Royal Messiahship* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011], 148-49; Godfrey C. Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Johannine Descent-Ascent Schema* [Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983], 3).

Belief in any one of Jesus' seven sign-miracles in John 2–12 cannot be salvific today because none of these signs accomplished the eternal change wrought to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ as occurred at His crucifixion and resurrection. The crowning sign of Christ's death and resurrection is distinct from all previous signs in that it uniquely resulted in an eternal change to the person of Jesus as the Christ, just like the moment of His incarnation when He became the unique God-Man, so that He became forever the crucified, risen Lamb of God. Charles Barrett correctly concludes that the singular event of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection "is not merely a token of something other than itself [like the sign-miracles in John 2–12]; this event is the thing which it signifies. . . . So, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, sign and its meaning coincide."⁵⁵ With the progress of revelation, Jesus became the crucified, risen Christ only after the eleven disciples initially believed in Him as the Messiah. Therefore, belief in Him *today* as "the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31) requires belief in His death and resurrection, along with His deity and humanity as God-incarnate.

"THE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD" IN JOHN 20:30–31

The purpose and message of John's Gospel is inseparable from its main character, Jesus Christ, who is the object of belief. The meaning of the key descriptive title "the Christ, the Son of God" should be derived first from its use in the immediate context of John's purpose statement and then from the use of the key terms "Christ" and "Son of God" throughout the rest of John's Gospel. Regarding this, Van Belle states, "The conclusion to the Gospel, together with the confession of Thomas, harks back to the first chapter, thereby forming an all-embracing inclusion based on the Christological titles."⁵⁶

John 20:20–31

30 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;

31 but these are written that [ἵνα] you may believe that [πιστεύω ὅτι] Jesus is **the Christ, the Son of God**, and that [ἵνα] believing you may have life in His name.

John 20:31 contains two ἵνα clauses expressing purpose, which indicates that John recorded select signs in order that [ἵνα] the reader might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that [ἵνα] believing, the reader may have life in His name. The two ἵνα + πιστεύω clauses in John 20:31 function in tandem, making the object or content of "believing" in John 20:31b dependent upon, and essentially the same as, the object and content of "believe" in John 20:31a—"that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." The object of the participial action of "believing" in John 20:31b must be drawn from the immediately preceding "believe" + "that" (πιστεύω + ὅτι) construction in 20:31a. So what does it mean to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God in order to have life in His name?

⁵⁵ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 78.

⁵⁶ Van Belle, "Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel," 452.

Many evangelical Christians who espouse Free Grace theology have followed the teachings of Zane Hodges, who claimed that belief in Jesus' deity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection is not necessary to receive eternal life but is necessary only to follow Him after regeneration as a matter of obedience in the Christian life. He writes, "Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this."⁵⁷ Similarly, John Niemelä claims: "John keeps the signs distinct from the message of life, so evangelicals must not confuse them either. John does not set forth the sign of the cross-and-resurrection as the message that one must believe in order to receive eternal life."⁵⁸ Likewise, Wilkin writes, "Nowhere in John is the idea of Jesus paying *one's personal penalty* for sin . . . mentioned, let alone discussed."⁵⁹ Why do these theologians hold this particular view? Hodges explains the rationale behind this unique interpretation of John's Gospel and purpose statement:

This statement does not affirm the necessity of believing in our Lord's substitutionary atonement. If by the time of the writing of John's Gospel, it was actually necessary to believe this, then it would have been not only simple, but essential, to say so. Inasmuch as the key figures in John's narrative *did* believe in Jesus before they understood His atoning death and resurrection, it would have been even more essential for John to state that the content of faith had changed. But of course he does not do this. The simple fact is that the whole Fourth Gospel is designed to show that its readers can get saved the same way as the people who got saved in John's narrative. To say anything other than this is to accept a fallacy. It is to mistakenly suppose that the Fourth Gospel presents the terms of salvation incompletely and inadequately. I sincerely hope no grace person would want to be stuck with a position like that. Let me repeat. Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this. If we say that it does, we are reading something into the text and not reading something out of it!⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," 7.

⁵⁸ John Niemelä, "The Message of Life in the Gospel of John," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (July-Sept. 2001): 18.

⁵⁹ Robert N. Wilkin, "A Review of J. B. Hixson's *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 21 (Spring 2008): 20 n. 44. With respect to Wilkin's claim about the *impersonal* nature of Christ's death for sin in John's Gospel, it should be noted that John 1:29, 3:16, and 6:51–53 speak of Christ's death for the "world." Since "world" encompasses every person, John 3:16 is frequently used in evangelism with an individual appeal where a person's name is inserted in the place of "world" (e.g., "For God so loved [Tom], that He gave His only begotten Son, that if [Tom] would believe in Him, [Tom] would not perish but have everlasting life"). Regarding the redemptive and *penal* nature of Christ's death for sin in John's Gospel, this is addressed later in this chapter under the subheading "Humanity & Death of Jesus the Christ," where it is explained that Christ's declaration "It is finished" (τετέλεσται) in 19:30 and the satisfaction of God's wrath (3:36; 18:11), combined with other evidence of His atoning, vicarious, and redemptive death in the book, show conclusively that John does portray Christ's death as paying one's personal penalty for sin.

⁶⁰ Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1," 7.

According to this view, not only is belief in Jesus' substitutionary death and bodily resurrection not required for eternal life, neither is belief in His deity. Hodges claims that a person does not need to believe in Jesus' deity as reflected in the title "Son of God."⁶¹ Consequently, those who follow Hodges's teaching, such as Bob Wilkin, deny that belief in Christ's deity is required for eternal life. Wilkin writes, "In the Fourth Gospel believing in Jesus for eternal life, not affirming His deity or other truths, is the sole condition of eternal life (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:25–27)."⁶² Elsewhere Wilkin claims, "While there may be texts that mention Jesus's finished work on the cross, His deity, His perfect humanity, His bodily resurrection, and justification by faith alone in Him alone, none say one must believe all those truths to be born again."⁶³ Lon Gregg concurs with Wilkin and Hodges in denying that John's Gospel requires belief in "the Right Jesus" for eternal life:

As might be expected from its stated purpose, however, the Gospel of John provides the preponderance of clear NT examples of common-sense faith in Christ (John 20:30–31). Here, where belief in Jesus is equivalent to recognizing Him as Christ, Guarantor of eternal life, every account of conversion richly illustrates the simple sense of faith described above. . . . Against a backdrop of John the Baptist's lofty affirmation regarding Jesus' parentage (1:34), Philip's confession stands as a patent unorthodoxy. He is apparently blissfully in error about Jesus' exalted Person (as of course might well be expected on day one), but this error does not keep him from the saving belief that Jesus is Christ. Philip's belief is inerrant nonetheless. As with the rest of John 1:41–54, Philip's confession serves the author's purpose to corroborate the overwhelming early credibility of Jesus, the man, as the Christ. As such, the story is an eyewitness account with its warts, not a reflection of the Gospel writer's own mature faith. Philip's example serves to establish that knowing the identity of Jesus, not the orthodoxy, is sufficient grounds for the faith that saves. Simply "finding" Jesus as the Messiah (1:45) is perfectly adequate for that.

Other Johannine examples of this unsophisticated faith include the woman at the well, whose regenerating belief apparently did not require Jesus to be deity. Her persuasion about eternal life is more directly explained by her persuasion that Jesus was the Messiah, the Prophet who would tell the truth about all things (John 4:25–26). Fully apart from knowing whether Jesus was God, she could aptly reason that the promise of eternal life to her if she believed (John 4:14c), as it was from the lips of the truth-telling Prophet, should be believed. There is likewise no record

⁶¹ Ibid., 5.

⁶² Robert N. Wilkin, "A Review of J. B. Hixson's *Getting the Gospel Wrong*," 13 n. 35.

⁶³ See Wilkin's "Editor's Note" in Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 2: Our Invitation to Respond," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 22 (Spring 2009): 116 n. 5. See also, Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living By Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 10, 21.

that her fellows, the townspeople of Sychar, recognized Jesus' deity (John 4:42; cf. 20:31a, 1 John 5:1), but their faith also stands in John's record as exemplary.⁶⁴

There is no literal "right" or "wrong" Jesus in which to put one's faith for eternal life. There is only one Jesus, about whom, on a very broad range of topics, one may believe correctly or not.⁶⁵

Any conception of belief in Jesus Christ that requires orthodoxy for salvation is in violation, not only of the biblical model, but also of the common-sense principles by which we come to believe in anyone for anything. Only by overlooking the normal processes of believing can the preacher require orthodoxy as a necessary concomitant of final salvation. The message of salvation through faith alone in Jesus Christ, perfectly or imperfectly understood, alone, is alone the message that God will continue to use to bring eternal life to a dying world.⁶⁶

Is the purpose of John's Gospel to show that people can have many theological misconceptions about Jesus and still possess eternal life, as long as they believe He guarantees them everlasting life? Is this really what the purpose statement of John's Gospel means by believing in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God in order to have life in His name? The evangelistic context of John 20:30–31 provides the key to answering these questions. In particular, the placement of John's two evangelistic, editorial appeals to the reader in 19:35 and 20:30–31 deserve special consideration.

Significantly, John waits until after Jesus' death and resurrection to break into the narrative of his Gospel with a personal invitation and appeal to his readers to believe in Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God." In John 20:31, he says that these eight signs were "written that *you* may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing *you* may have life in His name." Only in John 19:35 and 20:31 does John as the narrator speak directly and personally to his readers.⁶⁷ This is especially significant in light of the fact that John interjects as the narrator at least 59 times throughout the Gospel according to Tenney, who referred to such instances as "footnotes" within John.⁶⁸ Later O'Rourke located at least 109 and possibly up to 137 such "asides."⁶⁹ More recently, Thatcher reassessed the results of Tenney and O'Rourke and found that they both

⁶⁴ Lon Gregg, "A Critical Perspective: Orthodoxy, the Right Jesus, and Eternal Life," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 22 (Autumn 2009): 97-99.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁷ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 212; Gordon D. Fee, "On the Text and Meaning of John 20:30–31," in *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 31; Anthony D. Hopkins, "A Narratological Approach to the Development of Faith in the Gospel of John" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992), 180-81, 226; Van Belle, "Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel," 450.

⁶⁸ Merrill C. Tenney, "The Footnotes of John's Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 117 (October-December 1960): 352-64.

⁶⁹ John O'Rourke, "Asides in the Gospel of John," *Novum Testamentum* 21 (1979): 216-17.

underestimated the total number since there are actually 191 such instances in John.⁷⁰ In addition, though John also narrates at the beginning of his Gospel (1:14, 16) and then at the end (21:24) using the first-person plural “we,”⁷¹ nowhere else does John speak directly to the reader using personal pronouns. This is despite the fact that there are frequent narrator’s asides, interjections, and clarifications for the reader, to such an extent that one might say the narrator is “intrusive” in the storyline compared to the Synoptic Gospels.⁷² John’s personal closeness to the reader throughout his Gospel is intentional and is a common literary technique in which the narrator seeks “to provide a frame for the story.”⁷³ This observation further underscores the main point that the signs of John’s Gospel referred to in the purpose statement of 20:30–31 were never intended to be taken independently of the introductory chapter⁷⁴ or the concluding passion section containing the greatest of all signs—Jesus’ death and resurrection as the Christ, the Son of God.

If John interjected frequently as the narrator in this Gospel, yet only directly addressed the reader with an invitation to believe at 19:35 and 20:31, then there must be a significant reason for his particular placement of these invitations. Why did John not address his readers with “you” and an appeal to believe in Jesus as “the Christ” at any earlier point in the Gospel or in conjunction with any signs preceding the Cross and Resurrection? The context of the two evangelistic “you” statements provides the answer.

⁷⁰ Tom Thatcher, “A New Look at Asides in the Fourth Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (October-December 1994): 433-39.

⁷¹ This does not count 3:11 and 4:22, where it is not John who is speaking.

⁷² Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁴ The function of the Prologue, preceding as it does the rest of the Gospel, shows that John expected his readers *to start reading his book at the beginning*. John did not expect readers of his Gospel to open their scrolls to a particular evangelistic verse, such as 6:47 or 11:27, and interpret its promise of life in isolation from its surrounding context and the rest of the narrative, as some Free Grace adherents propose the lost may do in evangelism. Within the first chapter and a half John introduces the reader to the key elements of Jesus being “the Christ” (1:17, 20, 25, 41), “the Son of God” (1:18, 34, 49), namely, that He is both God (1:1–3, 10, 14, 18) and man (1:14, 30, 51) and the substitutionary Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (1:29, 36) and who will rise from the dead (2:19). The death and resurrection are clearly implicit in chapter one (Koester, *The Word of Life*, 8) as the Son who took on human flesh (1:14, 18) is also the sacrificed Lamb who was rejected by His own (1:11) and judged by God for man’s sin (1:29, 36), yet amazingly is declared to be accepted by the Father and presently in His bosom (1:18). In addition to the person and work of Christ set forth in John 1, the condition of believing (R. Alan Culpepper, “The Pivot of John’s Prologue,” *New Testament Studies* 27 [1980–81]: 1-31) and the promise of regeneration are declared in the opening chapter (1:12–13). Every element of the gospel of salvation is introduced before the reader even gets to the sign section starting in chapter 2. The post-cross reader of John’s Gospel is given this perspective and expected to possess this vantage point regarding Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God as the storyline unfolds. Thus, Koester writes, “Rather than actually telling the whole story, the prologue establishes a *perspective* on the whole story. It gives readers a transcendent vantage point, enabling them to see things about Jesus that are hidden from the people described in the Gospel” (*Word of Life*, 8). See also Richard Bauckham, “Dimensions of Meaning in the Gospel’s First Week,” *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 131-84; Kimberley D. Booser, “The Literary Structure of John 1:1–18: An Examination of Its Theological Implications Concerning God’s Saving Plan through Jesus Christ,” *Evangelical Journal* 16 (Spring 1998): 13-29; Gerald L. Borchert, “The Resurrection Perspective in John: An Evangelical Summons,” *Review & Expositor* 85 (Summer 1988): 505; Derickson and Radmacher, *Disciplemaker*, 14, 24-25; Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia in the Gospel of John*, 153; Simon Ross Valentine, “The Johannine Prologue—A Microcosm of the Gospel,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 68 (October 1996): 291-304.

The placement of “you” at 19:35 occurs just after Jesus has proclaimed His work on the Cross “finished” (19:30) and immediately after John has been an eyewitness to the “blood and water”—to the fact of Christ’s physical, propitiatory death (19:34).⁷⁵

John 19:30–35

- 30 So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!”
And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.
- 31 Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.
- 32 Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him.
- 33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.
- 34 But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.
- 35 And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that **you** may believe.

John waits nineteen chapters for the moment Christ says “It is finished” before speaking personally to his readers with the second-person pronoun “you.” In verse 35, he says that he has “seen” these things and testified “so that you may believe.” Since the verb “believe” is absolute in verse 35 (i.e., without a preposition or stated object), this leads to the question, believe *what* about Jesus? The context indicates that the content John wants his readers to believe is the reality of Jesus’ death and finished work on the cross.⁷⁶ This is essential to John’s evangelistic purpose of leading the reader to believe in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God.”

The same relationship between Jesus’ sacrificial death and the titles “Christ” and “Son of God” may be observed in the parallel passage of 1 John 5:1 and 5–6. In 1 John 5:1, there is a reference to Jesus as the Christ: “Whoever *believes* that *Jesus is the Christ* is born of God.” This corresponds to the first portion of the purpose statement in John 20:31, “that you may *believe* that *Jesus is the Christ*.” First John 5:1 sets forth both the condition of faith alone for eternal life (“whoever believes”) and the object of faith (“that Jesus is the Christ”). Four verses later, John repeats the sole condition for salvation and the object of faith, using “Son of God” instead of “Christ”: “Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who *believes* that *Jesus is the Son of God*?” (v. 5). Thus, 1

⁷⁵ J. Massingberd Ford, “‘Mingled Blood’ from the Side of Christ (John XIX. 34),” *New Testament Studies* 15 (1968–69): 337–38 (Ford argues for John 19:34 as a reference to Christ being the Passover Lamb that cleanses us from all sin); Thompson, *Incarnate Word*, 109–10 (Thompson interprets verse 34 as proof of Jesus’ physical death and real humanity without commenting on propitiation); John Wilkinson, “The Incident of the Blood and Water in John 19.34,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975): 171–72.

⁷⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 208; idem, *The Work of Christ*, trans. Cornelius Lambregtse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 169; Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 186.

John 5:1 and 5 parallel the purpose statement of John's Gospel by setting forth both the condition for eternal life and the object of faith: "that you may *believe* that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*" (John 20:31).⁷⁷

With both titles for Jesus as the object of faith ("the Christ, the Son of God") contained in the context of 1 John 5:1–5, the next verse goes on to say, "This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth" (v. 6). This significant verse provides another biblical example of the Christological titles "the Christ" (v.1) and "the Son of God" (v. 5) being defined by Jesus' sacrificial death (v. 6). The reference to His coming by "water and blood" has been debated. While there is little disagreement that "blood" refers to the Savior's death (1:7; 2:2; 4:10),⁷⁸ to what does "water" refer? Most often "water and blood" is interpreted as Christ's water baptism and His death, which marked the beginning and end points of His public ministry.⁷⁹ However, 1 John contains no other references to water baptism. It is foreign to the epistle. But Jesus' incarnation is not. In fact, His genuine humanity is a central truth emphasized throughout the epistle (1:1–3; 2:18–22; 4:1–5).

Furthermore, John 19:34, which refers to the Crucifixion, is the only other place in the entire body of Johannine literature that employs the two terms "blood" and "water" in combination,⁸⁰ where the blood and water witness to the reality of Christ's physical death (1 John 5:7–8).⁸¹ This has led some interpreters to conclude that the combination "water and blood" in 1 John 5:6 refers strictly to Christ's death.⁸² One potential problem with this interpretation is that the word order is reversed in 1 John 5:6 ("water and blood") from the earlier statement in John 19:34 ("blood and water").

This has led others to view "water" in 1 John 5:6 as a reference to Christ's flesh, incarnation, and real humanity⁸³ so that the verse would mean that Jesus Christ not only became incarnate ("This is He who came . . . not only by water") but He also came

⁷⁷ W. Hall Harris, III, *1, 2, 3 John: Comfort and Counsel for a Church in Crisis* (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 2003), 210.

⁷⁸ Martinus C. De Boer, "Jesus the Baptizer: 1 John 5:5–8 and the Gospel of John," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107.1 (1988): 93-94.

⁷⁹ Berkouwer, *Person of Christ*, 204-5; Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 576-78, 595-96; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 118-119; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, Hermeneia, trans. R. P. O'Hara, L. C. McGaughey, and R. W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 79-80; Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 365-68; Gary W. Derickson, *1, 2 & 3 John*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014), 510; D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1991), 234-37; Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 218; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 232-33; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1984), 278-80; Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 282-83.

⁸⁰ Harris, *1, 2, 3 John*, 212.

⁸¹ Wilkinson, "The Incident of the Blood and Water in John 19.34," 149-72.

⁸² Harris, *1, 2, 3 John*, 212-13.

⁸³ Georg Richter, "Blut und Wasser aus der durchbohrten Seite Jesu (Joh 19,34b)," *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 21 (1970): 13-14.

to die (“but by water and blood”).⁸⁴ Several facts support this interpretation. First, in the previous chapter, John had just spoken of Christ first in terms of His incarnation (4:1–3) followed by His propitious death (4:10). “Water and blood” in 5:6 follows the same order. The fact that the immediate context of 5:4–5 refers to overcoming shows that John in 5:6 is returning to the teaching of the previous chapter about overcoming (4:4) the false prophets who denied the incarnation (4:1–3). Second, aside from 1 John 5:6, John’s epistles use the verb ἔρχομαι (“came”) only three other times in reference to Jesus Christ (1 John 4:2, 3 [MT]; 2 John 7); and in each case, the text says He came specifically “in the flesh,” as opposed to the false prophets who taught that He did not come in the flesh.⁸⁵ Third, “blood” in 1 John 5:6 is a metonymy for Christ’s propitious death that uses an element of Christ’s physical body (His blood) to represent an action pertaining to Him (His death).⁸⁶ Thus, “water” would be a metonymy that also represents Christ’s body and a physical act pertaining to Him (His birth), so that “water” and “blood” function as parallel metonymies. However, if “water” in verse 6 represents Christ’s baptism, the parallelism of “water” and “blood” as metonymies for aspects of Christ Himself is broken since “water” would not be a metonymy for something inherent to Christ (His flesh) but of water from the Jordan River that is completely separate from His physical body. Fourth, “born of water” in John 3:5 forms a parallel to 1 John 5:6 in that “water” is used as a metonymy for a person’s physical birth “in the flesh” (John 3:6)⁸⁷ in contrast to a

⁸⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *Exegetical Digest of 1 John* (n.p.: Robert L. Thomas, 1984), 427–28.

⁸⁵ De Boer, “Jesus the Baptizer: 1 John 5:5–8 and the Gospel of John,” 91 n. 13; Edwin Yamauchi, “The Crucifixion and Docetic Christology,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (1982): 5–7.

⁸⁶ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 609–12.

⁸⁷ Russell Fowler, “Born of Water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5),” *Expository Times* 82 (1971): 159; Margaret Pamment, “Short Note on John 3:5,” *Novum Testamentum* 25 (1983): 189–90; Sandra M. Schneiders, “Born Anew,” *Theology Today* 44 (1987): 189–96; D. G. Spriggs, “Meaning of ‘Water’ in John 3:5,” *Expository Times* 85 (1973–74): 150; Ben Witherington, “The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6–8,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 155–60.

Some scholars claim there is no evidence that “water” was understood in ancient times as a figure of speech for physical birth. On the contrary, in the appendix see Job 38:8–11, 28–30; Song of Solomon 4:12–15; and extra-biblical sources closer to the first century A.D., such as the Dead Sea Scrolls (Hymns Scroll, IQH, Hymns 3, 6, 10, 24) and 4 Ezra 8.8. In addition, Philo speaks of water as the foundational element of earth and the human body: “If earth and water were personified and could speak, they could almost be heard to say, ‘we are the essence of your bodies; nature having mixed us together, divine art has fashioned us into the figure of a man. Being made of us when you were born, you will again be dissolved into us when you come to die; for it is not the nature of any thing to be destroyed so as to become nonexistent; but the end brings it back to those elements from which its beginnings come’” (*Works of Philo*, Special Laws I, Section XLIX, 266).

One common objection to the interpretation of “water” as reference to physical birth in “out of water and Spirit” (ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος) in John 3:5 and “by water and blood” (δι’ ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος) in 1 John 5:6 is that in each verse one preposition governs two nouns of the same case, gender, and number that are separated by the conjunction καὶ (Linda Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit: John 3:5,” *Trinity Journal* 1:2 [Fall 1980]: 131, 135–36; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 191, 194; Derickson, *1, 2 & 3 John*, 510–11; Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 143; Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 43–44, 110–11; Robert V. McCabe, “The Meaning of ‘Born of Water and the Spirit’ in John 3:5,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 4 [Fall 1999]: 96–98, 104). This objection asserts that the two nouns cannot be “conceived of as separate entities” (Harris, *Prepositions and Theology*, 79) and that “conceptually, the two are aspects of a single

spiritual birth (John 3:6). Finally, 1 John 1:1 speaks of Christ as the incarnate “Word.” This passage, coupled with the water-equals-humanity statement later in 1 John 5:6, parallels the truth from John’s Prologue that “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14).⁸⁸

First John 5:5–6 declares that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and as such, He is the One who came in the flesh of His genuine humanity and died a sacrificial death. According to 1 John 5:1–6, both Jesus’ incarnation and substitutionary death are integral to Him being “the Christ” and “Son of God.”⁸⁹ John 3:14 and 12:34 confirm this conclusion. Both passages state that the Christ, the Son of Man “must” (δεῖ) be lifted up on the Cross. Therefore, Jesus’ death is essential to Him being the biblical, Johannine Christ.⁹⁰ In John’s theology, this is what the world must believe about Jesus in order to believe in Him as “the Christ, the Son of God” and be born again. The testimony of 1 John 5:5–6 concerning Christ’s true humanity and sacrificial death constitutes “the witness of God which He has testified of His Son” (1 John 5:9), which must be believed

comprehensive idea” (ibid., 44). Supposedly, this means that “born of water and Spirit” in John 3:5 must refer to a single “water-Spirit” birth, while “water and blood” must refer to Christ’s baptism and death, marking the single timespan of His public messianic ministry. But if “water and blood” refers to Christ’s public ministry, how is this three-year span any more of a “single comprehensive idea” than Christ’s 33-year earthly life which began with a “water” birth and ended with a “blood” death? Besides, other Johannine examples of the same syntactical construction allow for the interpretation of “water” and “Spirit” in John 3:5 and “water” and “blood” in 1 John 5:6 as separate, but unified, entities. See, for example, “in Spirit and in truth” in John 4:24 and “to the chief priests and Pharisees” in John 7:45, where “Spirit” and “truth” have separate and distinct meanings, as do “chief priests” and “Pharisees” (cf. John 11:47), while being unified in purpose. These examples show that the nouns “water” and “Spirit” in John 3:5 are not necessarily semantically equivalent (i.e., a supposed water-Spirit birth in 3:5), though they are conceptually unified in the sense that the same person must experience both births (first a womb/water/physical birth, then a Spirit/spiritual birth) to enter the kingdom of God.

In 1 John 5:6, the nouns ὕδατος and αἵματος are clearly not equivalent as the verse itself shows by the additional qualifying statement: “not only by water, but by water and blood.” Coming by water is not the same as coming by “water” and “blood.” “Blood” adds something to the meaning that “water” alone did not adequately express. Therefore, “water” is not the same as “blood.” Though “water” and “blood” are connected and integrally related in the humanity and death of Christ, they are not the same, and one is not merely a figurative expression for the other. Harris continues to clarify regarding the grammatical construction of John 3:5 and 1 John 5:6 that in each case “conceptually, the two [nouns] are aspects of a single comprehensive idea” (ibid.). Thus, “by water and blood” carries a real unity in that the one person of Christ came both by “water” and “blood.” Christ’s entire earthly life should be viewed as a singular “coming” just as we speak distinctly of His “second coming.” From beginning to end, from “water” birth to “blood” death, Jesus was the incarnate Christ His entire life. This is the point of 1 John 5:6.

⁸⁸ Thomas, *Exegetical Digest of 1 John*, 427.

⁸⁹ Hengel asserts that “the idea of the suffering of the pre-existent Son of God was and remained an intolerable scandal. The ‘theologically progressive’ intellectuals of the second century AD therefore fled from this intolerable paradox of the Christological confession into Gnostic Docetism. Here was one of the chief reasons for the success of the Gnostic type of thinking in the church of the second and third centuries AD.” Martin Hengel, *The Son of God—The Origin of Christology and the History of the Jewish-Hellenistic Religion*, trans. John Bowden (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1976), 88. See also, James Parker, “The Incarnational Christology of John,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3.1 (1988): 31-48; Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School*, trans. Linda Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Yamauchi, “The Crucifixion and Docetic Christology,” 14.

⁹⁰ Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 86-87. Luke makes the same point in his Gospel using the word δεῖ to state the necessity of Jesus’ death for Him to be the true Christ or Messiah (24:44, 46).

for eternal life (1 John 5:10–13). The promise of eternal life in 1 John 5:10–13 cannot be divorced from the previous testimony of God’s Spirit concerning Christ’s humanity and death in 1 John 5:6. These conclusions about 1 John 5 harmonize with the contents of “saving faith” in John’s two evangelistic invitations in 19:35 and 20:30–31.

While 19:35 expresses purpose (“*so that you may believe*”), and in this respect it partially matches the purpose statement of 20:31, the difference between these two evangelistic purpose statements sheds light on the contents of faith in Christ for eternal life.

And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. (19:35)

but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (20:31)

In 19:35, John appeals to the reader to believe, but he stops short of saying to believe “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” like he does in 20:31. Though believing in Jesus’ finished work on the Cross is essential to faith in Him as “the Christ, the Son of God,” it is not sufficient to save a person without belief in His resurrection. This also explains why 19:35 does not contain the promise of eternal life associated with believing as in 20:31 (“and that believing you may have life in His name”). Eternal life is given today only to those who believe in Jesus as the risen Christ. In John’s Gospel, “Faith centers on a Jesus who was crucified as well as resurrected.”⁹¹ Leon Morris agrees, saying, “It is important to notice that believing is connected with a knowledge of the fact of Jesus’ death. Without that death there could, of course, be no resurrection. Believing, as John understands it, certainly includes a recognition of the significance of Jesus’ rising from the dead.”⁹²

Not only does the fuller purpose statement of John 20:31 containing Jesus’ title “the Christ, the Son of God” come after the Resurrection, but it also comes *immediately after* Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance to Thomas, yet *before* His appearance to His disciples up in Galilee in chapter 21. Why would John wait twenty chapters to insert his full purpose statement at 20:30–31, immediately after 20:29 but before 21:1? This placement appears to be significant in showing that belief in both Christ’s death and resurrection are essential to possess eternal life. If John simply wanted his readers to believe in the fact of Jesus’ resurrection, why did he not just insert his evangelistic invitation to the reader with the full phrase “the Christ, the Son of God” after he personally witnessed the empty tomb (20:1–10)? Why not after Christ’s appearance to Mary Magdalene (20:11–18)? Why not insert it after Jesus appeared to the ten disciples, including John himself (20:19–23)? Why wait until just after the account of Jesus’ appearance to “Doubting Thomas” (20:24–29)? The reason for this location relates to the

⁹¹ Koester, *Word of Life*, 170.

⁹² Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 186.

necessity to believe in both Jesus' sacrificial death and bodily resurrection in order to believe in Him as the Christ.⁹³

The theme of "seeing" and "believing" runs throughout the crucifixion and resurrection section of John's Gospel.⁹⁴ Following the Crucifixion, John testifies, "And he who has *seen* has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may *believe*" (19:35). Then, following Jesus' resurrection, the younger John outruns the older Peter to the tomb only to find it empty, just as Mary Magdalene had reported to them. John testifies to this saying, "Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he *saw* and *believed*" (20:8). Though Jesus appeared after this to all ten disciples in His glorified, resurrected body, including to John himself (20:19–23), John still does not insert his purpose statement with its evangelistic appeal to the reader until after the Thomas account. Why? The reason cannot be merely that Thomas's example fit the type of reader John was seeking to persuade to believe, namely, those who had never "seen" Christ's signs. If that were the case, John could have just inserted another invitation like the one in 19:35. Instead, he inserts an invitation to believe specifically that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God" in 20:30–31. There, John is trying to lead his readers (who had not seen the crucified, risen Christ) to belief in Jesus' death and resurrection,⁹⁵ in order that they might believe that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God" and possess eternal life. In John 20:24–29, the theme of seeing and believing culminates just before the purpose statement of verses 30–31.

John 20:24–29

- 24 Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.
- 25 The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have **seen** the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I **see** in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not **believe**."

⁹³ In the purpose statement of 20:31, John uses the present tense to describe the existence of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and to condition eternal life upon belief in Him as the resurrected Savior. John writes, "that you may believe that Jesus is [ἐστίν] the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name." This passage does not make eternal life contingent upon believing that Jesus *was* the Christ only during His earthly lifetime, using the imperfect tense of εἶμί (ἦν). Rather, John uses the present tense-form ἐστίν. John is writing decades after Jesus' death, yet he makes belief in the present status of Jesus as the Christ the condition for eternal life. This indicates that belief in Jesus as the presently living, resurrected Savior is part of believing in Him as the Christ. Sullivan states, "The present tense of the verb was used by John because Jesus was and is alive as Christ and Son of God" (Roger W. Sullivan, "The Christology of the Johannine Passion and Resurrection Narratives" [Th.D. dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986], 97). This conclusion fits well with the purpose statement's immediately preceding context in 20:24–29.

⁹⁴ Brendan Byrne, "The Faith of the Beloved Disciple and the Community in John 20," in *The Johannine Writings: A Sheffield Reader*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Academic, 1995), 39, 41; Salier, *Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia*, 162; Van Belle, "Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel," 441.

⁹⁵ Bonney, *Caused to Believe*, 7 n. 13.

- 26 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, “Peace to you!”
- 27 Then He said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be **unbelieving**, but **believing**.”
- 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”
- 29 Jesus said to him, “Thomas, because you have **seen** Me, you have **believed**. Blessed are those who have not **seen** and yet have **believed**.”

And then the purpose statement of John’s Gospel follows immediately:

- 30 And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;
- 31 but these are written that you may **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that **believing** you may have life in His name.

John waited until the perfect moment in his Gospel to insert his full evangelistic invitation and purpose statement because he was seeking to illustrate the fact that he saw Jesus’ death (19:35) and resurrection (20:8) and he personally believed (20:8), but blessed are those who have not seen, such as John’s readers and everybody else in the world, yet still believe that Jesus Christ died on the Cross and rose from the dead to assure everlasting life to all who believe in Him. The Thomas account fit perfectly with the point John wanted to make about not seeing yet still believing in the crucified, risen Christ. Hence, he waited until just after 20:29 to insert his full purpose statement that includes the key descriptive title, “the Christ, the Son of God.”

If John wanted to link only the Resurrection to the meaning of “Christ” and “Son of God,” then he could have placed the full purpose statement of 20:30–31 at the end of chapter 21. After all, there was one more post-resurrection appearance described in chapter 21 that would have bolstered John’s case for Jesus’ resurrection as the Christ, the Son of God. Immediately after the purpose statement of 20:31, John 21:1 says, “After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself.” But by inserting his editorial evangelistic invitation at the very end of his Gospel in chapter 21, John would not be able to connect the testimony of Thomas to the necessity of believing in Christ without seeing Him, nor to believing in the real identity of Jesus as the *crucified*-risen Lord, which His eternal, glorified body revealed to Thomas through the nail scars memorialized in His resurrected body.

The “Believing Thomas” account also demonstrates Christ’s deity. When Thomas saw Jesus resurrected from the dead, he professed his belief in Jesus as God, exclaiming, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).⁹⁶ The two terms “Lord” and “God” in

⁹⁶ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 92; Harris, *Jesus as God*, 103, 116. Some see in the expression “My Lord and my God” that the first term “Lord” (κύριος) a designation of honor and respect for Jesus on the order of “sir,” as used previously by John (4:11, 15, 19, 49, 5:7, 6:34, 9:36, 12:21, 14:7–9) but that the second expression, “My God,” is the only one of the two expressions referring to His deity.

verse 28 should be viewed as interchangeable.⁹⁷ The term “Lord,” as used of Christ, speaks of His sovereign position as God.⁹⁸ This combined usage of “Lord” and “God” occur in the Old Testament only in Psalm 35:23, which is an undisputed reference to the God of Israel.⁹⁹ Thomas’s confession “My Lord and my God” may also have been recognized by readers as a counterclaim to the titles assumed by the Roman emperors, who were worshipped as divine with the title *dominus et deus noster* (“our Lord and God”).¹⁰⁰ Thus, according to Thomas’s testimony and the rest of John’s Gospel, Jesus has the highest authority as the sovereign, Lord God, with the power to judge (5:25–27) and to grant eternal life (5:26; 17:2).¹⁰¹ This is who Jesus is as “the Christ, the Son of God” (20:31) and this is content included in belief in His name for eternal life (1:12).

The Thomas account not only highlights Jesus’ person but also His work as the Christ and Son of God.¹⁰² When Jesus showed Himself to His ten disciples (Thomas being absent), He showed them His nail prints and spear wound—the very emblems of His death (Luke 24:39–40; John 20:19–23). He did not show these to Mary Magdalene (20:11–18) or to His disciples when He appeared to them later in Galilee (21:1–23). However, when Thomas rejoined the ten disciples (20:24–26), the first thing the Lord Jesus did was show His death wounds to Thomas. Of course, one reason He did this was because Thomas insisted upon putting his finger in the nail prints and his hand into Jesus’ side before he would believe in Jesus’ resurrection (20:25). But the fact that the Synoptic Gospels do not contain this “Doubting Thomas” episode likely indicates that John chose

Ridderbos takes this view, as he explains Thomas’s reaction: “The case was rather that the unusual address of respect, ‘my lord’ (cf. 13:13), was not sufficient. For what, at the sight of Jesus, filled Thomas with awe he had only one word left: ‘my God’” (*Gospel According to John*, 647–48). Others, such as Harris, see the use of both terms in Thomas’s confession, κύριος (“Lord”) and θεός (“God”), as affirmations of the deity of the resurrected Christ (Harris, *Jesus as God*, 105–29). While it is true that the “Doubting/Believing Thomas” pericope of verses 24–28 is connected with the promised blessing and invitation to believe in verses 29–31, we should not infer from Thomas’s confession in verse 28 that a requirement is being made to live under the mastery of Jesus Christ as the condition for eternal life. Thomas is simply describing the divine Lord Jesus as the object of faith, not stating the nature of faith as on-going submission and obedience to Christ’s rulership. Regarding this, Bing writes, “*kyrios* here denotes *Yahweh*. Thus ‘Lord’ denotes both deity and the positional rulership which is included, but in the term itself is no demand for submission” (Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, GraceLife Edition [Burlington, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992], 115).

⁹⁷ Van Belle, “Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel,” 453.

⁹⁸ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 104; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 116–17; Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 204; Daniel Roy Mitchell, “The Person of Christ in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1982), 137–40; Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 182–86; idem, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 69–70; Woo-Jin Shim, “Kyrios im Johannesevangelium: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zum Kyrios-Titel im Johannesevangelium” (Dr.Theol. dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 2003), 108.

⁹⁹ Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 503.

¹⁰⁰ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 391; Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachen (New York: George H. Doran, 1927; reprinted, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 361–63; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 503; Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 80; Shim, “Kyrios im Johannesevangelium,” 101–8.

¹⁰¹ Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 47, 52–54.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 55.

to include it because it furthered his evangelistic objective and highlighted the meaning of Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God. Even the location and placement of the book's purpose statement and evangelistic invitation in 20:30–31 immediately after the “Doubting/Believing Thomas” pericope is significant. John waited until after this dramatic post-resurrection account of Jesus' appearance to Thomas in order to vividly illustrate what it means to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God—that Jesus is not only the guarantor of eternal life, but the Lord God who was crucified for us and rose from the dead.¹⁰³ Now He lives forever with the emblems of His death memorialized in His glorious body as the eternal Lamb of God. John was showing by the particular placement of his purpose statement and evangelistic invitation at 20:30–31 that this is the One who people must believe in, from that point forward, as “the Christ, the Son of God” in order to receive eternal life.¹⁰⁴

John's usage of the fuller title, “the Christ, the Son of God,” in the context of 20:24–31 makes an extremely important theological point about the principle of inherence. The saving works of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection have become inseparably connected to the very fabric of His being and identity. Sapaugh insightfully comments,

In the final analysis, the exclusive reliance by Hodges on the Gospel of John has led him to this very position: a division of the person of Christ from the work of Christ. The logical extension of this is that the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God were not even necessary. But who Christ is and what He did are inseparable.¹⁰⁵

Even though we often speak in the theological categories of His “person” and “work,” in reality Christ's work has become part of His person so that He is forever identified by His redemptive, saving work.¹⁰⁶ The “death of Christ for sin. . . is an essential part of the gospel and is indivisible with who He is” as the “historical, crucified Christ.”¹⁰⁷ The Lord Jesus cannot stop being the slain-living Lamb. He is forever Christ-crucified.¹⁰⁸ He cannot go back to being a non-crucified Christ any more than He can go back to His preincarnate state and undo the miracle of the Incarnation.

¹⁰³ J. T. Pamplaniyil, “ΤΥΠΙΟΝ ΤΩΝ ΗΛΩΝ. . . (JN 20,25): Johannine Double Entendre of Jesus' Wounds,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 942-43.

¹⁰⁴ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 247-48.

¹⁰⁵ Gregory P. Sapaugh, “A Response to Hodges: How to Lead a Person to Christ, Parts 1 and 2,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Autumn 2001): 28.

¹⁰⁶ Angus Paddison, “Engaging Scripture: Incarnation and the Gospel of John,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60.2 (2007): 147.

¹⁰⁷ Sapaugh, “A Response to Hodges: How to Lead a Person to Christ, Parts 1 and 2,” 28.

¹⁰⁸ In Matthew 28:5, following Jesus' resurrection, the angel does not refer to Him as “Jesus” but describes Him as “Jesus who was crucified” (NKJV), or more literally, “Jesus the crucified” (Ἰησοῦν τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον). A. T. Robertson comments on the use of the perfect-tense, articular participle for “Christ-crucified,” stating that it indicates “a state of completion. This he will always be. So Paul will preach as essential to his gospel ‘and this one crucified’ (καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον, 1 Co 2:2)” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.], 1:241). In the parallel account of Mark 16:6, the angel describes Christ again using the perfect-tense, articular participle, “Jesus of

The Savior's death and resurrection, just like His incarnation, marked an ontological change in Him in a way that none of the other sign-miracles did that are recorded in John's Gospel. After Jesus turned water into wine at Cana in John 2, He Himself did not turn into wine. After He multiplied the loaves and fishes in John 6, He did not become a loaf or a fish. Only with the last and greatest of Christ's eight signs recorded in John's Gospel—the Crucifixion-Resurrection (2:19)—did the sign and its referent merge as one.¹⁰⁹ "Jesus gives and is the sign."¹¹⁰ Morris says that "in the Gospels the person and work of Jesus interpenetrate."¹¹¹ John portrays Jesus' death as being not so much *behind* Him as now *in* Him.¹¹² Therefore, Barrett can truthfully conclude that "in the death and resurrection of Jesus, sign and its meaning coincide."¹¹³

Thus, the evangelistic purpose statement of the book is placed immediately after Thomas's confession of faith, right after he has beheld the eternal emblems of Christ's death in the hands and side of the Savior's incorruptible, glorified body, and Thomas believes (20:28–31). This means that the person of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God" is forever God-incarnate, the living Lamb of God, who was slain for the sins of the world (1:29). This is the object of "saving faith" today. This is the Christ of "saving faith." Faith's object and content cannot be separated.

For this reason, Van der Watt concludes regarding this theology of Jesus' identity in John's Gospel: "God, the Father, is with Jesus and this unique divine presence of the Father will be revealed especially in and through the cross/resurrection-events

Nazareth who was crucified" (τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον), or more literally, "Jesus of Nazareth—the crucified." Two notable references in 1 Corinthians also use the perfect participle to describe Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, He is called "Christ crucified" (Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον) and in 1 Corinthians 2:2, He is referred to as "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον). Similarly, Paul writes in Galatians 3:1, "Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified." The phrase, "as crucified" (ἐσταυρωμένον), is once again the perfect-tense participle. John's testimony is consistent with Paul's. In Revelation 5:6, John describes the scene in heaven by saying that there "stood a Lamb as though it had been slain" (ἀρνίον ἐστηκὸς ὡς ἐσφαγμένον). Here, John sees Jesus Christ standing in heaven as the Lamb of God, alive, but paradoxically as one who was and remains slain. In Revelation 5:12, the Lamb is worshipped by an innumerable host, who exclaim "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain" (Ἀξιόν ἐστι τὸ ἀρνίον τὸ ἐσφαγμένον). Here, the perfect tense is used again for the word "slay" (σφάζω) so that Christ is literally the one who was and is slain, yet He is alive forevermore. Even in this future scene of the Lamb in the last book of the Bible, Jesus Christ is not merely portrayed as the victorious, reigning Lamb of eschatology, but also as the sacrificial Lamb of John's Gospel, for Revelation also describes the blood of this Lamb having been shed for those who are saved out of the Tribulation (7:14; 12:11). Robert L. Reymond, *The Lamb of God: The Bible's Unfolding Revelation of Sacrifice* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006), 104.

¹⁰⁹ Robert R. Moore, "Soteriology and Structure: A Study of the Relation between the Soteriology and Present Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1982), 188-89.

¹¹⁰ Wead, "Literary Devices in John's Gospel," 29.

¹¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 86.

¹¹² Thomas Knöppler, *Die theologia cruce des Johannesevangeliums. Das Verständnis des Todes Jesu im Rahmen der johanneischen Inkarnations—und Erhöhungschristologie*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 69 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1994), 266; Herbert Kohler, *Kreuz und Menschwerdung im Johannesevangelium: Ein exegetisch-hermeneutischer Versuch zur johanneischen Kreuzestheologie*, Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 72 (Zürich: Theologischer, 1987), 166.

¹¹³ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 78.

(16:27 ff.; 17:7, 25. See also 14:18–21). Part of who Jesus is (ἐγώ εἰμι – 8:28) is that He stands in this unique relationship with God, the Father—and this may be seen in the cross/resurrection-events. This defines his divine identity.”¹¹⁴

Having considered the immediate context of John’s purpose statement, which defines what it means for Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of God,” the previous conclusions must agree with, and be confirmed by, the rest of John’s Gospel.

Deity of Jesus the Christ

Though the word “deity” rarely appears in English Bible translations in reference to Jesus Christ,¹¹⁵ the truth of His equality with God the Father in essence and being is still a thoroughly Johannine and biblical concept. Jesus’ deity is readily apparent in the references to Him as “God” (θεός) in at least four Johannine passages (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; 1 John 5:20) and elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8–9; 2 Peter 1:1).¹¹⁶

Sometimes those who hold to the promise-only view of the saving message claim that the concept of Jesus’ deity is too complex and subject to misunderstanding and heterodoxy for it to be a required element of faith for eternal life.¹¹⁷ However, if this argument were valid, it would also mean that deity itself is too complex, undefinable, incomprehensible, and subject to misunderstanding for belief even in “God” to be required for eternal salvation. Do the lost even need to believe in God to be born again? As absurd as this question may initially appear, it is appropriate to ask in light of repeated assertions by members of the Grace Evangelical Society that the *sine qua non* of the saving message consists of only three elements: (1) believing, (2) in Jesus, (3) for everlasting life.¹¹⁸ If the lost must believe in one who is identified merely as “Jesus,” without knowing or understanding His deity, then this “saving message” omits any requirement to believe even in God.

Bob Wilkin gives the impression that belief in God is not absolutely required by God Himself for regeneration. He writes:

¹¹⁴ Van der Watt, “The Cross/Resurrection-Events in the Gospel of John with Special Emphasis on the Confession of Thomas (20:28),” 133.

¹¹⁵ E.g., Colossians 2:9 (ESV, NASB, NIV).

¹¹⁶ Bowman and Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ*, 135-56; Harris, *Jesus as God*, 51-253.

¹¹⁷ Robert N. Wilkin, “Essential Truths About Our Savior,” *Grace in Focus* 23 (November-December 2008): 1; H. Graham Wilson, Jr., “The Importance of the Incarnation to Resurrection,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 31, 2009; Ken Yates, “Complexities in the Doctrine of the Deity of Christ,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 4, 2008.

¹¹⁸ See Zane C. Hodges, “Assurance: Of the Essence of Saving Faith,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 10 (Spring 1997): 7; idem, “We Believe in: Assurance of Salvation,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 3 (Autumn 1990): 14-15; Jeremy D. Myers, “The Gospel is More Than ‘Faith Alone in Christ Alone,’” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (Autumn 2006): 52; John Niemelä, “The Message of Life in the Gospel of John,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (July-September 2001): 18; Robert N. Wilkin, “Justification by Faith Alone is an Essential Part of the Gospel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 18 (Autumn 2005): 12; idem, *Secure and Sure* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2005), 74-75.

Let's consider one specific proposition: He who believes in Jesus has everlasting life (John 6:47). While one either is convinced that is true or he is not, there are beliefs that are logical prerequisites to believing this. And the more of those prerequisite beliefs one is convinced are true, the softer his unbelief. That is, some unbelievers are closer to faith in Jesus than others due to what they currently believe.

This relates to evangelism because belief in Jesus for eternal life is logically linked to other beliefs. While a person might be illogical and believe in Jesus without some of these prerequisite beliefs, that is not the norm. . . . What are some of these logically prerequisite beliefs? Here are some beliefs that typically precede faith in Jesus for eternal life:

- God exists.
- Life after death.
- Eternal condemnation for some and eternal joy for others.
- God is righteous; I'm not.
- God took on bodily form.
- Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin.
- Jesus lived a sinless life.
- Jesus willingly went to the cross.
- Jesus' death on the cross removed the sin barrier so that all people are savable.
- Jesus rose bodily from the dead. He didn't stay in the grave and He didn't just rise *spiritually*.
- People can't be righteous before God by their works.¹¹⁹

Wilkin's choice of words is both astounding and confusing. Is a "logical prerequisite" something that will merely *help* a person believe the saving proposition of John 6:47 but which is not truly "required" to be believed for regeneration? In other words, is a "logical prerequisite" less of a requirement than a "prerequisite"? If so, then a "prerequisite" is not really something that is required. Despite using the word "prerequisite," Wilkin implies that belief in God's existence and righteousness are not actually required by God to receive eternal life since he admits that "a person might be illogical and believe in Jesus *without some of these* prerequisite beliefs," though "that is *not the norm*." By saying that some of these normally held beliefs "*typically* precede faith in Jesus for eternal life," Wilkin is clearly implying that it is possible for an abnormal, atypical person to believe in Jesus for eternal life without even believing in God's existence or that He is righteous.

By contrast, belief in God is required for eternal life according to John's Gospel, especially in key evangelistic verses such as 5:24, where Jesus says, "He who hears My Word and *believes on Him who sent Me* has everlasting life."¹²⁰ Likewise, even

¹¹⁹ Robert N. Wilkin, "Should We Rethink the Idea of Degrees of Faith?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (Autumn 2006): 20-21.

¹²⁰ Hodges rightly concludes that belief merely in the existence of God does not result in eternal life, in contrast to belief specifically in Jesus as "the Christ" (Zane C. Hodges, "The Spirit of

3:16 requires belief in God: “For *God* so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John’s Gospel begins by assuming, rather than proving, the existence of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). This parallels the Old Testament: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Just as Genesis does not attempt to prove the existence of God neither does John. Perhaps the reason for this is because God has already made Himself known within every man (Rom. 1:19–20), even if this knowledge is suppressed in unrighteousness and unbelief (Rom. 1:18).

John 17:3 is often discounted by promise-only proponents as a text requiring belief in God for eternal life: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Wilkin, for example, interprets “know” (γινώσκωσιν) here as expressing the believer’s fellowship with God: “However, it seems more likely that Jesus is saying that eternal life *makes it possible* for the disciples (and all believers) to know God *in their experience*. Whether they do depends on whether they abide in Jesus.”¹²¹ “Know” is certainly used this way elsewhere by John (14:7, 9). However, the immediate context of 17:3 does not favor the meaning of *experiencing* eternal life but of *receiving* eternal life. In the previous verse, Christ speaks of the bestowal of eternal life: “You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should *give eternal life* to as many as You have given Him” (17:2). Verse 3 simply elaborates on the reception of “eternal life” mentioned in verse 2. Knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ (v. 3) is necessary for God to “give eternal life” (v. 2). Later in the context, Jesus also uses both “known” and “kept” as descriptions of those who are believers in distinction to the unbelieving world (17:6–8). This parallels John’s earlier pattern of knowing versus not knowing God the Father and keeping versus not keeping Christ’s word (8:51–55) as the characteristic distinction between those who are believers versus unbelievers, not between abiding disciples versus nonabiding disciples. Unbelievers are those who have *never* received, known, or believed (17:8) Christ’s word.

Just as John’s Gospel requires belief in God for salvation, there are several reasons for concluding that it also requires belief in Jesus’ deity for eternal life.¹²² First, Old Testament Scripture makes it plain that the object of faith cannot be man (Ps. 146:3; Jer. 17:5), yet John’s Gospel repeatedly instructs readers to place their faith in the person of Jesus. Faith in one who is supposedly less than God is tantamount to idolatry and invites the curse of God rather than eternal life.¹²³ Therefore, by deduction, the Jesus in whom John’s Gospel commands belief must be God Himself.

Antichrist: Decoupling Jesus from the Christ,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 20 [Autumn 2007]: 42-43). Based on John 5:24, Hodges concludes that “*God apart from Jesus* is never the Object of the faith that brings eternal life” (ibid., 43). However, consistent with his three-part *sine qua non* of saving faith (the name “Jesus,” believe, and eternal life), Hodges also never says that belief in Jesus for eternal life necessarily includes belief in God. While admitting from John 5:24 and 12:48–50 that belief in Jesus’ word amounts *de facto* to belief in God’s word or God Himself (ibid., 42-43), Hodges never states that the lost must *consciously know* and *believe* in God’s existence in order to believe in Jesus for eternal life.

¹²¹ Wilkin, “John,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 458.

¹²² Wilson, “Is Belief in Christ’s Deity Required for Eternal Life in John’s Gospel?” 58-86.

¹²³ David R. Potter, “The Substance and Scope of Johannine Christology” (Ph.D. dissertation, Bob Jones University, 1978), 110.

Second, Jesus states in John 8:24 that belief in Him as the “I Am” is necessary to be forgiven and not die in one’s sins: “If you do not believe that I am [ἐγὼ εἰμι], you will die in your sins.” Throughout John’s Gospel, the phrase “I am” (ἐγὼ εἰμι), whether absolute or with a predicate, is used to indicate that Jesus is the one, true God of Israel.¹²⁴ By referring to Himself as ἐγὼ εἰμι, Jesus is echoing the Old Testament Hebrew self-descriptive title for Yahweh, “I am He” (אני ה'; LXX, ἐγὼ εἰμι), found in Exodus 3:14, Deuteronomy 32:39, and Isaiah 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 45:18–19, 21–22; 46:4–5; 48:12; 51:12; 52:6.¹²⁵ In the same dialogue that Jesus has with the Jews in John 8:24, He concludes by saying in verse 58, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am [ἐγὼ εἰμι].” Earlier in the dialogue, the Jews did not understand Jesus’ claim of deity as the “I am” in verse 24, as evidenced by their question in verse 25, “Who are You?”¹²⁶ However, after Jesus declares Himself to be “I am” again in verse 58, the Jews clearly understand this as a claim to deity and consequently in verse 59 they seek to stone Him for blasphemy.

Some may raise the objection that requiring belief in Jesus as the “I am” to be saved from dying in one’s sins (8:24) is not equivalent to receiving eternal life and being saved from eternal condemnation.¹²⁷ However, for God to view a person in his or her sins means that person is not in Christ positionally—the only place where there is judicial

¹²⁴ Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 122-25.

¹²⁵ David M. Ball, ‘I Am’ in *John’s Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 124* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 185-94; Richard Bauckham, “Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John,” in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 148-66; Berkouwer, *Person of Christ*, 168-69; Delbert Burkett, *The Son of the Man in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 142-60; J. C. Coetzee, “Jesus’ Revelation in the *Ego Eimi* Sayings in the Jn 8 and 9,” in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament*, ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 170-77; Gary Lee Gramling, “The Metaphorical *Egō Eimi* Sayings in the Fourth Gospel: Their Origin and Significance” (Ph.D. dissertation, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993), 32-38; James Hamilton, “The Influence of Isaiah on the Gospel of John,” *Perichoresis* 5.2 (2007): 155-56; Philip B. Harner, *The “I Am” of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Johannine Usage and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 6-26; John F. Hart, “John,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 1632; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 268; Mitchell, “The Person of Christ in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” 158-59; Catrin H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of Anî Hû in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1999), 286.

¹²⁶ E. L. Miller, “The Christology of John 8.25,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 36 (1980): 257-65.

¹²⁷ One leading Free Grace author who holds the view that people do not need to believe in Jesus’ deity, death, or resurrection for eternal life writes, “What does it mean to die in your sins (John 8:24) or in your sin, singular (John 8:21)? The Bible is not clear on this question. I think it means that unbelievers die with sinful desires. It might also mean that unbelievers will be judged for their sins at the Great White Throne Judgment” (Robert N. Wilkin, *Secure and Sure* [Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2005], 92). Wilkin’s interpretation that “die in your sins” means to “die with sinful desires” does not adequately account for the gravity of Christ issuing a twofold warning to His unbelieving audience in John 8:21 and 24. On the other hand, Leon Morris explains that Christ’s warning about dying in their sin/s “stands for the ultimate horror. It is the very opposite of that life on which John puts so much stress. We see this also in passages such as that in which Jesus says those to whom he gives eternal life ‘will not perish for ever’ (10:28), where the implication is that those who do not receive this gift ‘will perish for ever’” (Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 208-9).

forgiveness (13:10).¹²⁸ According to biblical teaching, including John's teaching in Revelation, those who end up in the Lake of Fire are those who have not been judicially forgiven and are still viewed by God as dead in their sins (1 Cor. 15:17; Eph. 2:1; Rev. 21:8; 22:15). According to Johannine theology, believers are forgiven in the sight of God because they are in Christ, who is the believer's propitiation (1 John 2:2; 4:10).¹²⁹ If being in Christ is the only sphere of forgiveness, and the lost are outside of Christ, then the lost remain dead in their trespasses and sins even after death.¹³⁰ God has been propitiated by the work of His Son, and all sin has been paid for and therefore everyone is forgivable. But only those who trust in Christ alone instead of their own works are placed by the Spirit of God into union with Christ (John 17:21; 1 Cor. 12:12–13), where there is propitiation for sin, forgiveness toward the sinner, and reconciliation toward God: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them" (2 Cor. 5:19). Therefore, believers are safe in Christ, while the wrath of God presently abides on unbelievers, who are outside of Christ (John 3:36).

A third evidence that John's Gospel requires belief in Christ's deity for eternal life is that John makes Jesus' deity the first truth readers encounter, saying in 1:1 that "the Word was God." John wanted his readers to understand not only that Jesus is God but also that there is a distinction within the Godhead between Jesus and the Father. John did not want his readers to believe in two gods (ditheism), but to understand that within the one being who is God there is a distinction of persons.¹³¹ For this reason, John 1:1 distinguishes God the Father and the Word ("the Word was with God"), while also affirming the deity of the Word ("and the Word was God"), thereby revealing both Jesus' deity and separate personhood in relation to God the Father.

Similarly, the most popular evangelistic verse in the Bible, John 3:16, distinguishes God the Father from God the Son, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." If a person must simply believe John 3:16 to have eternal life as the promise-only position maintains,¹³² and John 3:16 sets forth a distinction between God the Father and the Son, then logically a lost person must know and believe in these two persons of the triune Godhead.¹³³ But this does not require understanding and believing in all three members of the Trinity since John 3:16 says nothing about the Holy Spirit. In

¹²⁸ Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., "Translating Believe in the Gospel of John," *Bible Translator* 30 (April 1979): 206.

¹²⁹ Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 102.

¹³⁰ Tom Stegall, "Are Disobedient Christians Under God's Wrath? Part II: Position in Christ," in *Should Christians Fear Outer Darkness?* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015), 268-95.

¹³¹ D. A. Carson, *Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 65; Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 99 n. 13.

¹³² John Niemelä, "The Cross in John's Gospel," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 30 (Spring 2003): 27; Wilkin, *Secure and Sure*, 74-75.

¹³³ This distinction is also necessary for the lost sinner to believe in Christ's substitutionary, satisfactory death for sin. For, if the lost must believe that Christ's death paid the penalty for sin, then who was Christ paying by His sacrifice? Whose justice was being satisfied? Why did God have to give His Son?

fact, no verse in the Gospel of John (or the entire Bible) requires belief specifically in the Holy Spirit for eternal life. The Holy Spirit is never specified as the object of faith.¹³⁴

A fourth evidence that John's Gospel requires belief in Jesus' deity for eternal life comes from the immediate context of the purpose statement in 20:30–31. In the verses before the evangelistic invitation to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" for eternal life, "the Christ, the Son of God" has just been identified as deity by Thomas's confession: "My Lord and my God" (20:28).¹³⁵ Clearly, John is connecting belief in Jesus as the Christ with belief in Him as the Lord God.

In addition to John's use of the term "Christ," the purpose statement of 20:30–31 also uses the title "Son of God," where it stands in epexegetical relationship to "the Christ," effectively making the two titles interchangeable.¹³⁶ If John intentionally defines "the Christ" to mean God, then the title "Son of God" cannot mean something less than God. Free Grace proponent Zane Hodges seems to distinguish "Christ" and "Son of God," making only the former necessary to believe for eternal life.

John tells us in his first epistle that "whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (5:1)! A full theology of His person is not necessary to salvation. If we believe that Jesus is the One who guarantees our eternal destiny, we have believed all we absolutely have to believe in order to be saved. Years ago, as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I washed dishes in the dining hall to pay for my meals. Often after I had finished this chore I hung around and talked theology with another student who swept up the kitchen every night. One night this student made a statement to me that I have never forgotten. He said something like this, "I know that I trusted Christ for salvation before I realized that Jesus was the Son of God." I was surprised because I had never heard anyone say this before. But I did not quarrel with that statement then, nor would I quarrel with it now. It is the name of Jesus that brings salvation whenever anyone believes in that name as his or her sure hope of eternal well-being. We are not saved by believing a series of theological propositions, however true and important they may be. We are saved by believing in Jesus. That's why the man on the deserted island can get saved with only the barest minimum of information. When he believes John 6:47 he is believing in Jesus as the Christ.¹³⁷

The Sonship of Jesus Christ should not be diminished in our understanding, as though it meant something less than "Christ," for John used "Son of God" as an interchangeable expression with "Christ" in the purpose statement and throughout his Gospel. But what does it mean that Jesus is God's "Son"?

¹³⁴ There is only one instance in Scripture where "spirit" (πνεῦμα; πῆρ) is the direct object of believing and it is not even a reference to the Holy Spirit: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

¹³⁵ Shim, "Kyrios im Johannesevangelium," 115; Thompson, *God of the Gospel of John*, 8, 223-24.

¹³⁶ Bonney, *Caused to Believe*, 27 n. 63.

¹³⁷ Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," 5.

John's Gospel employs the term "Son" (υἱός) and the fuller phrase "Son of God" 29 times in reference to Jesus being the unique Son of the Father and thus deity.¹³⁸ John also refers to God as "Father" over 100 times. The meaning is clear in the fourth Gospel: Jesus is not merely "a son" of God; He is "the Son" of God. The fourth Gospel emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus as God's Son by explicitly adding the term μονογενής (1:14, 18, 3:16) to describe Jesus as God's "only" Son.¹³⁹ The "adjective μονογενής emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus in his capacity as God's agent of salvation."¹⁴⁰ Consistent with the uniqueness of Christ's Sonship, John's Gospel also never speaks of men as "sons [υἱοὶ] of God,"¹⁴¹ only of Jesus as the "Son of God."¹⁴²

Some might conclude that Jesus' title "Son of God" in 20:31 expresses a level of divinity less than that of God the Father. After all, some may reason, Scripture calls the angels "sons of God" (בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים – Gen. 6:4; Job 1:6; 2:1)¹⁴³ and Adam a son of God (Luke 3:38) since God directly created each without angelic or human parents. "Son" in the Old Testament and extrabiblical Jewish messianic literature may simply refer to one who functions on behalf of God as His chosen agent but who is not actually God. However, the use of "Son of God" by John surpasses this meaning, expressing instead Christ's unique metaphysical relationship of oneness with God the Father, as one writer explains:

In no other New Testament document is the title "Son of God" as important as in John. This expression first occurs as a confession by Nathaniel in John 1:49. The metaphoric use of "Son of God" in the Old Testament may refer to: the nation (Exod. 4:22-23; Deut. 1:31; 32:6; Jer. 31:9, 20; Hos. 11:1), the Israelite King (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7). The "Son of God" is one who resembles God. The Hebrew language does not have as many adjectives as do some languages. It compensates for the lack by a variety of idiomatic structures including "Son of God." Thus "a wicked man" might be called "a son of wickedness" (Ps. 89:22); people in trouble are "sons of affliction" (Prov. 31:5); valorous men are "sons of valour" (Deut. 3:18). Those deserving execution are "sons of death" (1 Sam. 26:16); Judas Iscariot can be called the "son of perdition" (Jn. 17:12). The peacemakers are called "sons of God" (Mt. 5:9). In later Jewish literature, the "righteous" are spoken of as God's sons, e.g., *Jubilees* 1:24-25; *Wisdom of Solomon* 2:18; *Ecclesiasticus* 4:10. But the use of "Son of

¹³⁸ Hengel, *Son of God*, 63; Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 89.

¹³⁹ Brady, "A Theological Critique of the Divine Man Christology as an Explanation for the Title 'Son of God,'" 130-31; George W. Zeller and Renald E. Showers, *The Eternal Sonship of Christ* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1993), 55.

¹⁴⁰ Barnabas Lindars, "The Son of Man in the Johannine Christology," in *Essays on John*, ed. C. M. Tuckett (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 50.

¹⁴¹ But once as "sons [υἱοὶ] of Light" (12:36) and three times for believers as "children" (τέκνα or παιδία) of God (1:12; 11:52; 21:5). Carson, *Jesus the Son of God*, 33.

¹⁴² Potter, "The Substance and Scope of Johannine Christology," 100-101.

¹⁴³ Herbert W. Bateman, IV, "Anticipations of the One Called Son," in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 303.

God” to designate the Messiah ultimately depends on passages such as 1 Sam. 26:17, 21, 25; 2 Sam. 7:14 and Ps. 2:7 (linking sonship and Davidic royalty). The link is retained in Jewish literature (e.g., 1 *Enoch* 105:2; 4 *Ezra* 7:28–29; 13:52; 14:9). In 4Q Florilegium (which is pre-Christian) “Son of God” is another description of the Branch of David (4QF1 1:11–12; 1QSa 2:11ff.). Of the eleven occurrences of “Son of God” in John, in three passages, the title parallels Messiah or Christ (1:49; 11:27; 20:31), in one, it is connected with the resurrection, a decidedly Jewish notion (5:25), and two relate to the Old Testament Jewish tradition (10:36; 19:7). Even the remaining five are comprehensible within a Jewish framework. The readers of John’s Gospel will learn quickly that the categories “Son” and “Son of God” are used to depict the unique relation of oneness and intimacy between Jesus and the Father. Jesus’ sonship to God, however functionally described, involves a metaphysical, not merely a Messianic, relationship (cf. Jn. 5:16–30; 10:33).¹⁴⁴

Though extra-biblical Jewish literature leading up to the advent of Christ, and even the Old Testament in places, used “son” for human figures, the use of the titles “Son,” “Son of Man,” and “Son of God” for Jesus in the four Gospels also reflects the Old Testament’s fuller, additional revelation concerning the deity of the promised Son and Messiah (e.g., Ps. 2:7, 12; Prov. 30:4; Isa. 7:14; 9:6–7; Dan. 7:13–14).¹⁴⁵ In Johannine usage, sonship terminology refers to more than Jesus functioning merely as a human agent of God or even as a demigod with superhuman characteristics that still fall short of those possessed by the one, true God. John uses “Son” to denote Jesus’ deity and equality of nature or essence with God the Father in a manner consistent with Old Testament teaching about the promised Messiah,¹⁴⁶ which surpasses the sonship language of extrabiblical Jewish, and even pagan, Gentile literature.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Saeed Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ: A Theological Inquiry into the Elusive Language of the Fourth Gospel*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 120 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 170 n. 44.

¹⁴⁵ Psalm 2:7 and 12 refer to the deity of the Son since the Son is the object of trust and worship, which are solely the prerogatives of God. For evidence that “begotten” in Psalm 2:7 is not a temporal reference to the Son’s origination or generation, but to the declaration of Him as God’s Son, see S. Herbert Bess, “The Term ‘Son of God’ in Light of Old Testament Idiom,” *Grace Journal* 6.2 (Spring 1965): 20–23, and Zeller and Showers, *Eternal Sonship of Christ*, 56–64. The reference to “one like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven” in Daniel 7:13 likewise refers to Jesus Christ and His deity since “Clouds in Scripture are frequently characteristic of revelation of deity (Ex. 13:21–22; 19:9, 16; 1 Kings 8:10–11; Isa. 19:1; Jer. 4:13; Ezek. 10:4; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26)” (John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* [Chicago: Moody, 1971], 167). See also, Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 206–10; Renald E. Showers, *The Most High God: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 1982), 80–81; John C. Whitcomb, *Daniel*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 98–99; Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 192–93; E. J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 154–56.

¹⁴⁶ Bess, “The Term ‘Son of God’ in Light of Old Testament Idiom,” 18–19.

¹⁴⁷ James Robert Brady, “A Theological Critique of the Divine Man Christology as an Explanation for the Title ‘Son of God’” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1987), 135–51.

Though background studies in Jewish and secular literature are helpful for understanding first-century cultural beliefs and expectations about the coming Messiah, it would be “a mistake”¹⁴⁸ to define Jesus as the “Son,” “Son of Man,” and “Son of God” in the Gospels from these extra-biblical sources. Just as the first-century Sadducean view of the resurrection does not dictate the meaning of “resurrection” in the New Testament, so first-century Judaism’s mixed views of the Messiah and Son of God should not be read into the intended meaning of Sonship terminology for Jesus in the Gospels. Bauckham writes, “The concern of early Christology was not to conform Jesus to some pre-existing model of an intermediary figure subordinate to God. The concern of early Christology, from its root in the exegesis of Psalm 110:1 and related texts, was to understand the identification of Jesus with God. Early Jewish monotheism provided little precedent for such a step, but it was so defined and so structured as to be open for such a development.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, the titles “Son,” “Son of Man,” and “Son of God” should be understood according to the usage and meaning assigned to them by John in his Gospel.

In John 5, Jesus refers to Himself repeatedly as “the Son” of the “Father” (vv. 18–27), clearly equating Himself with God (v. 18).¹⁵⁰ Regarding 5:24, the immediate context explains what Jesus meant by His statement that “he who hears My words and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life.” Here eternal life is conditioned on believing in God the Father as the object of faith when one hears Christ’s words. In 5:24, the One who “sent” Jesus was the Father. The phrase “My words” in the surrounding context of 5:19–23 and 5:25–30 refers to Christ’s repeated explanations of His own equality with the Father.¹⁵¹ The main point of this Father-Son section in 5:17–30 is to illuminate the truth of verse 18, where Jesus “said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.”¹⁵² Therefore, the context of 5:24 establishes that the marvelous promise of possessing “everlasting life” and not coming “into judgment” but passing “from death into life” is only fulfilled for those who have believed the words of Jesus *about His deity and equality with the Father*. A person cannot pass from death into life without believing that Jesus, the “Son of God” (5:17–23, 25) and “Son of Man” (5:27),¹⁵³ is “equal with God” (5:18).

¹⁴⁸ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Gospel of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 175.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁵⁰ Lightner, *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, 39-42; Margaret Pamment, “The Son of Man in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (April 1985): 59-60; Zeller and Showers, *Eternal Sonship of Christ*, 52.

¹⁵¹ Zeller and Showers, *Eternal Sonship of Christ*, 53.

¹⁵² Richard Bauckham, “Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John,” in *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 243; Carson, *Jesus the Son of God*, 62-71.

¹⁵³ Regarding the significance of the anarthrous expression “Son of Man” in 5:27, some scholars see this as a definite title (i.e., “the Son of Man”) and an intentional reference to “son of man” in Daniel 7:13 (Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 178; Lindars, “The Son of Man in the Johannine Christology,” 41-42; Stephen S. Smalley, “The Johannine Son of Man Sayings,” *New Testament Studies* 15 [1968-69]: 292-93). However, Carson sees the emphasis of the anarthrous construction not as a reference to Daniel 7 but as emphasizing Jesus’ humanity: “This is the only place in the Gospels where Son of Man is anarthrous; almost certainly this has the effect of reducing the titular force of the expression. In other words, it is not the well-known figure of Daniel 7 who is most likely in view, but the sentence means something like this: The Father has given the Son authority to judge because he is a human being” (Carson, *Jesus the Son of God*, 70). See also, Barnabas Lindars, “The Son of Man in the Theology of John,” in

A comparison of two other “Son” passages in John’s Gospel, which have related contexts, shows that John clearly meant to convey deity by applying the term “Son” to Jesus. John 10:33 says that the Jews answered Jesus’ statement about Him and the Father being One, saying, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.” Later, at Jesus’ trial before Pilate, John explains the charges of the Jews against Jesus. In John 19:7, the Jews seek to justify the sentence of crucifixion for Jesus by telling Pilate, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.” In the minds of the Jews, and in John’s own choice of words as the inspired narrator, for Jesus to be considered “the Son of God” (19:7) meant He was also “God” (10:33).

Not only does the title “Son of God” denote Jesus’ deity in John’s Gospel,¹⁵⁴ so does the title “Son of Man.”¹⁵⁵ John uses this expression in several passages for Jesus’ deity. First, in 1:51, Jesus refers to Himself as “the Son of Man” in response to Nathanael’s confession of him as “the Son of God” and “the King of Israel” (1:49). Jesus’ use of “Son of Man” is exegetical and shows that He considers the titles to be interchangeable.

Second, in 5:27, Jesus refers to Himself as the One who will execute the final judgment of mankind, saying that the Father “has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.” Psalm 96:12–13 says that the “LORD” (יהוה) will come to judge the world. If John says Jesus will fulfill this divine prerogative, then John is equating “the Son of Man” with God.¹⁵⁶

Third, in 6:27, Jesus says He will fulfill another divine prerogative, namely, giving eternal life. Since the “LORD” (יהוה) alone possesses this ability (Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6),¹⁵⁷ “the Son of Man” must be God.

Fourth, Jesus tells the generation of Jews who rejected Him, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am” (8:28). Once again, Jesus in John’s Gospel equates “Son of Man” with deity by identifying “the Son of Man” with “I am” (ἐγώ εἰμι), which, in the context, is an unmistakable expression of deity (8:24, 58).

A fifth use of “Son of Man” in John’s Gospel to convey deity occurs in the Critical Text of John 9:35, where Jesus says to the man whom He healed of blindness, “Do you believe in the Son of Man [ἀνθρώπου]?” The man responds by believing in Jesus and worshiping Him (vv. 36, 38). Since these responses are fitting only toward God and Jesus does not correct the man, it is evident that John uses “the Son” in his Gospel (whether in the title “Son of God” or “Son of Man”) to denote the deity of Jesus.¹⁵⁸

Essays on John, ed. C. M. Tuckett (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 163; Pamment, “The Son of Man in the Fourth Gospel,” 60-61.

¹⁵⁴ Lawrence O. Richards, “Son,” in *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 573-74.

¹⁵⁵ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 162; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 92-97; Hengel, *Son of God*, 66.

¹⁵⁶ Bowman and Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 224; Thompson, *God of the Gospel of John*, 175, 230.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Bowman and Komoszewski, 228; *ibid.*, Thompson, 124-25.

¹⁵⁸ “Son of man” was also used in late Second Temple Judaism for a transcendent heavenly figure (2 *Baruch* 39–40; 4 *Ezra* 13; *Sibylline Oracles* 5:414-27), though there is debate whether this

To make Jesus' titles "Son of Man" and "Son of God" in John's Gospel mean something less than Him being fully God is to impose a different definition on these key theological titles than John himself intended. The title "Son" must be interpreted according to John's own definition and use. The revelation of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God" (6:69 [MT]; 11:27; 20:31) means that He is no one less than God.¹⁵⁹ John's obvious evangelistic objective is to lead his readers to believe in Jesus as God-incarnate.¹⁶⁰

Humanity & Death of Jesus the Christ

"Son of Man" was Jesus' most commonly used description of Himself in both the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John (1:51; 3:13–14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35 [CT]; 12:23, 34 [twice]; 13:31). The Lord Jesus used this preferred self-descriptive title to identify Himself as a member of the human race and to reflect the redemptive mission¹⁶¹ and purpose of His incarnation.¹⁶² The titles "Christ," "Son of God," and "Son of Man" all set forth the Lord Jesus as being fully God, yet genuinely human and not a mere mirage of a human being.¹⁶³ This is particularly true in John's letters (1 John 1:1–3; 4:2–3; 5:6; 2 John 7) and, of course, in his Gospel (1:14), which is primarily evangelistic in

expression reflected expectations of a Davidic Messiah or not (Bauckham, "Jewish Messianism according to the Gospel of John," 233, 237). Daniel 7:13-14 predicted that "One like a Son of Man" would come to establish an everlasting kingdom. Though this passage certainly describes Jesus at His Second Coming (Gordon H. Johnston, "Messianic Trajectories in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel," in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston [Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012], 184-89), and it was interpreted as messianic by Jews in Jesus' day, it is unclear whether this passage formed the basis for Jesus' use of "Son of Man." It is likely that Jesus used "Son of Man" not only to express His deity and humanity (J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, rev. ed. [Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013], 65-66), but also to encompass His sacrificial death, as in 3:13-14; 6:53; 8:28; 12:23-24, 34 (Richards, "Son," 573).

¹⁵⁹ The Critical Text of John 6:69 reads "the Holy One of God" (ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ) instead of the Majority Text's "the Christ, the Son of God." The Majority Text reading is not found in any Greek manuscripts prior to the 8th–9th centuries. The title "Holy One of God" occurs only here in John's Gospel. Of the use of this title in this passage, Domeris concludes that it affirms both the deity and humanity of Christ: "Peter thus responds in verse 69 as the spokesman of the community, and of all true believers, in affirming his faith in the divine/human nature of Jesus. . . . He affirms the Johannine belief in the scandal of the incarnation—the paradox of a human agent who performs divine deeds and makes divine claims. . . . the title underlines Jesus' role as the bringer of eternal life to the believers, represented by Peter, who are able to glimpse through the real flesh and blood of Jesus, the paradox of the incarnation. . . . As such the title 'the Holy One of God' ranks above messiah and prophet, and alongside the definitive titles of Son of God and Son of Man as used by John" (William R. Domeris, "The Confession of Peter According to John 6:69," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44.1 [1993]: 166-67. For similar conclusions, see H. L. N. Joubert, "The Holy One of God" (John 6:69)," *Neotestamentica* 2 [1968]: 66-67). Domeris and Joubert's conclusions are in keeping with the use of the title "Holy One" elsewhere in Scripture as it applies directly to God (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 145:17; Rev. 15:4; 16:5) and to Christ in His resurrection (Acts 13:35 cf. Ps. 16:10).

¹⁶⁰ Harris, *Jesus as God*, 124-25.

¹⁶¹ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 95-97; Lindars, "The Son of Man in the Johannine Christology," 38.

¹⁶² Berkouwer, *Work of Christ*, 151.

¹⁶³ Potter, "The Substance and Scope of Johannine Christology," 94-96; Adele Reinhartz, "John 20:30–31 and the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel" (Ph.D. thesis, McMaster University, 1983), 216-34.

purpose. While Christ's deity is referred to in the phrase "Son of God," as well as in popular evangelistic passages like 3:16 and 20:31, it is often overlooked that other equally evangelistic passages in John use the phrase "Son of Man" (3:13–15; 6:53). These verses require belief "in Him" as the object of faith; and in their immediate contexts, they define "Him" as the "Son of Man"—the One who is flesh and thus fully human, but also fully God.

Even the most popular evangelistic verse in the Bible, John 3:16, describes at least the incarnation of Christ when it says, "For God so [οὕτως γὰρ] loved the world that [ὥστε] He gave [ἔδωκεν] His only begotten Son." In what sense was the Son *given* for the world? Since the immediate context presents both Christ's incarnation (3:13–14) and substitutionary death (3:14–15),¹⁶⁴ the intended manner¹⁶⁵ in which God "gave" (δίδωμι) His Son must refer to both His humanity and sacrificial death.¹⁶⁶ He was given for humanity by dying for humanity.¹⁶⁷ This is the meaning of δίδωμι elsewhere in the New Testament in reference to Christ's death (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:19; John 6:51; Gal. 1:4; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14). This meaning is also implied in the following verse (John 3:17): "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." The Father "sent His Son into the world" at the Incarnation so that through Him the world "might be saved" by His substitutionary death.

The word "gave" (ἔδωκεν) in verse 16 is presented as a past-tense event, with δίδωμι being in the aorist tense and indicative mood. From the historical standpoint of Jesus and Nicodemus in the original context, Christ's incarnation had already occurred, but His sacrificial death was still future. Was Nicodemus therefore required to believe *at this point* that the Son of God would die for him in order to receive eternal life? The

¹⁶⁴ Some say even the deity of Christ is implied by His omnipresence in verse 13 (David Alan Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism: A Concise Guide* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 49-55; idem, "The Text of John 3:13," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 [Spring 1985]: 49-66; R. Larry Overstreet, "John 3:13 and the Omnipresence of Jesus Christ," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 2 [Fall 2004]: 135-53) as well as His resurrection (G. Michael Cocoris, *The Salvation Controversy* [Santa Monica, CA: Insights from the Word, 2008], 22).

¹⁶⁵ Verse 16 is syntactically connected to the immediately preceding verses by the use of οὕτως γὰρ . . . ὥστε so that the emphasis of verse 16 is not so much upon the *degree* to which God loved the world (i.e., "God loved the world so much that...") but rather on the *manner* in which He loved the world (i.e., by giving His Son in sacrificial death as in 3:14). This interpretation accords with the theology of John expressed elsewhere (1 John 4:8–11) and it fits the grammatical patterns of οὕτως γὰρ and ὥστε elsewhere in the New Testament (Robert H. Gundry and Russell W. Howell, "The Sense and Syntax of John 3:14–17 with Special Reference to the Use of οὕτως . . . ὥστε in John 3:16," *Novum Testamentum* 41 [1999]: 24-39). The presence of the postpositive conjunction γὰρ to start verse 16 indicates that John is not introducing a separate, distinctive thought in verse 16 but is strengthening the point of the previous verses (Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. [Dallas: SIL International, 2000], 91; Michael D. Makidon, "The Strengthening Constraint of *Gar* in 1 and 2 Timothy," [Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003]). Therefore, John 3:16 should not be wrested from its context and treated in isolation when interpreting it or building a doctrine upon it about the contents of "saving faith."

¹⁶⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 3:394-95.

¹⁶⁷ Roland Bergmeier, "ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ Joh 19:30," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 79 (1988): 289; Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, 70, 300.

passage does not say this. But does this mean that John's post-cross readers are also not expected to believe that the Father "gave" His Son to die for their sins? No. With the prior revelation from John's Gospel in hand that the incarnate Word would die sacrificially (1:29, 36; 2:19)—something Nicodemus did not have—the reader of John's Gospel from a post-cross perspective would most naturally interpret this sacrificial giving of God's Son to have already occurred historically.¹⁶⁸ From this perspective, John 3:16 certainly requires belief in the fact that God gave His Son to be sacrificially lifted up¹⁶⁹ as the context states. Consequently, John 3:16 presents the Incarnation and the Cross as essential elements of belief in Jesus for eternal life.

This conclusion is further supported by a comparison of John 3 with Isaiah 53. Lindars explains:

[John 3:14–15] has been interpreted in the light of the passion prophecy of Isa. 52:13–53:12. The verb παραδοθῆναι is an obvious link, because this verb occurs three times in the Septuagint, including the crucial verse 53:12. There is no need to doubt that John was aware of the link. His variation of the verb can thus be explained as the deliberate choice of a different verb from the same prophecy, i.e. 52:13, in order to bring together the concepts of death by crucifixion and exaltation, as suggested by the symbolism of the serpent (cf. John 12:33; 18:32). The reason for this is a central position of John's theology. The cross to John has revelatory significance, because it demonstrates the unity of the Father and the Son. Acceptance of the fact that Jesus must die is therefore indispensable to saving faith. It can now be seen that this verse (and the subsequent reflections on it in John 3:16–21) plays a vital part in the argument of the discourse. If Jesus is the agent of the birth from above, then belief in him as one who originates from God is a matter of the first importance. But belief in him will be defective, if it does not include acceptance of the necessity of his death on the cross.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ This point is bolstered by the fact that the words of verse 16 are John's and therefore narrated with a retrospective viewpoint. While opinions are divided about this, the majority of scholars view verses 16–21 as John's words. Not surprisingly, "promise-only" proponents Hodges and Wilkin believe that John 3:16 contains Jesus' words rather than John's (Zane C. Hodges, "Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 4: Coming to the Light—John 3:20–21," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 [October 1978]: 319 n. 8; Wilkin, "John," in *Grace New Testament Commentary*, 1:376).

¹⁶⁹ Ward William Andersen, "Signs of Jesus' Messiahship: A Biblical-Theological Comparison of Old Testament Messianic Revelation with the Miracles in John 1–12," (Ph.D. dissertation, Bob Jones University, 1985), 183–87, 220; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah—from Gethsamene to Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:1071; Delbert Burkett, *The Son of the Man in the Gospel of John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 127–28; Hamilton, "The Influence of Isaiah on the Gospel of John," 152–53; H. Hollis, "The Root of the Johannine Pun—'ΥΨΩΘΗΝΑΙ," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 475–78; Francis J. Moloney, *The Johannine Son of Man* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1976), 63, 179–80; Victor C. Pfitzner, "The Coronation of the King: The Passion in the Gospel of John," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 4 (1977): 13.

¹⁷⁰ Barnabas Lindars, "Discourse and Tradition: The Use of the Sayings of Jesus in the Discourses of the Fourth Gospel," in *The Johannine Writings: A Sheffield Reader*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Academic, 1995), 17–18. See also, Rick R. Marrs, "John 3:14–15: The Raised

This interpretation of 3:13–16 harmonizes with Jesus’ use of the verb δίδωμι twice in 6:51, where the purpose for giving His flesh (i.e., His real humanity)¹⁷¹ is also stated to be for the benefit of the “world.” Then, two verses later in 6:53, Christ issues the evangelistic challenge: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.” The reference to eating is “a metaphor for appropriating the benefits of Jesus’ death by faith” (6:35),¹⁷² because He is the sacrificial, saving Passover Lamb (Ex. 12:11–13),¹⁷³ which is an interpretation consistent with the extensive Passover motif found throughout John’s Gospel.¹⁷⁴ The metaphorical command of 6:53 resulted in many of the Jews stumbling spiritually (v. 61, σκανδαλίζει; cf. Rom. 9:32–33; 1 Peter 2:6–8).

This raises a critical question concerning the content of saving faith. If stumblingblocks are to be avoided, as Scripture consistently teaches elsewhere (Matt. 18:7; John 16:1; Rom. 14:13; 16:17; 1 Cor. 8:13; 1 John 2:10; Rev. 2:14), then why does Jesus intentionally use the metaphorical command in 6:53 that results in so many stumbling at His words? From the standpoint of promise-only proponents who deny that belief in Christ’s saving death is necessary for eternal life, Jesus should not have hindered His audience from believing the bare promise of life by complicating matters as He commanded His audience to “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood” (6:53). The only way to explain Jesus’ insistence on preaching a known stumblingblock to His audience of unregenerated Jews is if it was a *necessary stumblingblock*. There is an inherent offense in the message of the cross (1 Cor. 1:17–23; Gal. 5:11) for those who seek to be saved by trusting in their own works instead of Christ’s (Rom. 9:28–33; 1 Peter 2:8).¹⁷⁵ John 6:53 is not merely a more figurative way of expressing the crossless gospel’s three-part *sine qua non* of believing in Jesus for everlasting life. True, Jesus’ message in John 6 is a promise of eternal life, but it is also a promise of eternal life that is inseparable from belief in His incarnation and substitutionary death. The fact that Christ expressed this truth in terms that created such a scandal and offense to His original audience (6:60–68) indicates that His incarnation and substitutionary death are a *necessary* potential stumblingblock if one is to receive eternal life, and therefore they are a *necessary* part of the contents of saving faith. This is the conclusion of most interpreters regarding this verse.¹⁷⁶ Ryrie appropriately concludes concerning Christ as the object of faith in John’s Gospel:

Serpent in the Wilderness: The Johannine Use of an Old Testament Account,” in *Johannine Studies: Essays in Honor of Frank Pack*, ed. James E. Priest (Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University Press, 1989), 141-47.

¹⁷¹ Thompson, *Incarnate Word*, 44-49.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 47; See also, Gibson, “Eating Is Believing? On Midrash and the Mixing of Metaphors in John 6,” 5-15.

¹⁷³ Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 268-69; Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 596; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:690.

¹⁷⁴ Paul M. Hoskins, “Deliverance from Death by the True Passover Lamb: A Significant Aspect of the Fulfillment of the Passover in the Gospel of John,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (June 2009): 285-99.

¹⁷⁵ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ: A Biblical Response to the Crossless Gospel Regarding the Contents of Saving Faith* (Milwaukee: Grace Gospel Press, 2009), 301-4.

¹⁷⁶ Alford, *Greek Testament*, 1:766-67; Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 298; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 93-95; Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John

The very first statement in the Gospel concerning the new birth makes it dependent upon faith (John 1:12). The verse also mentions the object of faith, Christ. Thus it is throughout the Gospel—the Son as the bearer of salvation must be the object of faith (3:15–16, 18, 36; 4:29, 39, 39; 7:38; 8:24; 20:29, 31; 1 John 3:23; 5:1, 12). Faith involves the most thorough kind of appropriation of the person and work of Christ as the basis for the believer’s confident persuasion for salvation. The figure of eating His flesh and drinking His blood attests to that thoroughness (6:53–56). Faith in His person involves belief in His deity (John 3:13; 8:24; 9:22; 12:42; 1 John 2:23; 4:15), and faith in His work involves belief in the efficacy of His death to effect deliverance from sin (John 1:29; 3:14–17; 13:19). In John’s thought faith that saves is joined directly to the person and work of Jesus Christ.¹⁷⁷

The Lord’s incarnation is inseparably connected to His substitutionary sacrifice as the Savior of the world,¹⁷⁸ so that in the Johannine sense “the Christ, the Son of God” is One who is both truly human and the sacrificial substitute for the sins of the world.¹⁷⁹ John’s Gospel demonstrates that inherent to the definition of Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God is the fact of His substitutionary and satisfactory death for all sin.

F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 297; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 158; Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 295; Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:192-93; Robert L. Deffinbaugh, *That You May Believe: A Study of the Gospel of John* (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 1998), 263 n. 12; Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 339; Marcus Dods, “The Gospel of St. John,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Reprinted 1990), 757; Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of John*, rev. ed. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1965), 132-35; Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 600; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 373; Everett F. Harrison, “John,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 1087; H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Gospel of John* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1942), 264, 268-69; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:688-90; Koester, *Word of Life*, 84, 88; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 215; J. Carl Laney, *John* in Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 130; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 232; Barnabas Lindars, “The Son of Man in the Theology of John,” in *Essays on John*, ed. C. M. Tuckett (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 161; J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 113; Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love*, 136, 138; G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Revell, Reprinted 1992), 117-19; Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 378-79; idem, *Cross in the New Testament*, 163-64; Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 215; Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, 238-40; Robertson, *Divinity of Christ in the Gospel of John*, 74; Ray Summers, *Behold the Lamb: An Exposition of the Theological Themes in the Gospel of John* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 101; George Allen Turner and Julius R. Mantey, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 165; B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 106-7.

¹⁷⁷ Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 340.

¹⁷⁸ Bergmeier, “Die Bedeutung der Synoptiker für das johanneische Zeugnisthema,” 475; Bruce, *Gospel of John*, 376-77; Deffinbaugh, *That You Might Believe*, 751; John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 286.

¹⁷⁹ Thomas, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel, Part I,” 259.

But contrary to this conclusion stand the claims of liberal higher criticism with its denials not only of the inspiration, authority, and veracity of the Bible as God's Word, but also its insidious denial of redemption truth, including a denial of the universal, redemptive, propitious character of Christ's death in John's Gospel.¹⁸⁰ For example, Goodspeed denies the sacrificial atonement while seeking to uphold Jesus' promise of eternal life, claiming that "in the Gospel of John the function of Jesus is not so much sacrificial as to bring life and impart it. . . . Jesus' death has little of its old sacrificial meaning."¹⁸¹ Likewise, Forestell claims, "The cross of Christ in [the Gospel of 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."¹⁸² Similarly, Bultmann issued this infamous denial: "Whatever may be the origin of these passages, the thought of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin has no place in John, and if it should turn out that he took it over from the tradition of the Church, it would still be a foreign element in his work."¹⁸³ Bultmann is forced to admit that Jesus' death has some atoning significance in Johannine theology in explicit passages, such as John 1:29 and 1 John 1:7, but he conveniently dismisses such passages as being later accretions to the text of John's Gospel and epistle from Christian "tradition."¹⁸⁴

Bultmann and Käsemann argue that Christ's death in the narrative and theology of John's Gospel is subordinate to the theme of His incarnation. For Bultmann, the central point of John's Gospel is that Jesus is the unique Revealer of God to mankind.¹⁸⁵ This was the purpose for the Word becoming incarnate (1:14). The death of Jesus is perceived as having no preeminent importance for salvation but is merely a departure back to God that further demonstrates the fourth Gospel's central motif of revelation.¹⁸⁶ According to this form of crossless theology, the release of mankind from

¹⁸⁰ John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 485-501; Reimund Bieringer, "Das Lamm Gottes, das die Sünde der Welt hinwegnimmt (Joh 1,29): Eine kontextorientierte und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung auf dem Hintergrund der Passatradition als Deutung des Todes Jesu im Johannesevangelium," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 199-232; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951-1955), 2:54, esp. 49-59; Martinus C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 233-34, 276-80; J. T. Forestell, *The Word of the Cross: Salvation as Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 2, 60-61, 91, 149-66; Ernst Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1-6*, Hermania, trans. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 153; idem, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21*, Hermania, trans. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 75, 105, 194-95; Arland Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits: Christology and Redemption in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 91-164; William Loader, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Structure and Issues* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 101; Helge Kjaer Nielsen, "John's Understanding of the Death of Jesus," in *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 232-54; Dietrich Rusam, "Das 'Lamm Gottes' (Joh 1,29.36) und die Deutung des Todes im Johannesevangelium," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 49 (2005): 60-80.

¹⁸¹ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 299.

¹⁸² Forestell, *Word of the Cross*, 191.

¹⁸³ Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:54.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:54-55.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:40.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:34-35, 39, 52-53.

the bondage of sin is merely through Jesus' word, not an atoning, sacrificial death.¹⁸⁷ Likewise, for Käsemann, John's main theme is the unity of the Father and Son displayed in the incarnation and glory that such a relationship manifests.¹⁸⁸ Though Jesus' death is rightly interpreted by Käsemann as a departure to the Father that manifests God's glory by "divine self-giving love,"¹⁸⁹ such love is ultimately void and meaningless, for Jesus' death on the cross is not considered to be an act of divine judgment against human sin that achieves atonement for sin or the redemption of mankind, or reconciliation on behalf of mankind. To all of this, we must agree with the opinion of Scroggie, who wrote:

It is difficult to understand how anyone can say—as has been said—that the death of Christ has no place in the Fourth Gospel corresponding to that which it has elsewhere in the New Testament. So far is this from being so, that at least eighteen passages make definite pronouncements on the subject. They are as follows: i. 29, 36; iii. 14, 15; iii. 16, 17; vi. 31–33; vi. 48–58; viii. 28; x. 11, 15; x. 17, 18; xi. 48–52; xii. 23, 24; xii. 27; xii. 32, 33; xii. 36; xii. 38; xiii. 31; xv. 13; xvii. 19; xix. 36; xiii–xix. These passages present the profoundest teaching in the New Testament. Only one or two are expressions of men, and all the others are the words of Christ.¹⁹⁰

Contrary to the denials of liberal higher criticism, in the Gospel of John the evidence for the substitutionary, sacrificial, and satisfactory character of Jesus' death as the Christ, the Son of God is abundant and overwhelming. This truth begins in John 1 and continues all the way to the Cross in John 19 and even beyond to the Lord's post-resurrection appearance to the disciples in John 20. The reader is first introduced to the approaching death of Christ through the implicit reference to His own people rejecting Him (1:11) and the disciples beholding His glory (1:14), which ironically and paradoxically turns out to be His lifting up on the cross of shame,¹⁹¹ as well as His resurrection.¹⁹² Thus, Grigsby writes, "There is a close correlation between δόξα ὑψώω

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 2:52-56.

¹⁸⁸ Ernst Käsemann, "The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue to John's Gospel," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 6; idem, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (London: SCM, 1968), 24.

¹⁸⁹ Käsemann, "The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue to John's Gospel," 10.

¹⁹⁰ Scroggie, *Guide to the Gospels*, 598.

¹⁹¹ Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel*, 52, 128; G. B. Caird, "The Glory of God in the Fourth Gospel: An Exercise in Biblical Semantics," *New Testament Studies* 15 (1968–1969): 269; Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 88; Petrus Maritz, "The Glorious and Horrific Death of Jesus in John 17: Repetition and Variation of Imagery Related to John's Portrayal of the Crucifixion," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 693; Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 167; Jerome H. Neyrey, "'Despising the Shame of the Cross': Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative," *Semeia* 68 (1994): 113-37; Pfitzner, "The Coronation of the King," 10; Thompson, *Incarinate Word*, 94-97.

¹⁹² Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 58-61; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 351. Pfitzner explains John's lack of an ascension account. He sees significance in the Resurrection, in addition to the Cross, being Christ's glorification, but not the Ascension: "In John's understanding, Jesus' second stage of glorification is Easter, the conclusion of the return to the Father. Thus, John needs no

themes and the Johannine treatment of φῶς in the Fourth Gospel. Accordingly, it does not seem to be speculative to discuss the Johannine cross as a ‘sign.’ Nor is it too far afield to describe the Johannine cross as the place where the ‘Light of the World’ is lifted up or displayed.”¹⁹³ The usage of “glory” (δόξα) throughout John’s Gospel confirms this conclusion. The “glory” word group occurs 35 times in John. Of these, 14 occurrences are related to Christ’s passion.¹⁹⁴ The combination of the references to “glory” and “dwelt among us” in verse 14 most likely alludes to the Old Testament tabernacle and its sacrificial system, which prefigured the Cross.¹⁹⁵ Regarding John 1:14, Hengel appropriately concludes:

The confession “and we beheld his glory” (1:14) from the Prologue points ultimately to the Dying One. The single—ideal—eye-witness of the Gospel stands at the foot of the cross of Jesus (19:35). The crucified Son of God and his way into suffering—the severest challenge for ancient polemic—is thus a basic theme in the Fourth Gospel, and not only in the Passion story (cf. 2:4, 17, 21; 3:14; 5:17f.; 6:51–58; 7:19f. 33, 39; 8:59; 10:11, 15; 11:50ff.; 12:24, 31f.).¹⁹⁶

In addition to this connection between Jesus’ flesh or humanity and His death as “the Christ” introduced in the Prologue, there is also a clear connection later in John 1 between Jesus being the sacrificial “Lamb of God” and “the Son of God.” In 1:29, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming and the first title he uses to identify Jesus is that of the sacrificial lamb, saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away [αἴρων] the sin of the world,” which fulfills the picture of Christ in Isaiah 53.¹⁹⁷ There the Suffering Servant as the paschal lamb “takes away” (αἴρων) humanity’s sin by first taking it upon Himself to be judged in our place (Isa. 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24), thereby removing the guilt of sin.¹⁹⁸ John then concludes his identification of Jesus by saying in 1:34, “And I have seen and

ascension narrative. For the raising up of Jesus on the cross is the beginning of his ascent to heavenly *doxa*” (“The Coronation of the King,” 21).

¹⁹³ Bruce H. Grigsby, “The Cross as an Expiatory Sacrifice in the Fourth Gospel,” *The Johannine Writings: A Sheffield Reader*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Academic, 1995), 70 n. 6.

¹⁹⁴ David L. Claxton, “The Distinctive Emphases in the Johannine Passion Narrative as a Key to the Interpretation of John’s Gospel” (Th.D. dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986), 126.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 182-89. See also, Jörg Frey, “. . . dass sie meine Herrlichkeit schauen’ (Joh 17.24): Zu Hintergrund, Sinn und Funktion der johanneischen Rede von der δόξα Jesu,” *New Testament Studies* 54 (2008): 375-97.

¹⁹⁶ Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 372.

¹⁹⁷ Eugene W. Pond, “The Theological Dependencies of John’s Gospel on Isaiah” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985), 39. Even “promise-only” proponent Bob Wilkin acknowledges regarding John 1:29, “John now identifies Jesus in sacrificial terms. The expression *the Lamb of God* (i.e., of God the Father) means Jesus is the ultimate Passover lamb (cf. 19:36), the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.” Wilkin, “John,” in *Grace New Testament Commentary*, 1:365.

¹⁹⁸ C. K. Barrett, “The Lamb of God,” *New Testament Studies* 1 (1955): 210; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 272-73; Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 209-11; Christopher W. Skinner, “Another Look at The Lamb of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (January 2004): 102-3.

testified that this is the Son of God.” The record of the fourth Gospel is clear that to be “the Son of God” means being the sacrificial, substitutionary Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world.¹⁹⁹

When Jesus cried out in 19:30, “It is finished” (τετέλεσται), He was not stating the obvious fact that His earthly life had come to an end. Instead, “It is finished” is a most significant theological declaration, as Cook explains:

In John 19:30, the sixth of the Lord’s seven utterances from the cross is recorded. It is a cry of triumph rather than a whimper of despair and defeat. His statement may be translated, “It stands finished,” or “It has come to a state of completion.” The use of the third person singular perfect passive form τετέλεσται is most remarkable. There seems to be a purposeful ambiguity on our Lord’s part in this statement. The subject is left unidentified as to particulars, although there is no question that the general sense is clear. He is not merely saying, “My life is over”; rather, He is affirming the completion of the work of redemption.²⁰⁰

In the context of John’s Gospel and against the background of Koine usage, the expression τετέλεσται in 19:30 means that God the Father’s redemptive plan for His Son to pay for all human sin was complete, having satisfied the justice and wrath of God.²⁰¹ This is supported by the combination of several factors.

First, the Gospel of John has a consummate design that focuses the reader on Christ’s approaching death as the climactic “work” He accomplishes. As Moody states, “the theme of Jesus’ death, far from being a mere vestige of tradition, is seen to pervade the Gospel [of John].”²⁰² An “hour” theme runs throughout the book (2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23–24, 27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1), moving Christ’s life inexorably toward the Cross and the predicted “hour” of His death.²⁰³ This “hour” and the “work” given by the Father to the Son coincide and are only said to be “finished” at the Crucifixion (4:34; 5:36; 17:4;

¹⁹⁹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:189-91; P. J. Du Plessis, “The Lamb of God in the Fourth Gospel,” in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament*, ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 138-42; E. P. Groenewald, “The Christological Meaning of John 20:31,” *Neotestamentica* 2 (1968): 136-37; Skinner, “Another Look at The Lamb of God,” 97-99, 103-4; Van Belle, “Christology and Soteriology in the Fourth Gospel,” 444.

²⁰⁰ W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 83.

²⁰¹ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:80; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 213. By contrast, Bob Wilkin claims, “The popular notion that *tetelestai* here also means ‘It [redemption] has been paid in full’ is not supported by the lexical evidence. While it is true that Jesus’ death paid for the sins of all people (cf. 1:29), that is not the precise meaning of what Jesus said in v 30.” Then what does “It is finished” mean according to Wilkin? He simply says, “Clearly, John is emphasizing that Jesus successfully completed all that He had been sent to do.” See Wilkin, “John,” in *Grace New Testament Commentary*, 1:471 (brackets original).

²⁰² D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 119.

²⁰³ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 42; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 478; Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 158; Pfitzner, “Coronation of the King,” 10; Potter, “The Substance and Scope of Johannine Christology,” 123.

19:30). But what did Christ's death finish or accomplish, if not His substitutionary, satisfactory death for sin?

Second, the substitutionary nature of Christ's death in John's Gospel may be seen from his consistent use of the preposition ὑπέρ in passages describing the Lord's death (6:51; 10:11, 15; 11:51–52; 15:13; 17:19; 18:14).²⁰⁴ By using this preposition in conjunction with the Cross, John deliberately underscores the fact that Christ died for, or on behalf of, others.²⁰⁵

Third, John's Gospel contains a "Passover" theme that runs like a crimson thread through the book. The Passover theme runs concurrently with the "hour," "work," and "glory" themes throughout the book to portray Christ's death as substitutionary, sacrificial, and redemptive (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7).²⁰⁶ Not only is the Passover (πάσχα) mentioned explicitly ten times in John's Gospel (2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55 [twice]; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14),²⁰⁷ more so than the other Gospels,²⁰⁸ but there are unmistakable parallels to the Passover, such as: (a) Jesus' death coinciding with the time of the Passover lambs being killed (19:14, 31; cf. 18:28; Ex. 12:6),²⁰⁹ (b) the hyssop and basin

²⁰⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 193-97; Jörg Frey, "Die 'theologia crucifixi' des Johannes-evangeliums," in *Kreuzestheologie im Neuen Testament*, ed. A. Dettwiler and J. Zumstein, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 151 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002), 214-15; Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 37.

²⁰⁵ John uses the preposition (ὑπὲρ) only once in all his writings (John 1:16). Thus, his preferred, characteristic term is ὑπέρ rather than ὑπὲρ.

²⁰⁶ Borchert, "The Passover and the Narrative Cycles in John," 303-16; Paul M. Hoskins, "Deliverance from Death by the True Passover Lamb: A Significant Aspect of the Fulfillment of the Passover in the Gospel of John," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (June 2009): 285-99; Stephen S. Kim, "The Christological and Eschatological Significance of Jesus' Passover Signs in John 6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164 (July 2007): 310; Dorothy A. Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John: A Narrative and Symbolic Reading," *Pacifica* 24 (2011): 13-28; Robert R. Moore, "Soteriology and Structure: A Study of the Relation between the Soteriology and Present Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1982), 195; P. J. Du Plessis, "The Lamb of God in the Fourth Gospel," in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament*, ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 136-48; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 45-46, 113; Stanley E. Porter, "Can Traditional Exegesis Enlighten Literary Analysis of the Fourth Gospel? An Examination of the Old Testament Fulfillment Motif and the Passover Theme," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 396-428; idem, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 198-224; J. H. Roberts, "The Lamb of God," in *The Christ of John: Essays on the Christology of the Fourth Gospel* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Pro Rege, 1971); 41-56; Skinner, "Another Look at The Lamb of God," 97-99; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 35; Summers, *Behold the Lamb*, 40-42. Summers even contends that the Passover motif is the dominant theme of John's Gospel (ibid., 9-19, 163-66).

²⁰⁷ The Passover is also referred to indirectly ten times by the term "feast" (ἑορτή) in 2:23; 4:45 (twice); 5:1; 6:4; 11:56; 12:12, 20; 13:1, 29.

²⁰⁸ Luke contains seven references, while Matthew and Mark contain only four each (Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 272; Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 206).

²⁰⁹ Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 1:34, 2:847, 1077; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 275-76; Joachim Jeremias, "πάσχα," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:899; Pfitzner, "Coronation of the King," 14; Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 220-21. Strangely, in their attempt to deny a primarily evangelistic purpose for John's Gospel, Free Grace commentators Radmacher and Derickson deny that there is a Passover theme running throughout the book. They claim the Passover is used only as a chronological marker like other historical

being present at the cross (19:29; Ex. 12:22; Lev. 14:14; Num. 19:6);²¹⁰ (c) *seeing* the blood from Christ's wounded side (19:35; Ex. 12:13); (d) Christ's bones not being broken (19:31–37; Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12; Ps. 34:20).²¹¹

Fourth, the sacrificial “lamb” (ἀμνός, 1:29) provided “atonement” (כִּפּוּר) for sin (Ex. 29:38–46 cf. Lev. 1:4, 10–13; Num. 5:8).²¹² In the Septuagint, the word ἀμνός is used for the “peace offering” (Lev. 23:19) and the “trespass offering” or “guilt offering” (Lev. 14:12–13, 21, 24–25) to provide “atonement” (כִּפּוּר). Isaiah 53:6–7 (LXX) also uses

Jewish feasts in John, having no theological significance (*Disciplemaker*, 308). Yet, at the same time, they conclude that Passover lambs were being slain in Israel coincidentally during the exact hours Christ suffered on the cross—on the 14th of Nisan from 3–5 p.m. (*ibid.*, 18). This is despite the fact that John's Gospel is the only one of the four canonical Gospels to explicitly refer to Christ as “the Lamb of God” in 1:29 (Stephen S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984], 24).

²¹⁰ Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 222–23. John is the only Gospel to mention the hyssop, making the Passover theme more pronounced than the Synoptic Gospels (Pfitzner, “Coronation of the King,” 14).

²¹¹ Borchert, “The Passover and the Narrative Cycles in John,” 314; Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, 72; Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 204.

²¹² David R. Carnegie, “Kerygma in the Fourth Gospel,” *Vox Evangelica* 7 (1971): 59–60; D. A. Carson, “Adumbrations of Atonement Theology in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57 (September 2014): 513–22; W. D. Chamberlain, “The Need of Man: The Atonement in the Fourth Gospel,” *Interpretation* 10.2 (1956): 157–66; Christian Dietzfelbinger, “Sühnetod im Johannesevangelium?” in *Evangelium—Schriftauslegung—Kirche*, ed. J. Adna, S. J. Hafemann, and O. Hofius (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 65–76; Frey, “Die ‘*theologia crucifixi*’ des Johannesevangeliums,” 197, 201, 214–15; *idem*, “Probleme der Deutung des Todes Jesu in der neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft,” in *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament*, ed. Jörg Frey and Jens Schröter, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 181 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005), 40; Charles A. Gieschen, “The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John: Atonement for Sin?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008): 243–61; Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 270–80; Jintae Kim, “The Concept of Atonement in the Gospel of John,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 6 (2009): 9–27; Thomas Knöppler, *Die theologia cruce des Johannesevangeliums: Das Verständnis des Todes Jesu im Rahmen der johanneischen Inkarnations- und Erhöhungschristologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1994), 87–101; *idem*, *Sühne im Neuen Testament: Studien zum urchristlichen Verständnis der Heilsbedeutung des Todes Jesu*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten and Neuen Testament 88 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001), 233–34, 245–52; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in John's Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 203–4; Nicholas P. Lunn, “Jesus, the Ark, and the Day of Atonement: Intertextual Echoes in John 19:38–20:18,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (December 2009): 735–38; Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 339, 369–70; Rainer Metzner, *Das Verständnis der Sünde im Johannesevangelium*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 122 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 128–43; J. Ramsey Michaels, “Atonement in John's Gospel and Epistles,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 107–12; Leon Morris, “The Atonement in John's Gospel,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3.1 (1988): 49–64; Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 211 n. 57; Willis H. Salier, “The Obedient Son: The ‘Faithfulness’ of Christ in the Fourth Gospel,” in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 230–33; Rainer Schwindt, “‘Seht das Lamm Gottes, das hinwegnimmt die Sünde der Welt’ (Joh 1,29): Zur Frage einer Sühnetheologie im Johannesevangelium,” *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 119 (2010): 193–216; Skinner, “Another Look at ‘The Lamb of God,’” 97–99; Max Turner, “Atonement and the Death of Jesus in John—Some Questions to Bultmann and Forestell,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990): 99–122.

ἀμνός to depict substitutionary atonement for sin, even though כִּפָּר does not occur in these verses.²¹³

Fifth, the root verb of τετέλεσται (τελέω) for Christ's victory cry "It is finished" (19:30) is used elsewhere in the New Testament for a literal monetary payment (Matt. 17:24; Rom. 13:6).²¹⁴ The word τετέλεσται was often written on receipts in daily commerce during the Koine Period to show proof of full payment or completed redemption.²¹⁵ The choice to use the verb τετέλεσται in John 19:28a and 30 rather than the similar word τελειώω from verse 28b is significant. Τελέω carries the possible lexical meaning of paying a price whereas τελειώω does not.²¹⁶ While some deny the redemptive meaning of τετέλεσται in verse 30,²¹⁷ this may be another instance in John's Gospel of a word intentionally having two possible meanings, both of which are valid.²¹⁸ In this case, τετέλεσται would mean that the work planned by the Father has been fulfilled or accomplished specifically because redemption's price for sin has been paid in full.²¹⁹

Sixth, the same perfect, passive, indicative form of τελέω in John 19:28a and 30 (τετέλεσται) is used elsewhere in the New Testament for the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan revealed in the Old Testament (Luke 18:31; 22:37; cf. Luke 24:44–47; Acts 13:27–30; Rom. 1:1–2; 1 Cor. 15:3–4).

Seventh, τελέω also occurs in John's writings and throughout the New Testament in passages dealing with the completion of God's wrath. Τελέω is used for Christ's baptism of suffering and taking the cup of God's righteous wrath for mankind's sin (Luke 12:50). John's Gospel refers specifically to this same cup. When Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane, He tells Peter to cease resisting, saying, "Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" (John 18:11). This cup contained Christ's suffering for mankind's sin as the Father's just wrath was poured out on mankind's substitute and

²¹³ The classic passage on the suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is fulfilled in Jesus Christ's humiliation and glory in the Gospel of John. The emphases running throughout John parallel Isaiah's suffering Servant and Lamb passage. See William Ward Andersen, "Signs of Jesus' Messiahship: A Biblical-Theological Comparison of Old Testament Messianic Revelation with the Miracles in John 1–12," (Ph.D. dissertation, Bob Jones University, 1985), 183–87, 220; James Hamilton, "The Influence of Isaiah on the Gospel of John," *Perichoresis* 5.2 (2007): 143 n. 10, 149; Maarten J. J. Menken, "'The Lamb of God' (John 1,29) in the Light of 1 John 3,4–7," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, *Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium* 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 581–90; Dominic C. Obielosi, *Servant of God in John* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008), 167–284; Wead, "The Literary Devices in John's Gospel," 37–39. Bauckham sees both themes of the suffering Servant of Isaiah and the Passover theme running concurrently throughout John (*Gospel of Glory*, 154–59).

²¹⁴ Cook, *Theology of John*, 83.

²¹⁵ Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, *New Classical Fragments and Other Greek and Latin Papyri*, Greek Papyri, Series II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 78–84; J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 630. See also, Bergmeier, "ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ in Joh 19:30," 282–90; Alan M. Stibbs, *The Finished Work of Christ: τετέλεσται* (London: Tyndale, 1954).

²¹⁶ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 998; H. G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry S. Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1772.

²¹⁷ Wilkin, "John," in *Grace New Testament Commentary*, 1:471.

²¹⁸ Beasley-Murray, *John*, 352–53; Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 815 n. 73.

²¹⁹ Bernard, *Gospel According to St. John*, 638; Cook, *Theology of John*, 83; Godet, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, 948; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 2:1148–49.

Savior (Matt. 20:22–23; 26:39; Mark 10:38–39; 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 19:28c).²²⁰ In Revelation 15:1, John uses τελέω with reference to the completion of God’s temporal wrath on the unbelieving world in the future Great Tribulation: “Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous: seven angels having the seven last plagues, for in them the wrath of God is complete [ἔτελέσθη].” Revelation 16:19 and 18:6 say that this wrath is from God’s “cup,” which will be poured out as repayment on a Christ-rejecting world.

Eighth, John 3:36 speaks specifically of the “wrath” (ὀργή) of God abiding on those who refuse to believe “in the Son” versus the eternal life possessed by those who believe “in the Son.” This contrast shows that propitiation of God’s wrath is integrally connected to Jesus being the Son of God. John 3:36 shows that as early in John’s narrative as chapter 3, the reader is faced with the implicit question, what did the Son do to resolve man’s wrath problem?²²¹ John shows his readers the answer in the climactic moment of the Gospel when the Son completes the work given Him by the Father, namely, dying as a satisfactory, substitutionary sacrifice (19:30).²²²

For all these reasons, the Lord Jesus’ sacrificial, substitutionary, and propitiatory death for sin must be viewed as inseparable from His Person²²³ and as definitive of Him being the Christ, the Son of God in John’s Gospel and the object of faith for eternal life. Sapaugh correctly concludes, “The death of Christ for sin is inherent in what it means to believe in Christ for everlasting life.”²²⁴

The nexus between Christ’s person and work is also observable in the fourth Gospel by Jesus’ “I am” (ἐγώ εἰμι) statements of His divine identity. In 8:24, the Lord warns, “If you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins” (8:24). A few verses later He ties His divine identity to His death, saying, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am” (8:28).²²⁵ Here, the relationship between the Cross and Jesus’ identity as the one, true God is clearly seen, for Jesus’ “I am” statements in John’s Gospel not only reveal that He is God in His nature or essence but also in His saving

²²⁰ Bergmeier, “ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ in Joh 19:30,” 282; Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Work of Christ: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Our Hope, 1913), 34; Tom Stegall, “Are Disobedient Christians Under God’s Wrath? Part I: Propitiation by Christ,” in *Should Christians Fear Outer Darkness?* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015), 255-58; John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 74.

²²¹ Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 147.

²²² Berkouwer, *Work of Christ*, 273-74, 297, 307-9.

²²³ Berkouwer, *Person of Christ*, 105-6, 109.

²²⁴ Sapaugh, “A Response to Hodges: How to Lead a Person to Christ, Parts 1 and 2,” 27.

²²⁵ The connection between verses 24 and 28 naturally raises the question of when belief in Jesus’ deity became necessary for eternal life. The events of John 8 were only four months before Calvary. When Jesus said to the Jews that they must believe in His identity as God (“I am”) for their judicial forgiveness, He spoke in anticipation of His soon-approaching crucifixion. From the divine perspective, the requirement to believe in His deity (v. 24) would not take effect until He was lifted up (v. 28). John 8:24 and 28 show that Jesus’ saving work was the chief revelatory event or sign that identified Him as God (2:18–19). Bauckham’s explanation of this point is fitting: “The story of Jesus is not a mere illustration of the divine identity; Jesus himself and his story are intrinsic to the divine identity. The history of Jesus, his humiliation and his exaltation, is the unique act of God’s self-giving, in which he demonstrates his deity to the world by accomplishing salvation for the world. In the words of the Johannine Prologue, through Jesus Christ, grace and truth *happened*—the divine self-giving occurred in full reality—and in this way the glory of the God whom no one has ever seen was revealed (John 1:14–18). In this act of self-giving God is most truly himself and defines himself for the world” (Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 51).

work. Coetzee aptly states, “Jesus uses the absolute *EGO EIMI* as a technical term which carries exclusive claims with regard to both his own Person and his messianic work.”²²⁶ This conclusion is based on the use of God’s repeated “I am He” (אֲנִי הוּא; LXX, ἐγώ εἰμι) or “I, even I, am He” (אֲנִי אֲנִי הוּא; LXX, ἐγώ εἰμι ἐγώ εἰμι) declarations in the Old Testament (Deut. 32:39; Isa. 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4; 48:12; 51:12; 52:6). In the immediate contexts of these declarations, God refers to Himself as “Redeemer” (Isa. 41:14; 43:14; 48:17; 51:10–11; 52:9–10), “Savior” (Isa. 43:3, 11; 45:21–22), the one who “will provide atonement [כפר] for His land and His people” (Deut. 32:43), and who “blots out your transgressions for My own sake and . . . will not remember your sins” (Isa. 43:25). Particularly relevant is Isaiah 43:10: “that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He,” which parallels the repeated use of γινώσκω and πιστεύω in John’s Gospel²²⁷ as terms denoting the sole condition for eternal life. Isaiah 43:10–13 makes explicit that Yahweh, the “I am,” is identified as the one, true God by His work of salvation (vv. 12–13).²²⁸

10 “You are My witnesses,” says the LORD, “And My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me.

11 I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no savior.

12 I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, and there was no foreign god among you; therefore you are My witnesses,” says the LORD, “that I am God.

13 Indeed before the day was, I am He; and there is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?”

Ball concludes regarding the relationship of these verses to Jesus as the “I am” in John’s Gospel: “For John, the use of ἐγώ εἰμι points back to the whole context of the use of the words ‘I am’ in Isaiah 43.10 and not simply to the fact that *ani hu* may sometimes stand in the place of the formula ‘I am Yahweh’ ἐγώ εἰμι identifies Jesus with Yahweh’s saving action and even with Yahweh himself.”²²⁹ By Jesus’ application of the Old Testament’s “I am” statements to Himself, He was identifying Himself *by His work* as the only true God and Savior.

Finally, in concluding this section on the Lord’s saving death, the sheer bulk of material in John’s Gospel devoted to Christ’s death and resurrection must be considered in order to appreciate John’s evangelistic purpose of leading the reader to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Martin Kähler has famously described the

²²⁶ Coetzee, “Jesus’ Revelation in the *Ego Eimi* Sayings in the Jn 8 and 9,” 173.

²²⁷ Ball, *‘I Am’ in John’s Gospel*, 189; Hamilton, “The Influence of Isaiah on the Gospel of John,” 156; Harner, *The “I Am” of the Fourth Gospel*, 13.

²²⁸ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 149; Peter A. Steveson, *Isaiah* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2003), 375.

²²⁹ Ball, *‘I Am’ in John’s Gospel*, 193.

Gospels as essentially “passion narratives with extended introductions.”²³⁰ This evident fact leads Warfield to conclude:

The events of this final Passover season, the narrative of which becomes so detailed and precise that the occurrences from day to day are noted, constitute, along with their sequences, what is here called “the consummation.” They include the events which led up to the crucifixion of Jesus, the crucifixion itself, and the manifestations which He gave of Himself after His death up to His ascension. So preponderating was the interest which the reporters took in this portion of the “life of Christ,” that is to say, in His death and resurrection, that about a third of their whole narrative is devoted to it.²³¹

While all four Gospels devote a significant proportion of text to Christ’s passion and resurrection in comparison to His earthly life, the Gospel of John contains the highest percentage of passion and resurrection text.²³² The whole point of John’s Gospel is to induce faith in Jesus as the risen Christ who was sacrificed for sin.²³³ John’s purpose,

²³⁰ Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 80 n. 11.

²³¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950), 29.

²³² Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 202.

²³³ Some Free Grace proponents who hold to a promise-only or crossless view of the content of faith for eternal life claim it is not even necessary to know that one is a sinner before a righteous God and in need of salvation in order to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life (Zane Hodges, 2000 Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Question & Answer session on “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1”; Bob Wilkin, “Letters to the Editor,” *Grace Evangelical Society News* [August 1990]: 3). This view downplays personal knowledge of sin as not being “the fundamental issue” facing the unbeliever because “sin has ceased to be the big issue” now that Christ’s death has removed the sin-barrier between God and man (John Niemelä, “What about ‘Believers’ Who Have Never Known Christ’s Promise of Life?” *Chaffer Theological Seminary Conference*, Houston, TX, March 13, 2006). According to this view, the fundamental issue now facing the unbeliever is simply one of “life” versus death, and thus it is a divine requirement for unbelievers to learn only about eternal life, not Christ’s death for their sins (Stephen R. Lewis, “The Message of Life, Genesis through Revelation,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 27, 2016). While John’s Gospel certainly makes “life” a big issue, mentioning it 36 times, it also strongly emphasizes “sin” or being a “sinner” (David T. Adamo, “Sin in John’s Gospel,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13.3 [1989]: 216-17, 221-24). In John, the “sin” word group occurs 25 times (1:29, 5:14, 8:7, 11, 21, 24, 34, 46; 9:2-3, 16, 24-25, 31, 34, 41; 15:22, 24, 16:8-9; 19:11; 20:23). In fact, “sin” occurs more frequently in John than in Matthew and Mark combined, so that John’s Gospel actually emphasizes man’s sin problem the most of the four Gospels (Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 146). If acknowledgment of sin were not required to believe in Christ for eternal life, then why does John 16:8 say that the Holy Spirit is convicting the “world [i.e., unbelievers] of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment”? According to the promise-only view, John 16:8 should say the Holy Spirit is convicting the world of its lack of “life.” In order to believe in Christ for eternal life, a person must recognize his or her condition before God as sinful and perishing. Charles Ryrie agrees: “Certainly, faith must have some content. There must be confidence *about* something or *in* someone. To believe in Christ for salvation means to have confidence that He can remove the guilt of sin and give eternal life. It means to believe that He can solve the problem of sin which is what keeps a person out of heaven” (*So Great Salvation*, 118).

therefore, is expressly evangelistic and cross-centered, as Scroggie once again explains so well:

In addition to these specific references, there is the whole story of the Passion itself. Nearly half the Gospel is taken up with the events of a few days in a life of about thirty-five years. This fullness of detail brings the whole story into its true perspective. What is of primary importance in the Gospels, and in Christian theology, is not the incarnation, nor the perfect life of Jesus, but His death and resurrection. The incarnation made the death possible, and the life made it worthy, but both could not save a soul. For salvation, redemption, justification, forgiveness, and all attendant blessings, the . . . death of Jesus, and His resurrection, were necessary. To grasp this is to understand the Good News.²³⁴

Resurrection of Jesus the Christ

Besides Jesus' deity, humanity, and substitutionary death, His bodily resurrection also defines Him to be "the Christ, the Son of God"²³⁵ and the object of belief for eternal life. Several lines of evidence support this conclusion. First, when John as narrator writes from a retrospective vantage point, he portrays Jesus as being presently alive.²³⁶ Thus, Craig Koester states, "Faith is possible for those who have 'not seen' because Jesus is alive—this conviction is basic to John's theological perspective. The Jesus who visibly encountered people in the past, through his ministry and resurrection appearances, is understood to be alive and active in the time of the gospel's readers."²³⁷ In John 20:31, the present-tense is used in the statement "Jesus is [ἐστίν] the Christ" to indicate that following Jesus' resurrection, His current resurrected state defines Him to be "the Christ, the Son of God."²³⁸ The purpose statement of John's Gospel does not say it is sufficient to believe "that Jesus *was* the Christ, the Son of God."

Second, John's Gospel is written with a twofold perspective—one retrospective and the other prospective.²³⁹ As the narrator, John tells the story in

See also, Thomas L. Constable, "The Gospel Message," in *Walvoord: A Tribute* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 203-4, 210-11.

²³⁴ Scroggie, *Guide to the Gospels*, 600.

²³⁵ Larry W. Hurtado, "Christ," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 116; Andrew T. Lincoln, "'I Am the Resurrection and the Life': The Resurrection Message of the Fourth Gospel," in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 143.

²³⁶ Craig R. Koester, "Jesus' Resurrection, the Signs, and the Dynamics of Faith in the Gospel of John," in *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, ed. Craig R. Koester and Reimund Bieringer, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 222 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 72-74.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

²³⁸ Sullivan, "The Johannine Passion and Resurrection Narratives," 97.

²³⁹ J. Bryan Born, "Literary Features in the Gospel of John," *Direction* 17 (Fall 1988): 10-11; J. A. Du Rand, "Plot and Point of View in the Gospel of John," in *A South African Perspective on the New Testament: Essays by South African New Testament Scholars Presented to Bruce Manning Metzger during His Visit to South Africa in 1985*, ed. J. H. Petzer and P. J. Hartin (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 157-58.

hindsight from a vantage point after the Cross and Resurrection, but also with foresight, from a vantage point within the story, so that the reader sees Christ's approaching death and resurrection through the eyes of the characters in the Gospel.²⁴⁰ Andrew Lincoln explains the role of the Resurrection in this twofold perspective:

The dominance of the resurrection message in the Fourth Gospel is beyond dispute. While all the Gospel accounts are written from a post-resurrection perspective, the perspective in the Fourth Gospel is not only explicit in the narrator's asides (cf. 2:22; 7:39; 20:9) but also much more determinative for the shaping of the narrative than in the Synoptic Gospels. The preresurrection setting of Jesus and the postresurrection setting of the fourth evangelist and his readers have been telescoped together, so that much of the narrative is to be read on these two levels at the same time.²⁴¹

The result of this twofold perspective, that simultaneously looks backward and forward at the Resurrection, is a centering effect that focuses the reader on this climactic event. If the purpose of the book is to lead readers to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the literary design and function of the book focuses the reader on Jesus' resurrection, then John's key terms "Christ" and "Son of God" must be defined by the Resurrection.

Third, according to John 2:22, 5:39 (implied), 12:16, and 20:9, Jesus' resurrection fulfilled Old Testament Scripture, demonstrating that He met the qualifications for being the true Messiah. Jesus appears to His disciples after the Resurrection, saying, "'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day'" (Luke 24:44–46). Since other New Testament books teach that "the Christ" rises from the dead according to the Scriptures (Acts 17:3; 1 Cor. 15:3–4), and John's Gospel makes the same point, the Resurrection in the Gospel of John necessarily defines Jesus to be "the Christ."²⁴²

Fourth, since Jesus is the resurrection and the life according to John 11:25–27, and this is demonstrated through the raising of Lazarus's physical body, it is also essential that Jesus' body be presently risen in order for Him to provide life and resurrection bodies to all those whom He redeems. The Redeemer Himself cannot be one who is still subject to the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23) and in need of bodily redemption

²⁴⁰ Koester, "Jesus' Resurrection, the Signs, and the Dynamics of Faith in the Gospel of John," 50-51.

²⁴¹ Lincoln, "I Am the Resurrection and the Life': The Resurrection Message of the Fourth Gospel," 122.

²⁴² Donald Guthrie, "The Importance of Signs in the Fourth Gospel," *Vox Evangelica* 5 (1967): 78.

(Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30). Otherwise, He is no redeemer at all.²⁴³ Consequently, Koester writes:

Faith is the issue that runs throughout the Fourth Gospel. John wrote in order that people might believe. The question is how they can believe in a Jesus whom they have never seen. Faith is a relationship with a living being. The gospel assumes that there is content to faith, since people are to believe *that* Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20:31). Yet this alone is not faith, according to John. To believe is to trust, and such trust can only be placed in one who is alive; it cannot be lodged in someone who is dead. Therefore, Jesus' resurrection is essential for John's theology, since faith cannot be faith unless Jesus is alive. The conviction that the Jesus who was crucified is now living and that people can now relate to him undergirds the whole of John's message.²⁴⁴

Fifth, if the Resurrection has become part of Jesus as a Person and belief in the Person of Christ as the object of faith (i.e., “in Him”) is necessary for eternal life, then belief in a risen Savior is also necessary.²⁴⁵ John's purpose statement says that the signs in the book confirm that He is the Christ. The Resurrection was clearly a sign, even as Synoptic Gospel passages explicitly state (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:30). Earlier in this chapter the principle of inherence was explained with respect to Christ's work of sacrificial death and bodily resurrection becoming part of His identity as a person. Luke 11:30 reflects this truth: “For as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation.” While all of the signs in John's Gospel leading up to the Cross and Resurrection were done by Christ and stand apart from Him in one sense, the climactic sign of His cross-work and bodily resurrection is now permanently part of Him.²⁴⁶ Since Jesus Himself is a sign, He prophesies of His second coming, “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30). The “sign of the Son of Man” is most likely a genitive of apposition in the Greek text, indicating that the Son of Man is the sign.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ James Orr, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, n.d.), 280-84.

²⁴⁴ Koester, “Jesus' Resurrection, the Signs, and the Dynamics of Faith in the Gospel of John,” 48.

²⁴⁵ Berkouwer, *Work of Christ*, 200-1.

²⁴⁶ Moore, “Soteriology and Structure,” 189.

²⁴⁷ The “sign” (sing. σημεῖον) of verse 30 has been interpreted variously. Grammatically, some interpret the genitive τοῦ υἱοῦ as an objective genitive (i.e., “that which signifies the Son of Man coming”). In this case, the sign would be something singular that points to the Son of Man. Some interpret this as the sign of the Cross appearing in the sky (Alford, *Greek Testament*, 1:243; A. J. B. Higgins, “The Sign of the Son of Man [Matt. XXIV.30],” *New Testament Studies* [1962–63]: 380-82) or the Shekinah glory clouds surrounding the Lord (Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, reprinted 1961], 508; idem, *The Olivet Discourse* [Greenville, SC: Gospel Hour, n.d.], 66-67) or the trumpet of Matthew 24:31 or the opening up of the heavens as in Revelation 19:6–18 (Ed Glasscock, *Matthew*, Moody Gospel Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1997], 474). However, most interpreters either allow for (Thomas L. Constable, *Expository Notes on Matthew* [Garland, TX: Sonic Light, 2015], 386; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids:

Since sign and referent merge as one in the person of Jesus Christ, He will forever be identified by His death and resurrection. His nail prints and wounds are part of His glorified body as recorded in John 20 and Luke 24:39. Thus, Pfitzner concludes that Christ is “the one who still has holes in his hands, feet, and side. For the glorified Christ remains the suffering Christ.”²⁴⁸ Morris also states regarding the description of the risen, living Lamb as still “slain” in Revelation 5:6 and 13:8:

“Slain” in both these last references is a perfect participle; the Lamb continues permanently in the character of One who was slain for men. The crucifixion is not regarded simply as a happening that took place and is all over. While there is a once-for-all aspect to it, there is also the aspect which sees it as of permanent validity and continuing effect.²⁴⁹

Similarly, Robert Thomas comments about Revelation 5:6:

The participle *hestēkos* (“standing”) portrays the Lamb as standing in its natural living position. He is not dead. Even though slain, He is erect and alive in this heavenly scene. To be sure, the marks of His death are visible, but because of His resurrection, they are not debilitating. The other participle *esphagmenon* (“one slain”) depicts Christ’s present state resulting from death. The present and eternal reality remains as a consequence of His historical crucifixion.²⁵⁰

Thomas also states: “The participle is an intensive use of the perfect tense and thus points out the continuing character of the Lamb. It resembles Paul’s use of ἑσταυρωμένον in 1 Cor. 2:2: the nature in which Paul presented Christ in his preaching was that of ‘one crucified.’”²⁵¹ In harmony with Thomas, Morris, and a chorus of others, Bauckham also notes the inseparability of Christ’s person and work in Scripture, stating in reference to “the crucified Jesus” who is also presently risen and exalted:

Zondervan, 2010], 893; David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 582) or favor the appositional function of the genitive here (i.e., “the sign that is the Son of Man”). See Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 3rd ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), 258-59; A. B. Bruce, “The Synoptic Gospels,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1990), 1:295; Thomas O. Figart, *The King of the Kingdom of Heaven: A Commentary on Matthew* (Lancaster, PA: Eden, 1999), 448; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 488; Thomas Ice, “Matthew 24 and ‘This Generation’” (Pre-Trib Research Center), 3; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 1:193; Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), 276-77.

²⁴⁸ Pfitzner, “Coronation of the King,” 21.

²⁴⁹ Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 358 n. 114.

²⁵⁰ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 391.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 391 n. 59. See also David J. MacLeod, “The Lion Who Is the Lamb: An Exposition of Revelation 5:1–7,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164 (July-September 2007): 340.

Here God is seen to be God in his radical self-giving, descending to the most abject human condition and, in that human obedience, humiliation, suffering and death, being no less truly God than he is in his cosmic rule and glory on the heavenly throne. It is not that God is manifest in heavenly glory and hidden in the human degradation of the cross. The latter makes known who God is no less than the former. . . . This is the meaning of the slaughtered Lamb's standing as slaughtered on the heavenly throne of God in Revelation 5. This is the meaning of the Johannine paradox that Jesus is exalted and glorified on the cross. . . . The story of Jesus is not a mere illustration of the divine identity; Jesus himself and his story are intrinsic to the divine identity. The history of Jesus, his humiliation and his exaltation, is the unique act of God's self-giving, in which he demonstrates his deity to the world by accomplishing salvation for the world. In the words of the Johannine Prologue, through Jesus Christ, grace and truth *happened*—the divine self-giving occurred in full reality—and in this way the glory of God whom no one has ever seen was revealed (John 1:14–18). In this act of self-giving God is most truly himself and defines himself for the world.²⁵²

The Gospel of John and the rest of Scripture harmoniously testify to the inseparableness of Christ's saving work and His person²⁵³ as the object and content of saving faith.²⁵⁴

Words, Works, and Person of Christ

Besides “the irrefragable unity of Christ's person and work,”²⁵⁵ John's Gospel also teaches the indivisibility of belief in Christ's words or promises of eternal life from belief in His person and work. In John's Gospel, the object of πιστεύω is most often expressed as the person of Jesus Christ (“believe Me” or “believe in Him”); but at times the object of belief is also explicitly stated to be His words²⁵⁶ and works.²⁵⁷ Belief in His work can be seen clearly by His statement in John 10:37–38: “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works,

²⁵² Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 50-51.

²⁵³ Carnegie, “Kerygma in the Fourth Gospel,” 57.

²⁵⁴ Regarding the balance between Christ's being or essence as God and His acts as God, Bauckham has stated, “A Christology of divine identity thus offers a way beyond the misleading alternatives of functional Christology or ontological Christology. Certain divine ‘functions,’ if we have to use that word, are not mere functions, but integral to who God is” (*Jesus and the God of Israel*, 235). For a biblically balanced perspective between functional and ontological Christology, see Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 215-41.

²⁵⁵ Berkouwer, *Person of Christ*, 105.

²⁵⁶ Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., “Translating Believe in the Gospel of John,” *Bible Translator* 30 (April 1979): 205.

²⁵⁷ J. Dean Hebron, “A Study of ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ in the Gospel of John with Reference to the Content of Saving Faith” (Th.M. thesis, Capital Bible Seminary, 1980), 28-29; Arden W. Kinser, “The Subject of Belief in the Gospel of John” (M.A. thesis, Western Evangelical Seminary, 1980), 55-56, 64.

that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him.”²⁵⁸ Herman Ridderbos explains the inseparableness of Jesus’ person and work in this passage:

The opening statement, “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me,” again emphasizes—but now in a very radical form—the inviolable unity of Jesus’ person and work. He makes the credibility of his person and of his coming into the world dependent on his work, understood as “the works of the Father.” Inquiries into his identity (cf. vs. 24) apart from his works are therefore not meaningful, any more than he requires faith in what he is apart from the many-sided witness to what he does. The reverse is the case. But he can be known and believed as Christ, the Son of God, only in answer to whether what he does and says are of God, are “works of the Father,” and not a result of abstract thought or talk concerning his person.²⁵⁹

Some may wrongly conclude that Jesus’ works are not integrally connected to His person, and that His works only witness or testify to His person as the Christ or guarantor of eternal life, so that faith in those things which testify of His person (i.e., works, signs, teaching) are not essential to believe in order to receive eternal life. Hodges takes this view: “John makes the Person of Jesus, not a set of doctrines, the object of the faith that brings eternal life.”²⁶⁰ However, this is an illegitimate distinction that can be disproven rather easily by comparing Christ’s works with His words. Both His works (5:36; 8:28; 10:25)²⁶¹ and His words (3:11; 5:24, 34b) are a revelation of Christ Himself as the divine Logos (1:1, 14, 18).²⁶² In both His works and His words, He is revealed to be the Christ, the Son of God. Yet, as all would agree, this does not make believing His words optional for eternal life,²⁶³ as Jesus clearly warns in 12:44–50:

John 12:44–50

- 44 Then Jesus cried out and said, “He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me.
 45 And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me.
 46 I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness.
 47 And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.
 48 He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.

²⁵⁸ Sapaugh, “A Response to Hodges: How to Lead a Person to Christ, Parts 1 and 2,” 28.

²⁵⁹ Ridderbos, *Gospel According to John*, 376.

²⁶⁰ Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message,” 10.

²⁶¹ Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 166.

²⁶² Sapaugh, “A Response to Hodges: How to Lead a Person to Christ, Parts 1 and 2,” 28.

²⁶³ Richard R. Melick, Jr., “A Study in the Concept of Belief: A Comparison of the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Romans” (Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976), 203 n. 221.

- 49 For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.
 50 And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.

In verse 44, when Jesus says, “He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me,” He obviously does not mean that belief in Him is optional for eternal life while belief in the Father is essential. He means that His witness is so consistent and unified with the Father’s that when a person believes in Christ, that person has also believed in the Father (5:24). This truth directly parallels the thought of John 10:38 regarding Christ’s works, where He says, “though you do not believe Me, believe the works.” From this parallel passage, it is obvious that Jesus is not recommending the possibility of faith in His works *minus* faith in Himself. If this were true, then to be consistent we would have to interpret Jesus in 12:44 as advocating the possibility of having faith in the Father without faith in the Son.

John 12:47–48 poses a serious problem for those who deny that belief in Christ’s work is essential for eternal life since these verses teach that people will be eternally judged on the basis of whether or not they believed Christ’s words. If His words function just like His works as testifiers to the supposedly one, greater, saving “message of life” that He is the guarantor of eternal life, and these words are separate from His person, then logically people should not have to believe Christ’s words to receive eternal life. If both Christ’s works and words are a revelation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, then why is belief in His words about the supposedly crossless, resurrectionless “saving message” required for eternal life but not His works? This would be inconsistent and contrary to Johannine soteriology. This also leads to the promise-only view’s problem of Scripture itself being a witness to Jesus as the Christ.

Works, the Father, and Scripture

John 5:36–47 sets forth Christ’s work, the Father, and Scripture as witnesses to Jesus:

John 5:36–40, 45–47

- 36 But I have a greater witness than John’s; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very **works** that I do—**bear witness of Me**, that the Father has sent Me.
 37 And the Father Himself, who sent Me, **has testified of Me**. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.
 38 But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe.
 39 You search **the Scriptures**, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which **testify of Me**.
 40 But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. . . .
 45 Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust.
 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.
 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?

This passage does not separate the testifier or witness (Christ's works and Old Testament Scripture) from the supposedly one essential truth testified about—the person of Jesus Christ as the guarantor of eternal life. This passage does not distinguish the *person* of Christ from the *witnesses* to His person. Both the Scriptures and Jesus' works constitute a unified divine revelation about Him as the Christ, the Son of God; and therefore to reject one is to reject the other.²⁶⁴ This, of course, does not mean that everything written in the Old Testament must be believed for salvation, or that everything written and prophesied in the Old Testament specifically about Christ must be believed for eternal life. But if the gospel of Christ is according to the Old Testament Scriptures (Rom. 1:1–2; 1 Cor. 15:3–4), and the gospel must be believed in this dispensation for eternal life (1 Cor. 4:15; 2 Thess. 1:8–10), then logically the content of the Old Testament's witness about Christ's person and work (which the New Testament calls “the gospel”) must be believed.

In John 5:36–40 and 45–47, following the witness of John the Baptist, there are three that testify of Jesus Christ. First, in verse 36, Jesus says His *works* “bear witness of Me” (μαρτυρεῖ περὶ ἐμοῦ). In verse 37, He also says that the *Father* “has testified of Me” (μεμαρτύρηκεν περὶ ἐμοῦ). Then in verse 39, the Lord says that the *Scriptures* “testify of Me” (μαρτυροῦσαι περὶ ἐμοῦ). If the claim of those who advocate a crossless and resurrectionless “saving message” is correct that all of these “witnesses” merely pointed to the person of Jesus the Christ, the Guarantor of eternal life, but were not required to be believed for eternal life, then the conclusion seems inescapable that they are separating belief in God the Father and the Scriptures from belief in Christ in order to avoid the Savior's death and resurrection as the content of saving faith. In order to continue perpetuating this false distinction between believing in Christ's works (v. 36) and His person, consistency demands that the promise-only view should no longer require belief in God the Father as a witness (v. 37), or the testimony of Scripture (v. 39), or even Christ's words (3:11; 8:18–24; 18:37). Yet, according to John's Gospel itself, there is no dichotomy between believing the *scriptural* testimony about Christ (2:22; 19:24–37; 20:8–9) versus believing in the person of Christ Himself (i.e., belief “in Him” or “in Me,” 3:16; 5:38, 46; 8:30). Johannine belief in Jesus as the Christ is no different than believing the gospel of the Christ as contained in either the Old Testament or New Testament Scriptures.²⁶⁵ Likewise, John's Gospel repeatedly asserts that to receive Christ's *words* (4:50; 5:47; 12:47–48; 17:8) is to receive *Him* (1:12; 5:38, 43, 46).²⁶⁶

The Gospel of John sets forth not only a proposition²⁶⁷ or promise about Jesus Christ to be believed (3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 20:31) but also the person and work of Christ, which are integrally connected. To believe the one is to believe the other. Belief in Christ for eternal life involves a cognitive dimension,²⁶⁸ as all faith for salvation must involve knowledge of divine revelation (1 Tim. 2:4–5),²⁶⁹ assent to the truthfulness of that

²⁶⁴ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, 229.

²⁶⁵ Berkouwer, *Work of Christ*, 153.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 200–201.

²⁶⁷ Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 144.

²⁶⁸ Koester, *Word of Life*, 173.

²⁶⁹ Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, GraceLife ed. (Burleson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992), 56–57; Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 13–16.

revelation (John 11:27),²⁷⁰ and personal trust or reliance upon that revelation.²⁷¹ Regarding the gospel's requirement of revealed knowledge, assent to this truth, and trust or reliance upon the Son for eternal life, J. Sidlow Baxter aptly concludes:

We may not know the deeper truths of the New Testament, but we *must* know the elementary facts which the Gospel declares before we can possibly receive it. We may not know anything about the Christian believer's deeper experiences of fellowship with his Lord, but we *must* know certain great facts about the Lord Jesus before we can place our trust in Him as our Savior. We must know that as a matter of historical fact He lived on earth and that He taught and wrought as the Scriptures record. We must know, at any rate, that He declared Himself to be the Son of God; that He declared His death to be a ransom for us sinners; that He rose from the dead and . . . that above all, His resurrection substantiates His claims to be the incarnate Son of God and man's Savior; and that the Scriptures unite in testifying to Him and offering Him to us as our Savior. We need not know *more* than that, but there must be *some* such knowledge before there can be faith in Him at all. And then, following this simple knowledge comes *belief*. Having come to know of certain things, the mind goes on to believe them to be true.

So, through this modicum of knowledge and belief, the soul comes to accept the facts and truths and promises of the Gospel in the sense of *relying* upon them and thus appropriating the glorious blessings which the Gospel offers—the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation and peace with God, the blotting out of guilt, and the justifying of the pardoned sinner in God's sight through the merit of the Redeemer. And this act of relying upon the facts and truths and promises of the Gospel centers in an act of trust in Jesus Himself as the living embodiment of all the truths and promises of the Gospel, the Son of God and Savior of all who trust Him.²⁷²

JESUS' "NAME" IN JOHN 20:31

In addition to Jesus being "the Christ, the Son of God," John's purpose statement in 20:31 also contains a significant reference to Jesus' "name." In order to understand how Jesus' "name" relates to Him as the object of faith within the evangelistic purpose of John's Gospel, a few key interpretative issues must be addressed. For instance, is John 20:31 grammatically equivalent to the other five occurrences of believing "in His name" in Johannine literature, where "believe" is a transitive verb and the prepositional phrase "in His name" functions as the object of belief? Though John 20:31 is normally translated

²⁷⁰ Clark concludes, "Faith, by definition, is assent to understood propositions. Not all cases of assent, even assent to Biblical propositions, are saving faith; but all saving faith is assent to one or more Biblical propositions." Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983), 118. See also, J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925), 46-49, 148-51.

²⁷¹ The idea of trust inherent in πιστεύω was explained in the previous chapter.

²⁷² J. Sidlow Baxter, *For God So Loved the World: An In-depth Look at the Bible's Most Loved Verse* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 108.

“and that believing, you may have life in His name,” can it legitimately be interpreted in the same manner as John’s five other “believe” + “name” constructions, where “name” is the object of “believing”? If so, then the verse would read: “and that believing in His name, you may have life.” But if the prepositional phrase “in His name” is not the object of believing, then what specifically must be believed? What is the content of faith required in order to have life in His name? Second, can the prepositional phrase “life *in His name*” be better understood as a dative of means or cause, indicating “life *by means of His name*”? Or, is it best understood to be a dative of location or sphere, “life *in His name*”? Third, how does the syntax of the passage relate to the semantic value of “name” in its context in John 20, and how does this compare to the use of “name” in John’s other “name” passages?

Syntax and Translation of 20:31b

The reference to “believing” and “His name” in John 20:31 should be considered unique among the six Johannine passages that contain both the words “believe” and “name.” In the other five instances (John 1:12; 2:23; 3:18; 1 John 3:23; 5:13), the *object* of belief is stated to be His “name” (i.e., “believe *in His name*”). But this is not the case in John 20:31, where the *result* of believing is stated to be the possession of eternal life “in His name.” Since word order in Greek is so flexible, it is possible that the phrase “in His name” (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ) in verse 31 serves as the object of the participle “believing” (πιστεύοντες). In such a case, the Greek of verse 31b (καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ) would be translated “and that believing in His name you may have life.” Though this is grammatically allowable, the greater consideration and deciding factor as to whether it is correct is John’s customary syntax. Four times John uses the construction πιστεύω + the preposition εἰς (John 1:12; 2:23; 3:18; 1 John 5:13), and once he uses πιστεύω + the dative (1 John 3:23); but he never uses the verb πιστεύω + ἐν in his other “believe” + “name” passages.

Moreover, to take “in His name” (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ) in John 20:31 as the object of “believing” (πιστεύοντες) would be contrary to John’s established general usage of the term πιστεύω. This term occurs 107 times in the Johannine corpus, with the most frequent construction being πιστεύω + εἰς (41 times); followed by πιστεύω absolute (27 times); then πιστεύω + dative case (22 times); and πιστεύω + ὅτι (17 times). Surprisingly the construction πιστεύω + ἐν never occurs, with the possible exception of John 3:15, where the Critical Text has the textual variant ἐν while the Majority Text has εἰς.²⁷³ Even if the original reading in John 3:15 is πιστεύω + ἐν, there is good reason to translate it “so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (NASB) or “will have eternal life in Him.”²⁷⁴ Bruce Metzger notes that John has a practice “of placing an adverbial phrase with ἐν before its verb when the phrase is

²⁷³ Elizabeth Jarvis, “The Key Term ‘Believe’ in the Gospel of John,” *Notes on Translation* 2.2 (1988): 48.

²⁷⁴ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 817; Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 234.

emphatic or metaphorical (cf. 5:39; 16:33; and 1 Jn *passim*).²⁷⁵ Hence, the translation “will in Him have eternal life.”

Not coincidentally, among Johannine scholars and commentators who address this question in John 20:31, there is virtual unanimity that the phrase “in His name” is not the object of “believing” but is the object of the verb ἔχητε (“you may have”), meaning “you may have life in His name.”²⁷⁶ Therefore, John 20:31 should not be interpreted as saying, “and that believing in His name, you may have life.” Rather, the traditional interpretation and translation has better support.

Meaning of “Name”

Now that the syntactical support for the traditional translation of 20:31b has been given, it remains to determine what Jesus’ “name” means. Some Free Grace proponents claim that a person must know and be persuaded of three things to receive eternal life: the name “Jesus” itself, believing as the sole condition for eternal life, and the fact that Jesus guarantees everlasting life.²⁷⁷ Wilkin summarizes this view: “I like to put it together in one sentence as follows: *Jesus guarantees everlasting life to all who simply believe in Him. All who simply believe in Jesus are eternally secure.*”²⁷⁸ Those who hold such a limited view of faith’s content naturally reject Christ’s work as constituting any part of His “name.” Not surprisingly, Hodges claims:

No one has ever trusted in that name for his or her eternal well-being who has not been saved by doing so. And this is true no matter how little they might have known about the One whom that name represents. I think we need a renewed emphasis on the power of Jesus’ name. . . . Without the name of Jesus there is no salvation for anyone anywhere in our world. But the flip side of the coin is this: Everyone who believes in that name for eternal salvation is saved, regardless of the blank spots or the flaws in their theology in other respects.²⁷⁹

This view essentially reduces Jesus’ name to His attribute of trustworthiness. Those who advocate this crossless and resurrectionless saving message restrict the meaning of Jesus’ name in John’s Gospel to His reputation as the lifegiver. For instance, Wilkin says, “Thus

²⁷⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 175.

²⁷⁶ Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Vocabulary* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905. Reprint, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2006), 75-76; Alford, *Greek Testament*, 1:913; Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 575; Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, 996; Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 857; Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1980), 621; Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1965), 121; W. E. Vine, “John,” in *The Collected Writings of W. E. Vine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 1:318.

²⁷⁷ Wilkin lists these three elements as the “*sine qua non* of the gospel” or the three essentials to know and believe to be born again. Robert N. Wilkin, “Justification by Faith Alone is an Essential Part of the Gospel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 18 (Autumn 2005): 12.

²⁷⁸ Wilkin, *Secure and Sure*, 74.

²⁷⁹ Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1,” 8-9.

to believe in His name is to believe in His reputation as one who is faithful to His Word, the character quality necessary for Him to give everlasting life to those who believe in Him.”²⁸⁰ Wilkin concludes, “To believe in Jesus’ name in the Fourth Gospel is to believe in His promise of everlasting life to all who believe in Him. Believing in His name implies belief in His reputation to keep His promises.”²⁸¹ While the reputation of Jesus is certainly inherent to His name, reputation and character quality alone do not adequately explain Johannine “name” passages. A person’s reputation refers to an opinion or estimation of someone that has been informed by knowledge of that person’s character and deeds. Reputation is based on a person’s action, as “even a child is known by his deeds” (Prov. 20:11).

In Old Testament usage, God’s name is often a circumlocution for God Himself (Ps. 20:1; Prov. 18:10; Isa. 50:10). His name also speaks of His reputation connected with His character and deeds (Josh. 9:9–10; Jer. 16:19–21). One source concludes about God and His name: “His historical dealings with men in the past (Exod. 3:6, 13, 15), present (Exod. 20:7), and future (Ezek. 25:17; 34:30 *et al.*) are inextricably bound up with his name.”²⁸² Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitzsch conclude regarding God’s name of “I Am” revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:13–15 “that the name expressed the nature and operations of God, and that God would manifest in deeds the nature expressed in His name.”²⁸³ The Old Testament background and meaning of God’s “name” continues in the New Testament, including John’s Gospel, and it applies directly to Jesus.²⁸⁴ This means that Jesus’ name in the fourth Gospel must include both His deity²⁸⁵ and His works.²⁸⁶

In John’s Gospel, the name of Jesus encompasses His saving work, such as Jesus’ reference to “the works that I do in My Father’s name” (10:25). The fact that Christ’s works are an integral part of the “name” given to Him by the Father (17:11–12 [CT]) can be easily observed in John’s Gospel from the intimate association between the Father and the Son in their works. The Father gives the Son His work to perform (5:36). In addition, the work done by the Son in the Father’s name includes His death and resurrection (4:34; 5:36; 17:4 cf. 19:28, 30). In John 5:43, Jesus says, “I have come in My Father’s name.” Christ’s coming in the Father’s name is associated with His death in John 12:13 and in 1 John 5:6 (cf. John 19:34). This correspondence between the Father

²⁸⁰ Bob Wilkin, “What Does It Mean to *Believe in His Name* in the Fourth Gospel?” Paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, San Francisco, CA, November 16, 2011.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² Hans Bietenhard, “Name,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:650.

²⁸³ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1866-91; reprinted Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 1:287.

²⁸⁴ Raymond Abba, “Name,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 3:506; Ralph R. Hawthorne, “The Significance of the Name of Christ,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 103 (July 1946): 348-49; Lincoln, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 103, 507.

²⁸⁵ Charles A. Gieschen, “The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003): 135-41; Riemer Roukema, “Jesus and the Divine Name in the Gospel of John,” in *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses*, ed. George H. van Kooten (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 207-23.

²⁸⁶ Robert G. Bratcher, “‘The Name’ in Prepositional Phrases in the New Testament,” *Bible Translator* 14 (1963): 79; Gieschen, “The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology,” 135; Roukema, “Jesus and the Divine Name in the Gospel of John,” 216.

and Son's work leads one scholar to conclude that in John's Gospel "the name, person and work of God are—with various differentiations—inseparably linked with the name, person and work of Jesus Christ."²⁸⁷

John's first epistle also confirms this view of "name" in the fourth Gospel. In his first epistle, John writes to those who have been born again, saying, "I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" (2:12). In the phrase, "for His name's sake" (διὰ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ), the preposition διὰ ("for . . . sake") with the accusative case of the word ὄνομα ("name") has a causative sense. This demonstrates that "Who Jesus is and what he has done is the reason for God forgiving us our sins."²⁸⁸ In the context leading up to 2:12, John deals specifically with the problem of "sins." He explains that Christ Himself is the "propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:2). He also teaches that "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1:7). Before 2:12, John had already established that the ground upon which all sin is forgiven is the sacrificial, satisfactory death of Jesus Christ. This is true of both permanent, judicial forgiveness of sin (John 13:10), as well as daily fellowship-forgiveness with God (1 John 1:3–9). Forgiveness of sin owing to the sacrificial death of Christ is a thoroughly Johannine concept (John 1:29; Rev. 1:5). This is why even Hodges borders on acknowledging that "His name" in 1 John 2:12 includes Christ's satisfactory death for sin.

This forgiveness has been granted for His name's sake (literally, "on account of His name"). That is, their forgiveness is predicated on the effectiveness and efficacy of Christ's name. Although the reference to His name could be to God the Father, elsewhere in the epistle the reference of the word *name* is to Jesus Christ (cf. 3:23; 5:13) and is likely to be the same here, in view of the Savior's propitiatory work on the cross (cf. 2:2).²⁸⁹

Other scholars state explicitly that Jesus Christ's work is included within the scope of His name. Robert Thomas writes, "The 'name' to the Hebrew mind represented that which was implied by the name. When the reference is to Jesus Christ, as it is here, it sums up His attributes, His person, His work, His character, to all that was revealed in and through Him."²⁹⁰ Leon Morris concurs: "Sometimes John prefers to talk in terms of forgiveness, as when he says, 'your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake' (1 John 2:12). The 'name' points to all that Christ stands for, and this in such a context will especially mean His death."²⁹¹ Likewise, Kelcy states, "the name of Jesus signifies the saving work which he came to accomplish. Belief in the name of Jesus, therefore, emphasizes having the conviction that, since Jesus is who his name declares that he is, he is able to perform that

²⁸⁷ Hans Bietenhard, "ὄνομα," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:271.

²⁸⁸ Bratcher, "'The Name' in Prepositional Phrases in the New Testament," 77.

²⁸⁹ Hodges, *Epistles of John*, 95.

²⁹⁰ Robert L. Thomas, *Exegetical Digest of 1 John* (n.p.: Robert L. Thomas, 1984), 155.

²⁹¹ Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 350.

which his name implies.”²⁹² Regarding the evangelistic clause in John 1:12 “to those who believe on His name,” W. E. Vine concludes that “His Name expresses His attributes, character and actings.”²⁹³

Life in/by His Name

Christ’s “name” is a metonym for Christ Himself that encompasses His saving person and work. His “name,” therefore, is both the object of faith and the sphere in which all salvation resides. This is no different than saying that Christ is the object of our faith, yet our salvation resides “in Christ.” Therefore, John can instruct the reader to believe in Jesus’ name, while also declaring that eternal life resides in His name.

This is also the most natural interpretation contextually. In John 20:31, “life” can truly be “in His name,” or in His person, because of who He is—the One who is alive from the dead, who overcame the wages of sin, namely, death (Rom. 6:23). Thus, the meaning of “name” in 20:31 is determined largely by the immediate context, where the “name” stands for the once-crucified, now-risen Lord and God, who Thomas now believes in as “the Christ, the Son of God.”²⁹⁴ As a result, one New Testament scholar concludes that “name” in John’s Gospel “embraces the whole content of the saving acts revealed in Jesus”²⁹⁵ and that the “fullness of Christ’s saving work is contained in His name.”²⁹⁶ This meaning of “life in His name” in 20:31 is not poured into “name” in this verse (eisegesis) but is drawn out directly from the context (exegesis), where Jesus has appeared to Thomas as the One who was crucified but now stands alive from the dead as the Lord God. The crucified-risen Lord God is both the object of faith for eternal life and the One in whom this life resides.

This conclusion also allows for Christ’s “name” to be either the means of eternal life or the sphere of it. When people believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the *result* is that they have *life in His name* and *life by His name*. In the Greek text underlying the phrase “in His name” (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ), the preposition “in” (ἐν) is joined with the word “name” (τῷ ὀνόματι) in the dative case. This means the prepositional phrase may be translated or interpreted with a locative sense (“in His name”) or with an instrumental sense (“through or by His name”). If it is to be understood in a locative sense, this would denote the sphere in which life is available to the world (i.e., positionally “in Christ”).²⁹⁷ Or, if it is interpreted with an instrumental sense, this would denote the agency or means by which eternal life is given (i.e., “by

²⁹² Roger W. Kelcy, “In the Name of Jesus: A Study of the New Testament Phrase” (M.A. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1995), 90.

²⁹³ Vine, “John,” 1:225.

²⁹⁴ Adelheid Ruck-Schröder, *Der Name Gottes und der Name Jesu*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 80 (Berlin: Neukirchener, 1999), 208-9.

²⁹⁵ Hans Bietenhard, “ὄνομα,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:273.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Hawthorne, “The Significance of the Name of Christ,” 457; Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 164-65.

Christ”).²⁹⁸ Thus, Barrett concludes, “The meaning seems to be ‘...that you may have life on account of him, by his agency, in virtue of your believing relationship with him.’”²⁹⁹

But for John, as with the other New Testament writers, there is not a hard and fast distinction between sphere and agency. Greek grammarian Nigel Turner explains this point, especially as it pertains to the use of the preposition ἐν:

Attempts to explain this ἐν as having merely an instrumental meaning (“by” or “with”) should be resisted, for the predominant meaning is still “in,” “within,” “in the sphere of,” at this period. In a paper on the preposition ἐν, I set out its basic spatial meaning and proffered a warning against too flexible an interpretation of the passages. Sometimes, where at first sight it seems not possible that ἐν can mean “in,” a closer look and deeper insight into the primitive Christian viewpoint brings awareness that this is more than the exceptional instrumental ἐν. An example would be John 13:35. The best known translation, “if ye have love one to another,” assumes that ἐν means “to,” not “in.” But there is no reason at all why the Greek, which is ἐν ἀλλήλοις, should not be construed, “if you have love among one another,” for the sphere “in” which the love is exercised is Christ’s redeemed community.³⁰⁰

Turner’s conclusion is consistent with the usage of other New Testament writers such as Paul. For example, Ephesians 6:10 instructs believers to be “strong in the Lord [ἐν κυρίῳ] and in the power [ἐν τῷ κράτει] of His might.” While believers are to be strengthened “by” the Lord and “by” the power of His might, this strength and might resides only “in” the Lord. Although the instrumental idea is present, this does not preclude the predominant locative sense. Turner explains the same point, using another verse from Ephesians: “St. Paul described himself in Eph. 4:1 as ‘the prisoner *in* the Lord,’ and not ‘the prisoner *of* the Lord’ (A.V.). He lived in Christ, in hope, in consecration, in peace. They are spheres or atmospheres, air, which the Christian breathes.”³⁰¹

This dual sense of sphere and means relates to the subject of Christ’s “name” and other key salvation passages, particularly in Paul’s epistles, where his theology of the “name” harmonizes perfectly with John’s. For example, Romans 5:9 says that believers have been “justified by His blood [ἐν τῷ αἵματι].” We could also say that believers have been justified by virtue of being in the sphere of His blood, i.e., washed in the blood of the Lamb (John 1:29; Rev. 1:5). Elsewhere, Paul writes that believers have been justified in or by the name of Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 6:11 is a parallel passage to Romans 5:9, and instead of saying believers are justified by or in Christ’s “blood,” it says, “but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name [ἐν τῷ

²⁹⁸ Randall L. Adkisson, “An Examination of the Concept of Believing as a Dominant Motif in the Gospel of John,” (Ph.D. dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990), 141.

²⁹⁹ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 575.

³⁰⁰ Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1965), 120-21.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

ὀνόματι] of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit [ἐν τῷ πνεύματι] of our God.” So which is it? Were believers justified by Christ’s “blood” (Rom. 5:9) or by His “name” (1 Cor. 6:11)? Also, were believers justified “in” His blood/name or “by” His blood/name? The biblical answer to these questions is, of course, all of the above! Christ’s sacrificial death (blood) is both the content of saving faith (Rom. 3:25, KJV, NIV) and the sphere in which believers stand justified, forgiven, redeemed, and regenerated forever.³⁰²

This is also consistent with John’s theology of salvation. In Revelation 1:5, John addresses believers saying that Christ has loosed us “from our sins in His blood” (ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ). Did He forgive us our sins “in” His blood or “by” His blood? The answer is obviously both. Later in Revelation 5:9, we see that church-age saints will sing praise to Jesus Christ in recognition of Him redeeming us to God. We will exclaim that this was done “by Your blood” (ἐν τῷ αἵματι σοῦ). These Johannine passages reveal that our redemption and regeneration are both in the sphere of Christ’s blood and by means of Christ’s blood. Life in the sphere of Christ’s name means life in or by His saving death and resurrection. As this pertains to John 20:31, we can conclude that

³⁰² In 1 Corinthians 6:11, being justified, positionally sanctified, and washed should all be viewed as simultaneous actions. Titus 3:5–7 is a parallel passage to 1 Corinthians 6:11 since both the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit are involved there in salvation. In Titus 3:5–7, the main verbs, “saved” and “poured out,” are both aorist indicatives, with “justified” being an aorist participle. This is similar to another parallel Pauline passage in Colossians 2:11–14 where the aorist participles for forgiveness in 2:13b–14 are contemporaneous with the aorist-tense main verb for regeneration in 2:13. Theologically this shows that justification, forgiveness, and regeneration are all simultaneous saving events, since aorist participles do not necessarily precede the action of aorist-tense main verbs. In fact, aorist participles for Paul more often express contemporaneous action, as Wallace says, “From my cursory examination of the data, the aorist participle is more frequently contemporaneous in the epistles” (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 614). Robertson agrees: “One has no ground for assuming that antecedent action is a necessary or an actual fact with the aorist participle. The aorist participle of simultaneous action is in perfect accord with the genius and history of the Greek participle” (A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* [Nashville: Broadman, 1934], 1113).

The Pauline doctrine of the “name” accords perfectly with the Johannine doctrine. Paul’s references in 1 Corinthians 6:11 to regeneration (“washed,” cf. Titus 3:5–6) and justification in/by Christ’s name/blood (“justified,” cf. Rom. 5:9) show that regeneration and justification are simultaneous events. Justification occurs at the moment one receives “life in His name”—the moment of belief in Jesus Christ (John 1:12–13; 20:31). This also answers the claim of those who advocate the “promise-only” message that the lost need only be aware of their need for eternal life, rather than forgiveness of their sins (John Niemelä, “What about ‘Believers’ Who Have *Never* Known Christ’s Promise of Life?” *Chafer Theological Seminary Conference*, Houston, TX, March 13, 2006; Lewis, “The Message of Life, Genesis through Revelation”). Since regeneration, justification, and forgiveness are all simultaneous in God’s sight, one should not be made exclusively necessary versus another. In John’s Gospel, the concept of eternal life or regeneration is certainly emphasized, but not to the exclusion of other soteriological blessings such as justification and forgiveness of sins. Justification is implied in passages that promise believers deliverance from condemnation (κρίμα, κρίνω, κρίσις – 3:17, 18, 19; 5:22, 24, 27, 29; 9:39; 12:47–48). Likewise, forgiveness of sins is implied throughout the book (1:29; 8:11, 24; 13:10; 15:3; 16:8–11; 19:30) and explicitly mentioned in 20:23, where it occurs in connection with the commissioning of the disciples, and hence, is associated with believing the gospel. Klink writes, “Although the disciples are given by Jesus the full authority to forgive sins, this authority is based upon the proclamation of the Gospel, that is, belief in the work and person of Jesus Christ” (Edward W. Klink, III, “The Breath of Jesus: An Examination and Interpretation of the ‘Johannine Pentecost’ in John 20:19–23” [Th.M. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002], 90).

believers have life in His name “by entry into His sphere of action, the sphere of His person, Jn. 20:31.”³⁰³

Believers in Jesus Christ have eternal life both in the Son (John 5:26; 14:6; 1 John 5:11) and by the Son’s work on their behalf (John 6:51). The Son of God Himself stands as the propitiation for all sins, because who He is cannot be divorced or divided from what He has done (1 John 2:2; 4:10, “and He Himself is [αὐτὸς . . . ἔστιν] the propitiation for our sins”). Eternal life is both “in” and “by” the name of this One. Eternal life is a gift that is available to all who believe in Christ because eternal life is “in” (locative) His possession.³⁰⁴ It belongs to the risen Lamb. It is His to give. Eternal life is also a gift available to all because it was purchased “by” (instrumental) the Living One who appeared to Thomas, the One who was pierced for our transgressions, which is the context of the “life in His name” phrase.

The context of John 20:31 reveals the inseparability of Jesus Christ’s person as God-incarnate and His saving work of crucifixion and resurrection. Both His person and work are united in the one object of our faith. They are both bound up in “His name.” W. E. Vine states regarding the clause in John 20:31b (“you may have life in His name”) that this clause “indicates that the gift of life comes by reason of His character, His attributes and His dealings.”³⁰⁵ If the phrase “His name” has this meaning in the purpose statement of John’s Gospel, then John’s other evangelistic passages that speak of believing “in His name” (1:12; 2:23; 3:18; 1 John 3:23; 5:13) must not mean believing merely in the word “Jesus” without any awareness or acceptance of who He is or what He has done by His death and resurrection.³⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

According to John’s Gospel, the substance of belief in Jesus for eternal life is both personal and propositional; that is, belief requires both an object (Jesus Christ) and content (divinely revealed truth about Jesus Christ). Both Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word (John 1:14, 18), and the message about Jesus Christ, the word of the gospel (Gal. 1:11–12), are divine revelations that must be believed. While John does not use the word “gospel” to describe his saving message, the message of his book agrees with the saving message preached by Paul and the other apostles, which is called “the gospel of the Christ.” Thus, when a person believes the *gospel message* about Jesus being the Christ, he or she also believes in the *person* of Christ for eternal life.³⁰⁷

Though there is some semantic distinction between the person of Christ and gospel content pertaining to Him, the object of faith (Christ) and the content of faith (the gospel of Christ) are spoken of interchangeably in Scripture. Dozens of passages in the New Testament condition eternal salvation solely upon belief. Several of these use the verb “believe” intransitively (Acts 13:39, 48; Gal. 3:22); that is, they do not have a stated

³⁰³ Hans Bietenhard, “ὄνομα,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:274.

³⁰⁴ C. F. D. Moule, “The Meaning of ‘Life’ in the Gospel and Epistles of St. John,” *Theology* 78 (1975): 123.

³⁰⁵ Vine, “John,” 1:318.

³⁰⁶ Kelcy, “‘In the Name of’ Jesus: A Study of the New Testament Phrase,” 88-90.

³⁰⁷ Hebron, “A Study of ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ in the Gospel of John with Reference to the Content of Saving Faith,” 46.

object to receive the action of believing. In such cases, the object of faith is not specifically stated and the passage simply reads “they believed.” Nothing is stated to the effect that “they believed *in Him*” or “they believed *the gospel*.” But many other salvation passages use “believe” transitively. In these, the object of belief is variously stated to be the *person* of Jesus, as in “the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31) or “Christ” (Gal. 2:16) or even just “Him” (1 Tim. 1:16). Finally, there are passages that require belief in some specific form of propositional truth or divine revelation in order to be saved, such as belief in “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18), “the message preached” (1 Cor. 1:21), “our testimony” (2 Thess. 1:10), “the testimony that God has given of His Son” (1 John 5:10) or even just “the truth” (2 Thess. 2:12).

The Gospel of John also demonstrates that there is no theological distinction between believing *in* versus believing *that*.³⁰⁸ “To believe in Christ Jesus simply means to believe that Jesus died and rose again. In John especially *to believe in* and *to believe that* are constantly used interchangeably.”³⁰⁹ For example, in John’s Gospel to “believe that” (πιστεύω + ὅτι) Jesus is the I Am of the Old Testament (i.e., the Lord God) is necessary not to perish in one’s sins (John 8:24). According to John, to “believe that” (πιστεύω + ὅτι) Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God is necessary to have eternal life (20:31), as is believing “in” (πιστεύω + εἰς/ἐν) Him for eternal life (3:15–16).³¹⁰ This shows that belief in some *propositional* truth about Jesus (i.e., that He is God, the Christ, the Son of God) occurs simultaneously with belief in Him *personally*.³¹¹

Practically, all of this means that when someone believes the message of the gospel, he or she also believes in the person of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1:13 demonstrates this principle when referring to Christ: “*In Him* you also trusted, after you heard *the word of truth, the gospel* of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” Though the gospel sets forth propositional truth to be believed, it also sets forth a person to be believed. If belief in the gospel is required for salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 4:15; 15:1–4; Eph. 1:13; 2 Thess. 1:8–10), and belief in the person and work of Christ is also required for salvation (John 3:15, 16, 18; 6:53; 8:24; 20:30–31; Acts 13:38–41), and there is only one condition to be saved (Rom. 4:4–5; Eph. 2:8–9), then believing the gospel and believing in Christ must occur simultaneously rather than being two separate steps to receiving eternal life.

The gospel message of Christ’s death and resurrection is called “the word of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:8–10; 2 Thess. 3:1), “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18), “the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19), “the word of truth” (Eph. 1:13), “the word of life” (Phil. 2:16), and “the word of God” (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; Phil. 1:14; 2 Tim. 2:9). If the gospel is “the word,” and John teaches that Jesus Christ is also “the Word” (John 1:1, 14; 14:6), then belief in one is inseparable from belief in the other.³¹² In this sense it may be

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 16–43.

³⁰⁹ Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith*, 101.

³¹⁰ Morris, *Jesus Is the Christ*, 188–89; Robert L. Reymond, *Faith’s Reasons for Believing* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), 13.

³¹¹ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 58.

³¹² A. M. Ramsey, “The Gospel and the Gospels,” in *Studia Evangelica* (Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 37.

said that “Jesus *is* the Gospel, and . . . the Gospel *is* Jesus,”³¹³ for in Christ “Gospel and Person are one.”³¹⁴

³¹³ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 70.

³¹⁴ Ramsey, “The Gospel and the Gospels,” 38.

CHAPTER 7

THE CONTENT OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ NOT INCLUDED IN JOHN'S EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE

The previous chapter demonstrated the Christological content included in John's evangelistic revelation of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of God" that is necessary to believe for eternal life. This chapter explains the content that is *not* included by John as essential to believe for eternal life, namely, Jesus' virgin birth, burial, status as a prophet, Davidic lineage, national kingship, and second coming.

JESUS' VIRGIN BIRTH

Most evangelical theologians correctly conclude that although the New Testament teaches the truth of Christ's virgin birth, belief in this particular miracle is never stated in Scripture to be a requirement for eternal life.¹ Many modern proponents of Free Grace theology who reject the requirement to believe in Christ's deity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection for eternal life reason incorrectly that if His person and work are content required to be believed for regeneration, then belief in His virgin birth must also be necessary² since a virgin birth is assumed to be essential to His deity.³ But neither John's Gospel nor the rest of Scripture teaches this.

¹ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 3:529-30; Robert Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 189-90; J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), 395; George E. Meisinger, "A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content," in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, edited by J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 76; James Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 285; Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 119.

² Lon Gregg, "Alp upon Alp," *Grace in Focus* 24 (January/February 2009): 1, 4 n. 4; Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 4, 9; idem, "The Hydra's Other Head: Theological Legalism," *Grace in Focus* 23 (September/October 2008): 3; Jeremy D. Myers, "The Gospel Is More Than 'Faith Alone in Christ Alone,'" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (Autumn 2006): 49; Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 10; idem, "Essential Truths About Our Savior," *Grace in Focus* 23 (November/December 2008): 2; idem, "Five Current Confusions Concerning the Gospel," *Grace in Focus* 25 (March/April 2010): 1; idem, "Most Evangelicals Need Evangelizing," *Grace in Focus* 24 (March/April 2009): 2 n. 1; idem, "Saving Faith in Focus," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 11 (Autumn 1998): 46; idem, "Scavenger Hunt Salvation without a List," *Grace in Focus* 23 (May/June 2008): 3; idem, "Should We Rethink the Idea of Degrees of Faith?," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (Autumn 2006): 20; idem, "Tough Questions About Saving Faith," *The Grace Evangelical Society News* (June 1990): 4.

³ Robert N. Wilkin, "A Review of J. B. Hixson's *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 21 (Spring 2008): 24; idem, "A

Not only are there no verses in the Bible requiring belief in Christ's virgin birth for eternal salvation, there are surprisingly few passages in the New Testament that even refer to this miracle.⁴ The Gospels of Mark and John do not contain any direct references to it. Of the New Testament's 260 chapters, only two explicitly refer to the Virgin Birth (Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–35).

Occasionally, appeal is made to a variant reading of John 1:13 as evidence for the Virgin Birth in John's Gospel. This variant reading, found in only one versional witness (it^b, a fifth-century Old Latin ms.) along with a few Latin patristic quotations,⁵ contains the singular pronoun "He."⁶ This makes John 1:13 refer to a single person (Christ) as not being born of the will of man but of God. In which case, verse 13 becomes an allusion to the Virgin Birth in anticipation of the great incarnation verse that follows (v. 14). However, as enticing as this possibility seems, it must also be recognized that every extant Greek manuscript of John has the plural pronoun "who" (οἱ),⁷ making the passage refer to those who are regenerated solely by God. While some evangelicals view this textual variant as plausible,⁸ others have considered it doubtful based on internal, contextual factors in John.⁹ The fact that its external manuscript support is virtually nonexistent witnesses decisively against its authenticity.

Some interpreters, dating back to Origen in the third century, regard the objection of the Jews in John 8:41 to be an indirect reference to the Virgin Birth.¹⁰ There the unbelieving Jews say to Jesus, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God." By this, the Jews *may have been* insinuating that Mary was not a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth and that He was actually born out of fornication in contrast to a putative virgin birth. But this interpretation is far from certain and may be reading too much into the Jews' statement in verse 41, where they appear to be defending their own origin, not making a claim about Jesus' origin. The fact that there are no explicit references to Christ's virgin birth in John's Gospel indicates that it is not required content to believe for eternal life.

A second reason why John's Gospel does not require belief in Christ's virgin birth is because a virgin birth was not necessary soteriologically for Christ to be sinlessly

Review of Thomas Stegall's *The Gospel of the Christ*, "Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society 23 (Spring 2010): 15.

⁴ This observation should not be misconstrued to imply what many unbelieving critics of the Bible deduce from this fact, namely, that the Virgin Birth is not an important event that every Christian should believe. Some theological liberals even claim that Mark, John, Paul, and other first-century Christians were ignorant of the doctrine of the virgin birth and that it evolved as an explanation for the incarnation and deity of Christ. The implication, of course, is that the doctrine was man-made (Emil Brunner, *Der Mittler: Zur Besinnung über den Christusglauben* [Tübingen: J. Mohr, 1927], 289).

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 168.

⁶ This reading is accepted by the evangelical J. Oswald Sanders (*The Incomparable Christ* [Chicago: Moody, 1971], 18-19), and "a number of modern scholars (including Zahn, Resch, Blass, Loisy, R. Seeburg, Burney, Büchsel, Boismard, Dupont, and F. M. Braun)" (Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 169).

⁷ *Ibid.*, Metzger, 168-69.

⁸ Gromacki, *Virgin Birth*, 185-86.

⁹ Machen, *Virgin Birth of Christ*, 255-58.

¹⁰ Barrett, *Gospel According to John*, 348; Brown, *Gospel According to John, I–XII*, 357; Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 342.

human and capable of dying a substitutionary death for mankind's sin.¹¹ The Virgin Birth served only as a sign of Jesus' deity (Isa. 7:10–14). The Gospel of Luke states that Christ was miraculously and immaculately conceived without any sin in Mary's womb as a result of the Holy Spirit's overshadowing work at the moment of His incarnation (Luke 1:35). All that was necessary for Christ to be born without inheriting any human sin was that He be perfectly, sinlessly conceived (i.e., "immaculately" conceived). This is technically distinct from a virgin birth. Once married to Joseph, Mary theoretically could have first conceived Jesus' half brothers and sisters (Ps. 69:8; Matt. 12:46; 13:55; Mark 6:3; Luke 2:5; John 7:3; Gal. 1:19; Jude 1) through normal human paternity with Joseph (Matt. 1:18, 25). Then later, as a nonvirgin, she could have received the sinless conception of Christ in her womb solely through the agency of the Holy Spirit and completely apart from Joseph, and Christ still would have been conceived without any human sin through a nonvirgin. Of course, had this occurred, such a miraculous, immaculate, and divine conception would probably not be accepted by all who knew that Mary and Joseph were already married with several children. Though this hypothetical scenario still would have resulted in Christ's sinless humanity through a miracle of the Holy Spirit, it would not have provided the necessary "sign" signifying the deity of the One born.¹² Evangelical theologian Norman Geisler clearly summarizes the matter.

God may have achieved our justification without Jesus being virgin-born . . . His sinlessness . . . soteriologically, is absolutely necessary, but virgin birth is not an absolute *condition* for His sinlessness. . . . God instead could have had Christ born through an immaculate conception, for example, but this would not have drawn the same attention to His supernatural origin, since a virgin birth is more empirically obvious than an immaculate conception. All that is absolutely necessary in this regard is for Christ not to have inherited Adam's sin nature; a virgin birth is one way (but not the only way) to accomplish this.¹³

This complex theological issue boils down to the simple conclusion that Scripture requires for eternal life belief in the miracle of Christ's incarnation, rather than His virgin birth. The incarnation of the Son of God is a miracle in itself that must be believed for one's salvation (John 3:13–16; 6:51–53). The Bible does not require belief in all miracles to receive eternal life—only the miracles of Christ's incarnation, substitutionary death for sin, and resurrection from the dead. John's Gospel requires belief in Jesus as the unique Son of God and Man, which qualifies Him to be the one mediator and Savior of mankind (1 Tim. 2:4–6). Thus, John teaches that the lost must believe in the fact of Christ's incarnation, not the means used by God to achieve it (i.e., the Virgin Birth).¹⁴

¹¹ A. N. S. Lane, "The Rationale and Significance of the Virgin Birth," *Vox Evangelica* 10 (1977): 56; Orr, *Virgin Birth of Christ*, 188–89; Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ: A Biblical Response to the Crossless Gospel Regarding the Contents of Saving Faith* (Milwaukee: Grace Gospel Press, 2009), 705–46.

¹² Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986), 242.

¹³ Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 3:535.

¹⁴ Orr, *Virgin Birth of Christ*, 285.

JESUS' BURIAL

Free Grace proponents who deny that the Cross and Resurrection are essential to believe for eternal life sometimes argue that if these works done by Jesus are necessary to believe for regeneration, then the fact of His burial must also be believed.¹⁵ However, most theologians, regardless of affiliation, recognize that Jesus' burial and post-resurrection appearances are not elements of the saving gospel but are evidences of His death and resurrection, which in themselves are the two key elements of the gospel.¹⁶ There are three main reasons why John's Gospel does not require belief in Jesus' burial for the new birth. First, neither the Gospel of John nor the rest of Scripture present the burial of Jesus' body as being inherent to His personhood and thus inherent to Him being the object of faith for eternal life. In the previous chapter, it was stated that Jesus' death and resurrection became a fixed part of His identity in a way that His other signs and actions did not. When Jesus turned water into wine at Cana, He did not become wine. Jesus' incarnation, sacrificial death, and resurrection were unique events since each one became part of His permanent identity as "the Christ, the Son of God."

Second, in contrast to the Lord's burial and post-resurrection appearances, only His incarnation, death, and resurrection were salvific in the sense that these events formed the necessary ground to provide eternal salvation to mankind.

¹⁵ Jeremy D. Myers, "The Gospel is More than 'Faith Alone in Christ Alone,'" 48; Robert N. Wilkin, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:3–11," *Grace in Focus* 23 (January/February 2008): 1; idem, "Essential Truths About Our Savior," 2; idem, "Five Current Confusions Concerning the Gospel," 1; idem, *The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2012), 140, 154.

¹⁶ Ronald B. Allen, *The Wonder of Worship: A New Understanding of the Worship Experience* (Nashville: Word, 2001), 65; Charles C. Bing, "How to Share the Gospel Clearly," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 7 (Spring 1994): 57; Gerald L. Borchert, "The Resurrection: 1 Corinthians 15," *Review & Expositor* 80.3 (Summer 1983): 402-3; G. Michael Cocoris, *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 12; Thomas L. Constable, "The Gospel Message," in *Walvoord: A Tribute* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 202-3; James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (London: Tyndale, 1960), 73, 167; Thomas R. Edgar, "What Is the Gospel?" in *Basic Theology: Applied*, ed. Wesley and Elaine Willis & John and Janet Master (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), 158; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 725; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 684; Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 3:518, 526-29, 531-32, 538-39; Michael D. Halsey, "What Is Free Grace Theology?" in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, edited by J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 12-13 n. 23; J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, rev. ed. (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 57; John Kloppenborg, "An Analysis of the Pre-Pauline Formula 1 Cor 15:3b5 in Light of Some Recent Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40.3 (July 1978): 357; Jan Lambrecht, "Line of Thought in 1 Cor 15,1-11," *Gregorianum* 72.4 (1991): 662; Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 129-32, 160, 283; David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 542; Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1973), 56; Meisinger, "A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content," 74-79; R. Larry Moyer, *Free and Clear: Understanding & Communicating God's Offer of Eternal Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 16-17; Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 267; idem, *So Great Salvation*, 39; Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 47; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Das paulinische Evangelium: Vorgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1968), 274.

Third, John's Gospel does not present Jesus' burial as the fulfillment of Scripture, in contrast to the gospel of salvation, which is elsewhere stated to be "according to the Scriptures" (Rom. 1:1–2; 1 Cor. 15:3–4). John repeatedly depicts the sacrificial death of Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture (13:18–19; 15:25; 19:24, 28, 36, 37) and thus as saving gospel content,¹⁷ as well as Jesus' resurrection (2:22; 12:16; 20:9). But conspicuously, the section in John's narrative devoted to Jesus' burial (19:38–42) makes no mention of this event fulfilling Scripture.

Passage in John's Gospel	Christological Event	John's Statements of Old Testament Fulfillment
19:16–37	Crucifixion	19:24, 28, 36, 37
19:38–42	Burial	
20:1–13	Resurrection	20:9
20:14–29	Appearances	

Table 3. Jesus' Burial and Scriptural Fulfillment Pattern in John 19–20

The omission of any statement in John 19:38–42 or anywhere else in John that Christ's burial fulfilled Scripture is not because His burial was not predicted in the Old Testament, for Isaiah 53:9 clearly stated that the Messiah would be "with the rich at His death." Jürgen Zangenberg explains how the description of Jesus' burial in John 19:38–42 matches the prophecy of Isaiah 53:9.

On the basis of these discoveries it seems that the closest archaeological parallels for John's account of Jesus' burial are not royal funerals, as is often suggested on the basis of royal imagery that indeed permeates the passion narrative, but "civic" burials of wealthy upper class families. The depiction of Nicodemus and Joseph as members of the local upper class fits well into this picture, and the burial practices using spices and layered textiles are also entirely plausible on the basis of the cosmopolitan Jewish upper class of 1st c. CE Jerusalem. For a royal burial, e.g. like that of Herod, the amount of spices does not seem big enough.¹⁸

¹⁷ Berkouwer, *Work of Christ*, 141; David E. Garland, "The Fulfillment Quotations in John's Account of the Crucifixion," in *Perspectives on John: Method and Interpretation in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Robert B. Sloan and Mikeal C. Parsons (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993), 230–32, 249–50; Brian J. Tabb, "Johannine Fulfillment of Scripture: Continuity and Escalation," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21.4 (2011): 495–97.

¹⁸ Jürgen Zangenberg, "'Buried According to the Custom of the Jews': John 19,40 in Its Material and Literary Context," in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle,

Even though Jesus' burial was predicted in Old Testament Scripture, John 19:38–42 makes no mention of it fulfilling Scripture, like John does elsewhere for the Cross and Resurrection. This demonstrates that John does not regard Jesus' burial as part of the saving gospel that must be believed for eternal life, though it provided valuable evidence for the reality of the Savior's death and resurrection.

This conclusion is consistent with the pattern found elsewhere in the New Testament where the elements of the gospel are said to be “according to the Scriptures,” whereas elements that are technically not part of the gospel, but are its supporting evidence, lack such qualifiers. For instance, 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 attaches the phrase “according to the Scriptures” only to Christ's death for our sins and His resurrection, not to His burial and post-resurrection appearances.¹⁹

15:3	Christ died for our sins	1) First proposition
15:3	according to the Scriptures	1a) Scriptural proof
15:4	and was buried	1b) Physical proof
15:4	He arose	2) Second proposition
15:4	according to the Scriptures	2a) Scriptural proof
15:5	and was seen	2b) Physical proof

Table 4. Jesus' Burial and Scriptural Fulfillment Pattern in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5

In Luke-Acts, the evangelistic message that fulfills Old Testament Scripture is specifically said to consist of the Cross and Resurrection, but noticeably absent is any mention of the Lord's burial or post-resurrection appearances (Luke 24:44–46; Acts 3:18; 26:22–23). In Paul's evangelism at Antioch of Pisidia in southern Galatia, he speaks of the scriptural, prophetic “promise” (Acts 13:23) that God has “fulfilled,” but he applies this only to Jesus' death (vv. 27, 29a) and resurrection (vv. 32–33). Significantly, Paul does not apply the modifying terminology of scriptural promise and fulfillment to the Lord's burial (v. 29b) and post-resurrection appearances (v. 31).

Bibliotheca ephemericum theologiarum lovaniensium 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 887-88.

¹⁹ Bing, “How to Share the Gospel Clearly,” 57; George E. Meisinger, “A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content,” in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 78 n. 35.

Acts 13	Christological Event	Statement of Scripture Fulfilled
13:27–29a	Crucifixion	13:27, 29
13:29b	Burial	
13:30, 32–37	Resurrection	13:32–35
13:31	Appearances	

Table 5. Jesus' Burial and Scriptural Fulfillment Pattern in Acts 13

These patterns found in the Gospel of John, Luke-Acts, and 1 Corinthians show that John, Luke, and Paul taught the same saving message of the gospel. Though John, along with the other biblical writers, presents the facts of Jesus' burial and post-resurrection appearances as valuable proofs of His death²⁰ and resurrection, John does not present the burial and post-resurrection appearances as the essence of Jesus being "the Christ, the Son of God" and thus not as the content of faith required for eternal life.²¹

JESUS AS PROPHET

If the Gospel of John identifies Jesus as a prophet, does this mean that belief in Him as a prophet is necessary, or even sufficient, to receive eternal life? This section explains that though Jesus functioned in the capacity of a prophet, this was not equivalent to Him being the Christ, the Son of God, and therefore belief in Him as a prophet is neither necessary nor sufficient for eternal life.

Prophet Passages in John's Gospel

In John's Gospel, the word "prophet" or "prophets" occurs 14 times. In six passages, the term refers to the prophet Isaiah (1:23; 12:38) or to Old Testament prophets in general (1:45; 6:45; 8:52–53). John the Baptist is asked twice whether he is "the Prophet" (ὁ προφήτης) of Deuteronomy 18:18–19 who would be like Moses (John 1:21, 25). Twice the Jewish multitude speculates that Jesus is "the Prophet" (6:14; 7:40), also in reference to the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18. On one occasion, the rulers and Pharisees deny that Jesus is "a prophet," incorrectly telling Nicodemus, "Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee" (7:52).²² Jesus is also called "a prophet" by the Samaritan woman

²⁰ Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 271.

²¹ Bing, "How to Share the Gospel Clearly," 57; Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, 57; J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 146–47; Meisinger, "A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content," 76, 78; Radmacher, *Salvation*, 47.

²² Jonah the son of Amittai (Jonah 1:1) was from Gath Hopher (2 Kings 14:25) in Galilee. Ray Summers, *Behold the Lamb: An Exposition of the Theological Themes in the Gospel of John* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 114.

at the well (4:19) and by the blind man whom Jesus healed (9:17). Only once does Jesus refer to Himself as “a prophet” (4:44), and even there, John uses indirect discourse: “For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country.”

Several important facts may be gleaned from these uses of “prophet” in John as they pertain to Jesus. First, a “prophet” in John possesses the same characteristics as an Old Testament prophet, such as having authority as one sent by God and an ability to perform miracles and communicate verbal revelation from God to man.²³ Each of these attributes of a prophet is shared by Jesus in John’s Gospel; but Christ’s prophetic function is far superior in several respects. His authority stems not merely from the fact that He was sent by God but that His mission originated from His unique relationship with God as His Father. Dodd explains the meaning of “out of the Father” (7:17; 8:42; 16:28):

Εκ properly denotes extraction or origin: ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ ἐλήλυθα εἰς τὸν κόσμον (xvi. 28) can hardly mean anything else than ‘I issued out of the Father and came into the world’; cf. viii. 42 ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθον καὶ ἤκω, οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀπ’ ἐμαυτοῦ ἐλήλυθα, ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνός με ἀπέστειλεν, where the distinction between ἐκ and ἀπό is in view; Christ’s coming was not initiated by Himself—He came, not ἀπ’ ἐμαυτοῦ but ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, since the Father sent Him; but not only so—He had His origin in the being of the Father. It is in this precise sense, and not in any vaguer sense which the words might also bear, that He is ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ. In this sense, applicable to no prophet or messenger, Jesus is Son of God.²⁴

In addition, Jesus’ miracles in John’s Gospel were unlike any done by Old Testament prophets in that His were “signs” (σημεῖα) intended to reveal or signify truth *about Himself*—the miracle-worker—in whom people were to believe (20:30–31). In contrast, miracles done by all other prophets pointed observers to faith in God alone, not the prophets themselves. Moreover, Jesus’ verbal communication of God’s words was unlike that of any other prophet in the sense that He not only communicated faithfully the words God gave Him (5:24), but He Himself was God’s revelation to man as the incarnate Logos (1:1, 14, 18), so that both His words and deeds were divine revelation.²⁵ In John’s Gospel, Jesus is a prophet in the technical sense, even “the Prophet” (Deut. 18:18–19; Acts 3:22–23). As “the Christ, the Son of God,” He not only meets and fulfills all the requirements for being “the Prophet,”²⁶ but He far exceeds them. While the lost do not need to know and believe that Jesus fulfilled the role of a prophet or even “the

²³ Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 89-90.

²⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 259-60.

²⁵ Michael D. Halsey, *The Gospel of Grace and Truth: A Theology of Grace from the Gospel of John* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015), 114-15.

²⁶ Richard Bauckham, “Jewish Messianism according to the Gospel of John,” in *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 209, 213, 225.

Prophet” to be saved, they must believe Jesus’ prophetic divine revelation about Himself concerning His person and saving work. This same saving revelation is reiterated later in Acts and the Epistles as the gospel of Christ or the gospel of the grace of God. Faith in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God” saves, not belief in Him merely as a prophet.

In John’s Gospel, the terms “Christ” and “Prophet” are treated distinctly. For example, John the Baptist is asked by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to identify himself as either “the Christ” (1:20, 25), “Elijah” (1:21, 25), or “the Prophet” (1:21, 25).²⁷ Later, this same distinction persists among the multitudes in Jerusalem: “Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, ‘Truly this is the Prophet.’ Others said, ‘This is the Christ.’ But some said, ‘Will the Christ come out of Galilee?’” (7:40–41). John knows that “the Prophet” and “the Christ” refer to the same person; nevertheless, he maintains the crowd’s distinction between these important terms. In doing so, John maintains a theological distinction between these terms in his Gospel, where “Christ” is clearly treated as a messianic and salvific term that defines Jesus as the object of faith for eternal life,²⁸ whereas John’s readers are never told that believing Jesus is “a prophet” or even “the Prophet” results in everlasting life. Concerning John’s choice of terms for Jesus, Dodd concludes: “It is however the titles ‘Son of God’ and ‘Son of Man’ that the evangelist has selected to bear the weight of his interpretation of the Person of Christ.”²⁹

These conclusions harmonize with the rest of the New Testament, where Jesus as “the Christ” is the object of faith, not Jesus as a prophet. In Luke 24, the risen Christ (whose identity is temporarily veiled) appears as a stranger to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They ask the “stranger” if He is aware of “the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was *a prophet* mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (24:19). When they finish describing this “prophet” to the “stranger,” the Lord responds to them, saying, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not *the Christ* to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” (24:25–26). In His rebuke, the risen Lord switches the description of Himself from the inferior term “prophet” to “the Christ.” This distinction is consistent with the rest of the New Testament, where eternal life is never conditioned on belief in Jesus as a mere prophet, for His function as the Christ and Son of God encompasses and exceeds the role of a mere human prophet.³⁰

²⁷ Bernard clarifies this distinction: “The Jews held that not only Elijah, but others of the great prophets, would return before Messiah’s appearance. Cf. 2 Esd. 2:17, ‘For thy help will I send my servants Isaiah and Jeremiah,’ a passage which may be pre-Christian. One of the rumours about Jesus during His Galilean ministry was that He was ‘Jeremiah or one of the prophets’ (Mt. 16:14; cf. Mk. 8:28). . . . But more specific than this expectation of the return of one of the older prophets was the expectation of one who was pre-eminently *‘the prophet,’* whose coming was looked for on the ground of Deut. 18:15. This idea is not in the Synoptists, but appears three times in Jn. (1:21; 6:14; 7:40). Christian exegesis from the beginning (Acts 3:22; 7:37) found the fulfillment of Deut. 18:15 in the Christ; but pre-Christian, *i.e.* Jewish, comment distinguished ‘the prophet like unto Moses’ from the Messiah, as is clear from the present passage [John 1:21] and from 7:40” (J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928], 1:37).

²⁸ Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 239.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁰ For further explanation about Christ as Prophet not being part of the content of faith for eternal life, especially as it relates to Acts 3:22–23, see Stegall, *Gospel of the Christ*, 674–76.

Samaritan Concept of Messiah (John 4)

At this point, some who hold to the deityless “promise-only” saving message may object that John 4 presents the case of a Samaritan woman who believed in Jesus as the guarantor of eternal life while also believing Him to be only a human prophet. Supposedly, this shows that it is possible to believe in Jesus for eternal life as “the Christ” while believing He is strictly human and not deity. Lon Gregg holds this view and explains it as follows:

Other Johannine examples of this unsophisticated faith include the woman at the well, whose regenerating belief apparently did not require Jesus to be deity. Her persuasion about eternal life is more directly explained by her persuasion that Jesus was the Messiah, the Prophet who would tell the truth about all things (John 4:25–26). Fully apart from knowing whether Jesus was God, she could aptly reason that the promise of eternal life to her if she believed (John 4:14c), as it was from the lips of the truth-telling Prophet, should be believed. There is likewise no record that her fellows, the townspeople of Sychar, recognized Jesus’ deity (John 4:42; cf. 20:31a, 1 John 5:1), but their faith also stands in John’s record as exemplary.³¹

Gregg’s view follows that of Zane Hodges, who writes:

But now let us look at John 4. In that famous passage we have the Samaritans saying to the woman who had encountered Jesus, “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

Observe that the common denominator to both passages [John 11:25–27 and 4:42] is the term “Christ.” On Martha’s lips He is “the Christ, the Son of God,” and on the lips of the Samaritans He is “the Christ, the Savior of the world.” This is not an accidental or insignificant difference.

In Jewish prophecy and theology the promised Christ was also the Son of God—that is, He was to be a divine person. Recall the words of Isaiah: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given . . . and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6–7). But in Samaritan theology, the Messiah was thought of as a prophet and the woman at the well is led to faith through our Lord’s prophetic ability to know her life. Her words, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (4:19) are a first step in the direction of recognizing Him as the Christ. There is no evidence that she or the other Samaritans understood the deity of our Lord.

But they *did believe* that he was the Christ. And John tells us in his first epistle that “whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God”

³¹ Lon Gregg, “A Critical Perspective: Orthodoxy, the Right Jesus, and Eternal Life,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 22 (Autumn 2009): 99.

(5:1)! A full theology of His person is not necessary to salvation. If we believe that Jesus is the One who guarantees our eternal destiny, we have believed all we absolutely have to believe in order to be saved.³²

These claims fail to recognize John's theological point about Jesus' deity in 4:26 and are based on unproven assumptions about Samaritan theology. There are several reasons for concluding that the example of the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar does not support a deityless Christ as the object of faith for eternal life.

When Hodges writes "in Samaritan theology, the Messiah was thought of as a prophet," he means "thought of as [only] a prophet" since his point is that the Samaritans did not believe in the deity of the Messiah. But it is impossible to prove with any degree of certainty what the first-century Samaritans believed about the Messiah, or the Taheb as he was called³³ since the earliest extant Samaritan sources referring to the Taheb were composed in a commentary called *Tibat Marqe*, which dates no earlier than the fourth century.³⁴ It is quite possible that John's Gospel preceded Samaritan theology's concept of the Taheb, so that the direction of influence may have been from John to Marqah,³⁵ who wrote *Tibat Marqe*. Johannine concepts about "knowing the truth" and "walking in truth" occur throughout *Tibat Marqe*.³⁶ Consequently, Samaritan scholars Anderson and Giles conclude: "The Sources for Marqe are the Pentateuch, the New Testament, Jewish (non-Torah) documents, and certain Muslim documents."³⁷ Based on these facts, Hodges has no basis for issuing a sweeping statement about first-century Samaritan beliefs concerning the Messiah. Furthermore, in light of varying Jewish views on the Messiah circulating in the first century, why should we assume first-century Samaritan theology of the Messiah or Taheb was monolithic?³⁸

Even if we assume that later and more general Samaritan beliefs about the Taheb were also held by the woman at the well near Sychar, this still does not mean Jesus accommodated her false views about the Messiah and accepted her faith in Him as a mere human prophet. Instead, Jesus' dialogue with her in John 4 reveals His conscious attempt

³² Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," 4-5.

³³ The name Taheb comes from the Samaritan Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew word for return or restore. Thus, the Taheb or Samaritan version of the Messiah was viewed principally as a coming restorer and teacher of true worship and the Mosaic Law. James Alan Montgomery, *The Samaritans: The Earliest Jewish Sect – Their History, Theology and Literature* (New York: KTAV, 1968), 246-47.

³⁴ John MacDonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans* (London: SCM, 1964), 42; George Mlakuzhyil, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1987), 251 n. 18; James D. Purvis, "The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans," *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975): 163. For the view that *Tibat Marqe* was written even more recently than the fourth century, see Catrin H. Williams, *I am He: The Interpretation of Anî Hû in Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 258.

³⁵ Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Origins and Development of Samaritan Christianity," *New Testament Studies* 19.4 (1973): 405. For an opposing view, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 239-40.

³⁶ Marie-Emile Boismard, *Moses or Jesus: An Essay in Johannine Christology*, trans. B. T. Viviano (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993), 40-41.

³⁷ Robert T. Anderson and Terry Giles, *Tradition Kept: The Literature of the Samaritans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 271.

³⁸ Purvis, "The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans," 168.

to incrementally elevate her perception of His true identity, culminating in the pronouncement of His own deity. This is illustrated by the following bolded text.

v. 9 “How is it that You, being a **Jew**, ask a drink from me . . . ?”

v. 12 “Are You **greater than our father Jacob** . . . ?”

v. 19 “Sir, I perceive that You are a **prophet**.”

v. 25 “I know that **Messiah** is coming” (who is called Christ).

v. 26 Lit. “**I am**, who speak to you.”

The Samaritan woman’s comprehension of Jesus’ identity progresses rapidly from viewing Him as a Jewish man, to someone greater than the patriarch Jacob (esteemed by both Jews and Samaritans), to a prophet, to the Messiah, whom Jesus declares to be “I Am.” After the woman’s reference to the Messiah in verse 25, Jesus voluntarily identifies Himself as the Messiah in verse 26, where He literally proclaims “I am, the one who speaks to you” (Ἐγὼ εἶμι, ὁ λαλῶν σοι). By replying to her in this manner, Jesus was obviously not making a self-evident statement: “I, and not another person, am currently speaking to you.” Such a statement would have disrupted the flow of the conversation and had no logical connection to her statement in verse 25. Moreover, if Jesus in verse 26 simply sought to affirm His identity as the “Messiah” of verse 25, then He could have said just as easily, “I am the Messiah,” where a predicate “Messiah” is supplied with the “I am” statement. Or, Jesus could have spoken of Himself in the third person: “The Messiah is the one speaking to you.” Or, Jesus could have replied by emphasizing *her* statement about the Messiah in the previous verse: “I am the one *you* speak of.” Instead, by saying, “I am, the one who speaks to you” (Ἐγὼ εἶμι, ὁ λαλῶν σοι), Jesus’ provides an arresting reply that declares a twofold truth—He is both the Messiah and God as the “I Am.”³⁹ This is likely a case of ironic double meaning,⁴⁰ where there are two levels of intended meaning—a surface-level meaning and a spiritual level of meaning intended for those who are willing to believe.⁴¹ On the surface, Jesus’ use of ἐγὼ εἶμι to start His sentence in verse 26 can be overlooked as simply a stylistically unusual way to reply to the woman’s statement about the Messiah in verse 25.⁴² On the

³⁹ O’Day’s comments are helpful here: “The association of these two verses leaves little doubt that this is an absolute *ego eimi*, that is, an *ego eimi* saying that is an unqualified revelation of Jesus’ identity. Jesus does not intend for us to supply the predicate from the woman’s statement in v. 25. Jesus is *not* confirming that he is the Messiah expected by the Samaritan woman but is using the *ego eimi* in its fullest sense to identify himself as God’s revealer, the sent one of God.” Gail R. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 72.

⁴⁰ Duke categorizes verse 26 as an instance of “irony of identity,” similar to John 9:35–38 and 20:14–16. Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 123. See also, Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:620.

⁴¹ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 28.

⁴² Louw says “*any* stylistic device has the function of highlighting, that is, of emphasizing and drawing attention to” (Johannes P. Louw, “On Johannine Style,” *Neotestamentica* 20 [1986]: 8).

other hand, John's characteristic use of ἐγώ εἰμι elsewhere in the book points to a spiritually significant meaning, where He is identified not only as the Messiah but as God. Jesus' choice to describe Himself as ἐγώ εἰμι in the absolute (without a predicate) is a clear affirmation of His deity.⁴³ Several factors support this interpretation.

First, while some commentators and translators downplay the significance of Jesus' expression in verse 26 by supplying the predicate "he," as though Jesus were simply saying "I am he,"⁴⁴ this is not consistent with Jesus' pattern of usage throughout John's Gospel. The expression ἐγώ εἰμι occurs 24 times in John, and on every occasion but one (9:9), it is Jesus who employs this expression. Every time He uses ἐγώ εἰμι outside of 4:26, this construction can reasonably be interpreted in each context as a statement of His deity.⁴⁵ So why should verse 26 be treated as an anomaly? Since verse 26 is the climactic moment in Jesus' conversation with the woman, it is more consistent to view ἐγώ εἰμι as Jesus' climactic revelation of His deity. This is characteristic Johannine style (8:58; 9:35–38; 20:28).

Second, Jesus' statement in verse 26 (Ἐγώ εἰμι, ὁ λαλῶν σου) bears a striking resemblance to the Septuagint rendering of Isaiah 52:6 (ἐγώ εἰμι αὐτὸς ὁ λαλῶν), where God is clearly the one speaking.⁴⁶

Linguistically, the place of the ἐγώ εἰμι statement first in Jesus' reply to the woman in verse 26 (Ἐγώ εἰμι, ὁ λαλῶν σου) has the effect of highlighting or emphasizing this portion of Jesus' statement to the woman since it occupies a specially marked position of prominence (Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010], 269-72).

⁴³ David M. Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 178-81; Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 209-10; Kenneth O. Gangel, *John*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 79; Philip B. Harner, *The "I Am" of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Johannine Usage and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 45-47. Hart also concludes that "I am" in verse 26 implies Jesus' deity: "I am" recalls the name of the self-existent God of the OT (Ex. 3:14–15; Is. 41:4; 43:10, 13) and implies Jesus' deity" (John F. Hart, "John," in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham [Chicago: Moody, 2014], 1618).

⁴⁴ For example, Carson says, "This instance of *egō eimi* (lit. 'I am') is not theologically loaded" (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 227 n. 1). But Carson provides no explanation why in this context this expression is void of deity. This is typical among commentators who do not see Jesus' deity in His declaration in verse 26. Those who accept that ἐγώ εἰμι is a declaration of deity typically give reasons for this interpretation. See George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1987), 62; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:620; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 158; J. Carl Laney, *John*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 96-97; Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 178; Leon Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 273; Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 152-53; Elmer Towns, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1990), 100.

⁴⁵ Besides John 4:26, see also 6:20, 35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 18, 24, 28, 58; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1, 5; 18:5, 6, 8.

⁴⁶ Ball, *'I Am' in John's Gospel*, 179-80; James Hamilton, "The Influence of Isaiah on the Gospel of John," *Perichoresis* 5.2 (2007): 153; Harner, *"I Am" of the Fourth Gospel*, 47; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:620; Franklin W. Young, "A Study of the Relation of Isaiah to the Fourth Gospel," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 46 (1955): 224.

Third, according to later Samaritan theology, the Messiah or Taheb would be a lesser prophet than Moses.⁴⁷ Like Islam, which teaches that Muhammad was the greatest of all prophets (including Jesus), Samaritan theology taught the preeminence of Moses as prophet. Montgomery writes, “inasmuch as there could be no greater prophet than Moses nor one equal to him, the Messiah is an entirely inferior personage”⁴⁸ in Samaritan theology. Therefore, if the Samaritan woman in John 4 understood “Messiah” (4:25) to be someone inferior to Moses, then Jesus certainly would have corrected this notion by seeking to elevate her concept of the “Messiah.”⁴⁹ This conclusion fits perfectly with Jesus’ ἐγώ εἰμι statement in verse 26 being a declaration of His deity.

Fourth, since Samaritan theology was based predominantly on the Pentateuch rather than subsequent portions of the Old Testament canon, the reference to the name of God in Exodus 3:14 would have carried significant weight. In popular Samaritan religious practice, God was commonly referred to as “I am who I am” or the great “I Am.”⁵⁰ Speaking of divine names in Samaritan literature, Montgomery states, “Of the other Biblical names, Adonai and Shaddai are in frequent use. But especially favorite is the employment of the ‘I am that I am,’ or simply, ‘I am.’”⁵¹ This would fit with Jesus leading the woman to a higher and correct notion of who He was as the “Messiah.”

Fifth, regarding the sphere of Taheb’s ministry in Samaritan theology, Montgomery writes, “No worldwide dominion is predicated of the Taeb, his function is solely for Israel.”⁵² This stands in contrast to the testimony about Christ made by the citizens of Sychar: “we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). To be the Savior of the world requires one to be no less than God (Isa. 45:22). Thus, the Samaritans’ confession of faith in John 4:42 reveals an expanded concept of the Messiah that must have included Jesus’ deity.

Finally, interpreting Jesus’ ἐγώ εἰμι statement in John 4:26 as a declaration of His deity for the Samaritan woman to believe fits with His stated objective to her earlier in the dialogue where He says, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (v. 10). Note that Jesus wanted the woman to realize both the gift and the Giver: “If you knew the *gift of God* and *who it is* who says to you . . .”⁵³ Not only did Jesus want her to realize that eternal life is a gracious gift, but He also wanted her to know the true identity of the Giver—that eternal life is “the gift of God.” Jesus Himself is “God” who gives her this gift, as He Himself declares to the woman: “whoever drinks of the water that *I shall give* him will never thirst. But the water that *I shall give* him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (v. 14).

⁴⁷ John MacDonald, *The Theology of the Samaritans* (London: SCM, 1964), 363; Purvis, “The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans,” 189-90.

⁴⁸ Montgomery, *Samaritans*, 245.

⁴⁹ Purvis, “The Fourth Gospel and the Samaritans,” 187.

⁵⁰ Edwin D. Freed, “Did John Write His Gospel Partly to Win Samaritan Converts?” *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970): 251-52.

⁵¹ Montgomery, *Samaritans*, 214.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵³ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 241, 243.

At what point in the dialogue does the woman come to realize “the gift of God and who it is” who gives this gift? It could not have been prior to verse 26, where, for the first time in the dialogue, Jesus identifies Himself as the Messiah that the woman had just mentioned in verse 25 and where He simultaneously teaches that Messiah is also God as the “I Am.” Significantly, it is only *after* verse 26 (in verse 28) that the woman leaves her waterpot with physical water at the well and returns to Sychar to testify about Christ. Evidently, at this point she comprehends the gift of the living water that supercedes the physical water from the well and the true identity of the Giver.⁵⁴ These details in the text provide ample evidence to conclude that, consistent with the rest of John’s Gospel, the Samaritan woman and townspeople of Sychar believed in the deity of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of the world and that He was much more than a mere human prophet like Moses or the Taheb.

JESUS’ DAVIDIC LINEAGE

Some Free Grace “promise-only” adherents view the Davidic lineage of Jesus as being part of a broad “gospel” that encompasses every Christological truth in the Bible. But since they distinguish the narrower “saving message” from the broader “gospel of Christ,” they reject the Davidic lineage of Jesus as being content that is essential to believe for eternal life.⁵⁵ Since proponents of the “promise-only” view deny that Jesus’ person and work are essential to believe for eternal life, they may wonder why traditional Free Grace people do not include the Lord’s Davidic lineage as part of the contents of “saving faith” or as an element of the “gospel of Christ.” Is there a biblical basis for this distinction? What does John’s Gospel teach about Christ’s Davidic descent?

Davidic Lineage in John’s Gospel

The Gospel of John mentions David by name in only one verse (7:42). This occurs in a setting where the multitudes in Jerusalem are perplexed and divided (v. 43) about the origin and identity of Jesus (vv. 26–27). Some conclude correctly (but deficiently), “Truly, this is the Prophet” (v. 40), while others affirm, “This is the Christ” (v. 41a). But if Jesus is the Christ, as He is claiming, then how can “the Christ come out of Galilee?” (v. 41b, cf. 7:52). This leads the crowd to recall the teaching of the prophets: “Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?” (v. 42). The crowd is correct as to the lineage and birthplace of the true Messiah (2 Sam. 7; Isa. 9:6–7; Mic. 5:2).⁵⁶ But John stops short of explicitly answering their question.

While John implies the truth of Jesus’ Davidic sonship, he makes no effort to prove either Christ’s birth in Bethlehem or Davidic descent,⁵⁷ leading one scholar to

⁵⁴ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1:621.

⁵⁵ Myers, “The Gospel Is More Than ‘Faith Alone in Christ Alone,’” 53-54, 56.

⁵⁶ Gordon H. Johnston, “Messianic Trajectories in God’s Covenant Promise to David,” in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel’s King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 59-74.

⁵⁷ Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 178-79; Margaret M. Daly-Denton, “David in the Gospels,”

declare, “This Gospel is very far from the concept of Davidic royalty.”⁵⁸ In truth, Christ’s Davidic lineage is neither denied in John’s Gospel nor developed;⁵⁹ but it is represented once in the narrative (7:42), where John indirectly plants in the reader’s mind the truth of Jesus’ physical descent from David.

Jesus’ Davidic sonship is hardly a prominent feature of the fourth Gospel. This can be seen by a comparison of John to the Synoptic Gospels, where the title “Son of David” occurs in Matthew 10 times, Mark 4 times, and Luke 4 times, but not once in John.⁶⁰ In fact, Moses is mentioned far more in John’s Gospel than Abraham, Jacob, and David.⁶¹ Of course, Jesus is not presented in John as being against Moses, but simply far greater than Moses. This leads to the question, why does John appear to deemphasize Jesus’ Davidic descent? The answer can only be realized once contemporary Jewish expectations about the Messiah are understood. John, in harmony with the teaching of Christ, sought to elevate and develop the reader’s conception of “Christ” and “Son of God” above first-century Jewish notions of the Messiah.

Jewish Expectations of Davidic Messiah

The abundant literature preserved from the Second Temple era provides a window into the meanings associated with “Son of David” as a messianic reference in the milieu of first-century Israel. The title “Messiah” derived from the Hebrew verbal root מָשַׁח which was used in reference to anyone or anything “anointed,” and it applied broadly to “anyone to whom God assigns a special mission,” whether prophet, priest, king, or even a heavenly apocalyptic figure.⁶² Χριστός, the Greek translation of מָשַׁח (John 1:41; 4:25), was also used in reference to messianic figures.⁶³ Beyond this, beliefs about the Messiah

Word & World 23.4 (Fall 2003): 426; Sherman E. Johnson, “The Davidic-Royal Motif in the Gospels,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968): 139.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Johnson.

⁵⁹ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 131-33; Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 23.

⁶⁰ D. R. Bauer, “Son of David,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 767; F. Lamar Cribbs, “A Reassessment of the Date of Origin and the Destination of the Gospel of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 40; Daly-Denton, “David in the Gospels,” 426; James M. Gibbs, “Purpose and Pattern in Matthew’s Use of the Title ‘Son of David,’” *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963/64): 446-64; Jack D. Kingsbury, “The Title ‘Son of David’ in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 591-602; D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 125.

⁶¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:291; Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 125-26.

⁶² Herbert W. Bateman, IV, “Anticipations of the One Called Messiah,” in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel’s King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 254-55; John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 12; Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, 114.

⁶³ *Psalms of Solomon* 17:32 and the heading to 18; 18:5, 7. See Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Messianic Ideas in the Apocalyptic and Related Literature of Early Judaism,” in *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 93-94.

or messiahs were somewhat diverse.⁶⁴ Texts from Qumran show that some Jews anticipated a binary messianism with one priestly, Aaronic messiah and the other a political or regal messiah, who together would form a diarchy.⁶⁵ Other literature reveals belief in a monarchy of Davidic kingship (*Pss. Sol.*).⁶⁶ Though not all literature of that period connects a coming messiah to David,⁶⁷ most does make this connection.⁶⁸ In some texts, Davidic lineage is explicit, while in others it is implied; but “the support for regal Davidic figures is constantly present.”⁶⁹ Messianic motifs not only included Davidic lineage but also warrior activity.⁷⁰ Collins explains the prevalence of this motif: “This concept of the Davidic messiah as the warrior king who would destroy the enemies of Israel and institute an era of unending peace constitutes the common core of Jewish messianism around the turn of the era.”⁷¹ This warrior theme also pervades messianic texts referring to the Davidic ruler as “the branch” (Isa. 11:1)⁷² or “the prince” (Dan. 9:25).⁷³ Significantly, the coming Davidic ruler was expected to be not only a victorious military leader but one who would overthrow the *Kittim*,⁷⁴ which possibly refers to the Greeks, but most likely the Romans.⁷⁵

With these associations surrounding “Son of David,” it is easy to see why Jesus would distance Himself from this title. While the people wanted a nationalistic, militaristic leader to overthrow their foreign occupiers, the will of the Father first called for His Son to die in the place of the nation (John 11:50–52) and the world (1:29; 3:16).⁷⁶ Conspicuously absent from all intertestamental messianic texts is the expectation of a

⁶⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁵ Dead Sea Scrolls CD; 1Q28; 1Q28a; and 4Q266. See Bateman, “Anticipations of the One Called Messiah,” 256-64.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 272.

⁶⁷ *Similitudes* or *1 Enoch* 37–71. See Stuckenbruck, “Messianic Ideas in the Apocalyptic and Related Literature of Early Judaism,” 100.

⁶⁸ *Psalms of Solomon* 17:4–8, 21; *4 Ezra* 12:32; Dead Sea Scrolls 4QpIsa^a; 4Q174; 4Q252; and 4Q285. See Herbert W. Bateman, IV, “Three Obstacles to Overcome, and Then One,” in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel’s King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 244-45; idem, “Anticipations of the One Called Messiah,” 269-70; Al Wolters, “The Messiah in the Qumran Documents,” in *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 77.

⁶⁹ Bateman, “Anticipations of the One Called Messiah,” 273.

⁷⁰ Stuckenbruck, “Messianic Ideas in the Apocalyptic and Related Literature of Early Judaism,” 112.

⁷¹ John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 68. See also, M. De Jonge, “The Use of the Word ‘Anointed’ in the Time of Jesus,” *Novum Testamentum* 8 (1966): 144; Wolters, “The Messiah in the Qumran Documents,” 80.

⁷² Herbert W. Bateman, IV, “Anticipations of the One Called Branch and Prince,” in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel’s King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 275, 277.

⁷³ Ibid., 290.

⁷⁴ Dead Sea Scrolls 1QpHab; 4Q161; 4Q285; cp. CD; 4Q266. Ibid., 299-300.

⁷⁵ W. H. Brownlee, “Kittim,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:45-46; Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, Jr., and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: Harper One, 2005), 80.

⁷⁶ Bauer, “Son of David,” 767-68.

suffering-servant king who would die as a sacrifice for his subjects.⁷⁷ Thus, the Lord Jesus throughout John's Gospel seeks to develop the concept of the true Messiah, Christ,⁷⁸ King of Israel,⁷⁹ and Son of God. The Gospel of John seems to deflect the issue of Davidic royalty to show that "Jesus' kingship is only the transcendent royalty of the Son of God."⁸⁰ What is more important in John's concept of the Christ is that He originates from above rather than from Bethlehem. What is emphasized as essential in John's Christology is Jesus' deity and humanity, not His Davidic lineage.⁸¹ Even the title "Son" or "Son of God" is elevated in John's Gospel far above contemporary usage, in which the Messiah was considered to be a strictly human figure.⁸² While some Qumran texts speak of the messianic descendant of David as also being a "Son of God,"⁸³ the meaning of these messianic texts is highly debated as to whether the "Son" possibly shares the same nature and identity as God, or whether the Son is merely a nondivine, heavenly agent acting on God's behalf. One thing is certain with respect to the Gospel of John; it shows conclusively that Jesus is nothing less than fully God and fully man as the "Son of God" and "Son of Man."⁸⁴

Additional Reasons Excluding Davidic Lineage

The references to a Davidic messianic figure and "Son" texts in Second Temple literature reveal a significant point about Jesus' Davidic lineage not being an element of "saving faith." If the titles "Christ," "Messiah," "Son of David," and even "Son of God" all fell short of their divinely intended meaning in first-century Israel, yet John does not explicitly elevate and develop the concept of Jesus' Davidic descent while doing the opposite for the other Christological titles, then this demonstrates that John does not regard Jesus being the "Son of David" as essential to saving belief in Jesus as "the Christ,

⁷⁷ Herbert W. Bateman, IV, "Anticipations of the One Called Son," in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 329.

⁷⁸ Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 228; Keener, *Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:291; Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 22, 87, 125.

⁷⁹ Otto Michel, "υἱὸς Δαυὶδ," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3:652.

⁸⁰ Johnson, "The Davidic-Royal Motif in the Gospels," 140.

⁸¹ John Bowman, "Samaritan Studies," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 40 (1958): 313.

⁸² Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Concepts of *Māshīah* and Messianism in Early Judaism," in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 113.

⁸³ 4Q174; 4Q246; 4Q369; and 4Q534, which reads "chosen one of God." See John J. Collins, "A Pre-Christian 'Son of God' Among the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Bible Review* 9 (June 1993): 34-38, 57; Craig A. Evans, "Are the 'Son' Texts at Qumran Messianic?" in *Qumran-Messianism: Studies on the Messianic Expectations in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, Hermann Lichtenberger, and Gerben S. Oegema (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1998), 141-52; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Contribution of Qumran Aramaic to the Study of the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973-74): 394; Seyoon Kim, *The "Son of Man" as the Son of God* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1983), 20-21.

⁸⁴ Darrell L. Bock, "The Messiah Preached and Veiled," in *Jesus the Messiah: Tracing the Promises, Expectations, and Coming of Israel's King* by Herbert W. Bateman, IV, Darrell L. Bock, and Gordon H. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 436.

the Son of God” (20:31). This conclusion agrees with other biblical and theological evidence outside of John’s Gospel.

First, when every reference to David is examined in the Book of Acts (Acts 1:16; 2:25, 29, 34; 4:25; 7:45; 13:22, 34, 36; 15:16), a striking pattern emerges. Christ’s connection to David is proclaimed only in the presence of Jewish audiences. Christ’s descent from David is not an essential feature of evangelism to the Gentiles. Though Paul does proclaim the Davidic lineage of Christ in Acts 13, he is in a Jewish synagogue (13:14–16), which happens to be attended by God-fearing Gentiles who likely possessed some familiarity with the Old Testament covenant promises to Israel (13:26). However, in all other preaching to Gentiles recorded in Acts, the Lord’s Davidic birth line is not mentioned once, while the other elements of the gospel are still proclaimed.⁸⁵ Unless God has a different gospel for the Jews than He does for the Gentiles, Christ’s descendancy from David must not be a part of the contents of “saving faith.” While the proclamation of Jesus Christ’s descent from David has inestimable apologetic and pre-evangelistic value in establishing that He is Israel’s rightful Messiah (2 Sam. 7:16; Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5–6), awareness of this truth and belief in it are not essential to receive eternal life.⁸⁶

Christ’s descent from David is also not required for eternal life because there are no individual verses in Scripture explicitly requiring belief in this truth, as there are for Christ’s deity, humanity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. There are no verses, for instance, that state, “For if we believe that Jesus died and [descended from David]” (1 Thess. 4:14) or “Unless you believe that I am [from the seed of David], you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). This complete lack of even a single verse prescribing belief in Christ’s Davidic lineage is astonishing when considering that the name “David” is found over 1000 times in the Bible. This is more than the words “faith,” “hope,” and “love”—combined! Yet not once did the Spirit of God move the writers of Scripture to connect the blessed name “David” to the saving gospel message.

Finally, Christ’s Davidic descent is not an element of “saving faith” because it does not form the grounds of salvation for mankind. Again, this is quite different from Jesus Christ’s deity, humanity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection which are amply attested throughout Scripture as the necessary grounds.⁸⁷ While the facts of Christ’s birth in the lineage and city of David were absolutely essential to fulfill every letter of Bible prophecy and to uphold God’s covenant promises to David and Israel, these facts do not provide the grounds or basis for mankind’s eternal deliverance from sin. Regarding the Lord’s humanity, millions of other human beings have also been Israelites, and tens of thousands have been descendants of Judah, and thousands have descended from David and even been born in Bethlehem. But this did not qualify any of them to be the Savior of mankind. Though Christ in His humanity will forever be a descendant of David (Rev. 5:5; 22:16), it is not this trait that brings redemption to mankind. Instead, it is His common humanity—the fact that He is a son of Adam (Luke 3:38) as “the Man, Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). This made it possible for Him to pay the redemption price “for all” (1 Tim. 2:6). While the fact of Christ’s deity and incarnation distinguishes Him from the rest of humanity and made propitiation toward God possible,

⁸⁵ Stegall, *Gospel of the Christ*, 684-703.

⁸⁶ Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ*, 119.

⁸⁷ Stegall, *Gospel of the Christ*, 284-318.

it was the fact of His common humanity, not His narrow descent from David, that made efficacious His sacrifice for the whole human race.

JESUS AS NATIONAL KING

While John's Gospel barely hints at the Davidic lineage of Jesus Christ, the opposite is the case with the concept of Christ's kingship. The motif of Christ as King is dominant in the fourth Gospel and plays a vital role in conveying a particular Christology, as recent Johannine studies have demonstrated.⁸⁸ John repeatedly uses the terms βασιλεύς and βασιλεία (1:49; 6:15; 12:13, 15; 18:36–37, 39; 19:3, 14–15, 19, 21) and an entire kingship motif to illustrate the book's central evangelistic truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Unique Concept of Christ's Kingship

John's Gospel speaks of Jesus' kingship in ethnic ("King of the Jews") and nationalistic ("King of Israel") terms.⁸⁹ But the ethnic, national, and even political element of Christ as "King" is not stressed in John's Gospel since the book's evangelistic objective and message is universal: Jesus is the Savior of the whole world, not just Israel. The nature of Jesus' kingship is fundamentally different from first-century Jewish and Roman concepts of national kings and even international emperors.⁹⁰ Christ essentially says this to Pilate: "My kingdom is not of [εκ] this world . . . My kingdom is not from here" (18:36).⁹¹ In

⁸⁸ Ulrich Busse, "Metaphorik und Rhetorik im Johannesevangelium: Das Bildfeld vom König," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, ed. Jörg Frey, Jan G. Van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmerman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 279-318; Halbert A. Cauthron, Jr., "The Meaning of Kingship in Johannine Christology: A Structuralist Exegesis of John 18:1–20:18" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1984); Jey J. Kanagaraj, "Jesus the King, Merkabah Mysticism and the Gospel of John," *Tyndale Bulletin* 47.2 (November 1996): 349-66; Hans Kvalbein, "The Kingdom of God and the Kingship of Christ in the Fourth Gospel," in *Neotestentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, ed. David Edward Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl Henning Ulrichsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 215-32; Mavis M. Leung, *The Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John: Jesus' Death as Corroboration of His Royal Messiahship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Beth Marie Stovell, "The Crucified and Exalted King of Israel: The Metaphor of Kingship in John's Gospel" (Ph.D. thesis, McMaster Divinity College, 2011); Tom Thatcher, *Greater Than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Travis D. Trost, *Who Should Be King in Israel? A Study on Roman Imperial Politics, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Jan G. Van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel According to John* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); idem, "The Spatial Dynamics of Jesus as King of Israel in the Gospel according to John," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 72.4 (2016): 1-7.

⁸⁹ John's Gospel uses both "King of Israel" and "King of the Jews" with equal meaning but with different intended audiences. Jews living in the land of Israel customarily referred to themselves as "Israelites," while Gentiles referred to them as "Jews." Israelites in the company of Gentiles would often accommodate Gentile usage and refer to themselves as "Jews." The titles "King of Israel" and "King of the Jews" in John's Gospel reflect this general pattern. Richard Bauckham, "Messianism According to the Gospel of John," in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 219 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 59-60.

⁹⁰ Thatcher, *Greater Than Caesar*, 97-122.

⁹¹ The preposition "of" [εκ] in this verse is a preposition of source (A. L. Lukaszewski & M. Dubis, *Lexham Syntactic Greek New Testament: Expansions and Annotations* [John 20:31], Logos Bible

John's Gospel, Jesus Christ is not a mere mortal man, or a national or regional ruler, subjugating His enemies to secure His empire and exalt Himself. Instead, as "King of the Jews," He is equal in essence and authority with Israel's ultimate ruler—God. As such, this otherworldly King is the universal sovereign, greater than the human emperor Caesar (19:12–15), and sovereign over the diabolical ruler of the present world order (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Rather than Jesus using His power and authority to subjugate those within His realm and even take the life of His enemies, He gives His own life on their behalf to save them (1:29; 3:17; 6:51), even though this is something they do not deserve (1:14, 16–17). Paradoxically, He is not glorified in the customary fashion of worldly kings who exalt themselves (1:14; 7:18); rather He is glorified through the ignominy of the Cross (12:23; 17:4). But far from being conquered by crucifixion; He is sovereign over it and willingly complies with His own execution (2:19; 10:18).

The nature of Christ's kingship is utterly unique. This King uniquely possesses two natures—deity and humanity—in one person. Because of this King's loving sacrifice and resurrection from the realm of the dead, He alone is uniquely qualified to either bestow eternal life or pronounce final condemnation.⁹² Since the kingship motif mirrors the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20:31), the elements of His unique kingship in the Gospel of John constitute the elements of John's evangelistic saving message. This can be seen from a survey of the words "king" and "kingdom" throughout the book, starting in John 1:49–51.

Kingship Passages in John's Gospel

- 49 Nathanael answered and said to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"
- 50 Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see [ὄψρη] greater things than these."
- 51 And He said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you [ὄψεσθε] shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Software [2009]). This indicates that Christ's kingdom is not of earthly origin or did not come from men. While some argue that the prepositional phrase "of this world" simply indicates heaven as the source of Christ's kingdom but not necessarily the heavenly nature or character of this kingdom (Stovell, "The Crucified and Exalted King of Israel," 385), this does not adequately account for the Lord's qualifying statements in the immediate context about the non-militaristic and truth-based nature of His kingdom: "If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews" (v. 36); "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth" (v. 37). Hans Kvalbein says that Jesus' "not of this world" statement to Pilate in 18:36 "shows a Jesus who is no political challenge to the Roman Empire. The message and the methods of Jesus were not at all comparable with the Zealots in the years leading up to the first Jewish war AD 66–70. Their messianic expectations and political aspirations were not dead at the time of John's Gospel" ("The Kingdom of God and the Kingship of Christ in the Fourth Gospel," 228). This would have been especially significant if John was indeed written in the late 60s as I am inclined to believe.

⁹² Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 109-12.

John 1:49 is the first use of “King” in the book as it applies to Jesus. John includes Nathanael’s statement in order to shape the reader’s perspective of Jesus and His kingship for the rest of the book, telling the reader that there is a conceptual link between Jesus as King and Jesus as Son of God.⁹³ This linkage culminates in the purpose statement of the book, where Jesus the crucified-risen King is identified as the Christ, the Son of God (20:31). Nathanael’s testimony stands at the beginning of John’s Gospel as another witness to Jesus being the Christ, after that of John the Baptist (1:29–36) and the disciples (1:41).⁹⁴ The fact that Nathanael includes “Israel” in his identification of Christ (“King of Israel”) shows that he serves as an ideal Israelite, whom Jewish readers of the book would do well to emulate in coming to Jesus by faith.⁹⁵ This conclusion is supported by the shift in person from “you” singular in 1:50 (ὁψη) to “you” plural in 1:51 (ὁψεσθε), indicating that Jesus’ statement in verse 51 was intended for a broader audience than just Nathanael.⁹⁶

But what does Nathanael’s testimony say about the identity of Jesus? While it is possible at this early stage in the Lord Jesus’ earthly ministry that Nathanael may have understood the terms “Son of God” and “King of Israel” as titles fit for a merely human but royal messiah, the reader of John’s Gospel, informed by the book’s prologue and introduction, knows that there is much more behind these titles—that they do in fact point to Jesus’ deity⁹⁷ (1:1–3, 18) and His death (1:11, 14, 29, 36).⁹⁸

The phrase “King of Israel” was used predominantly throughout the Old Testament for the human kings of the nation, born in the lineage of David. But in John’s Gospel, “King of Israel” surpasses mere human kingship and refers to none other than the universal King—the God of Israel—in keeping with Old Testament passages that explicitly identify the “King of Israel” as the Lord God (Isa. 44:6; Zeph. 3:15). The Isaiah 44:6 reference is particularly significant: “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.’” This reference to God as “the King of Israel” occurs in a section of Isaiah

⁹³ This will become more evident in the Passion narrative of John 18–19, where “Son of God” is the only other Christological title used of Jesus besides “King” (Cauthron, “The Meaning of Kingship in Johannine Christology,” 169).

⁹⁴ C. H. Dodd states that Nathanael’s proclamation of Jesus as “King of Israel” (1:49) is virtually equivalent in meaning to John the Baptist’s identification of Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29, 36). See, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 236–38. In John 1:45, Philip also says to Nathanael that Jesus’ *identity* as the Messiah is according to the law and the prophets. This connects the content of Nathanael’s testimony about Jesus to the *gospel* of salvation, which, like the saving message of the gospel, is also according to the Scriptures (Rom. 1:2; 1 Cor. 15:3–4).

⁹⁵ Craig R. Koester, “Messianic Exegesis and the Call of Nathanael (John 1:45–51),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39 (1990): 26–27.

⁹⁶ Craig R. Koester, “The Savior of the World (John 4:42),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109:4 (1990): 671, 678.

⁹⁷ Kanagaraj, “Jesus the King,” 362; Koester, “Messianic Exegesis and the Call of Nathanael (John 1:45–51),” 27; idem, “The Savior of the World (John 4:42),” 671; Kenneth M. Wilson, “Is Belief in Christ’s Deity Required for Eternal Life in John’s Gospel?” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 12 (Fall 2006): 66–70.

⁹⁸ William R. G. Loader, “John 1:50–51 and the ‘Greater Things’ of Johannine Christology,” in *Anfänge der Christologie: Festschrift für Ferdinand Hahn zum 65 Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 261–62; L. Paul Trudinger, “An Israelite in whom there is no Guile: An Interpretative Note on John 1:45–51,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 54 (April–June 1982): 119–20.

(chapters 41–52) that contains several “I am” (אֲנִי הָאֵל; LXX, ἐγώ εἰμι) statements (41:4; 43:10, 25; 45:18–19, 21–22; 46:4–5; 51:12; 52:6), which are also characteristic of John’s Gospel. In addition to Isaiah 44:6, the writing prophets also spoke of Israel’s true “King” as its Redeemer, Deliverer, or Savior (Isa. 43:15; Hos. 13:10; Zech. 9:9). The Lord Jesus’ kingship corresponds to these Old Testament references to “King,” and in John’s Gospel Jesus’ kingship encompasses His deity, humanity, and saving work. Philip’s statement in John 1:45 introducing Nathanael to Jesus makes explicit this connection to the prophets: “Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’” Though Nathanael may not have recognized at this early stage the real meaning of Jesus’ kingship with respect to the Lord’s person and work,⁹⁹ he certainly would have come to this realization by the end of Christ’s public ministry through the progress of revelation (John 2:11; 8:28; 14:9; 20:28), as would the reader of John’s Gospel.

The next use of “king” in John’s Gospel occurs in 6:15: “Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.” While the people try “to make Him king,” the Lord Jesus rejects their attempt, first, because He was already the King of Israel (1:49; 18:37),¹⁰⁰ and second, because their concept of Israel’s king-to-be was deficient and the Lord did not want this association. Morris explains, “Their idea of a King was a King concerned with food and armies and pomp and splendor. In their apparent acceptance of Jesus, even enthusiasm for Him, there is a deep-seated rejection of all that He really stood for. They were interested not in His purposes but in their own.”¹⁰¹ Christ’s purposes involved dying sacrificially for their sins¹⁰² and rising from the dead in order to provide them with eternal life by faith alone in Him. Significantly, the context of the “king” reference in verse 15 falls under the shadow of the Cross, as this verse is enclosed in its context by a reference to the Passover (v. 4)¹⁰³ and the Bread of Life Discourse (vv. 26–71), with its prediction that Christ will give Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for the world (vv. 51, 53), guaranteeing eternal life on the condition of belief in Him (vv. 29, 35–36, 40, 47, 64, 69). The meaning of Jesus’ kingship in the context of John 6 is clear—the true King of Israel is He who gives Himself for the world and Israel as a Passover sacrifice, who people are to personally appropriate by faith (vv. 35, 53–54, 56). The kingship of Christ is inextricably connected to His work on the Cross¹⁰⁴ and promise of eternal life.

The next references to Christ as King occur in John 12:13 and 15.

⁹⁹ Kanagaraj, “Jesus the King,” 351; Koester, “Messianic Exegesis and the Call of Nathanael (John 1:45–51),” 27.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Kanagaraj, 355.

¹⁰¹ Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 169.

¹⁰² A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1965), 119; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 109.

¹⁰³ Barrett, *Gospel According to St. John*, 273; Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 342 n. 12; C. T. Ruddick, Jr., “Feeding and Sacrifice: The Old Testament Background of the Fourth Gospel,” *Expository Times* 79 (1968–1969): 340.

¹⁰⁴ Morris, *Cross in the New Testament*, 179.

- 12 The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem,
- 13 took branches of palm trees [τὰ βᾶϊα τῶν φοινίκων] and went out to meet Him, and cried out: “Hosanna! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’ The King of Israel!”
- 14 Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written:
- 15 “Fear not, daughter of Zion; Behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt.”
- 16 His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him.

Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem pictures His kingship in a variety of ways—first by palm branches. John is the only Gospel writer to specify what type of leafy branches (Matt. 21:8; Mark 11:8) were brought by the crowd.¹⁰⁵ The word for “palm” (βᾶϊα) is rare, occurring only here in the New Testament. Coins from the period of the Maccabees contain images of the palm-tree with the inscription “for the redemption of Zion.”¹⁰⁶ Palms were also used by the citizens of Jerusalem to hail the victory of Simon Maccabeus over the Syrians¹⁰⁷ and the cleansing and rededication of the Temple later by Judas Maccabeus.¹⁰⁸ After the Maccabees, the Romans chose symbols for the coins of the respective nations they conquered, such as the camel for Arabia and the crocodile for Egypt. For Judaea, they chose the palm.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the palm would have had strong national and political associations in John 12. Since John is the only Gospel writer to mention βᾶϊα by name, it is also likely that he saw in the palm branches some ironic significance with respect to Jesus’ kingship. Christ would indeed provide victory for Israel, but not the type they expected. Spiritual redemption is the type of victory pictured by the palm branches (φοίνικες) in Revelation 7:9, where John describes those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb out of the Great Tribulation (7:14).¹¹⁰

Second, John 12:13 mentions the crowd extolling Christ and quoting Psalm 118:25 with shouts of “Hosanna” (ᾠσαννά), which means either “save now”¹¹¹ or “glory to.”¹¹² Both meanings are likely intended as Christ would provide salvation for Israel by

¹⁰⁵ W. R. Farmer, “The Palm Branches in John 12, 13,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (1952): 64.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

¹⁰⁸ Leung, *Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John*, 155.

¹⁰⁹ Farmer, “The Palm Branches in John 12, 13,” 64.

¹¹⁰ The phrase “branches of palm trees” (τὰ βᾶϊα τῶν φοινίκων) may simply be a somewhat awkward pleonasm, but it may also forecast the Lord’s resurrection and victory over the grave (John Spencer Hill, “τὰ βᾶϊα τῶν φοινίκων (John 12:13): Pleonasm or Prolepsis?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101.1 [1982]: 133-35), especially since the greenery of the palm made it “a symbol of life in antiquity” (Leung, *Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John*, 156 n. 17).

¹¹¹ Edwin D. Freed, “The Entry into Jerusalem in the Gospel of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80.4 (1961): 329-30; Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 107.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, Freed, 331.

His impending death, which was also His ironic and climactic moment of glory and exaltation according to John.

Third, the quotations of Old Testament passages in John 12:13 and 15 are significant for what they say and do not say. When John quotes Psalm 118:25 in John 12:13, he does not mention “David” as the Synoptic writers do in Matthew 21:9 and Mark 11:10, probably because these references to David “do not fit his unique view of Jesus as king.”¹¹³ In other words, John did not press the Davidic lineage of Jesus in the book’s kingship theme. In addition, Zechariah 9:9 is quoted in John 12:15 to convey the humility of Christ, who would come to Israel “lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.” What a contrast to the warhorses that kings road in their military conquests¹¹⁴ and that Christ will ride when He returns in judgment (Rev. 19:11)! The humility of the King reflected by the donkey which He road in His triumphal entry reflected His internal disposition that made Him willing to go to the Cross (Phil. 2:5–8).

Fourth, John 12:13 and 15 cite two Old Testament texts that emphasize Christ’s coming: “He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Ps. 118:25) and “Your King is coming” (Zech. 9:9). On the basis of such prophecies, Israel was right to expect the coming of the King and His kingdom, especially since John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, and the disciples preached the kingdom as being “at hand” contingent upon Israel’s repentance and reception of its King (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15). But the nation failed to see its need of spiritual, rather than physical and political, salvation. What is particularly striking about the kingship motif in John’s Gospel is that, though the title “king” is attributed to Jesus in several places, there are no references to the imminence of His kingdom rule or the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom as in the Synoptics.¹¹⁵ But this is precisely what we would expect from a book with an explicitly *soteriological*, evangelistic purpose (John 20:30–31) and emphasis, in contrast to the *eschatological* emphasis of Revelation, also written by John, but much later.¹¹⁶

Fifth, the chronology of the Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem as recorded by John is also theologically significant. John is careful to note in 12:1 that Jesus came to Bethany outside of Jerusalem “six days before the Passover.” This would have been on the first day of the week, or the 9th of Nisan according to the Jewish calendar. John says the triumphal entry occurred “the next day” (12:12), on the 10th of Nisan. Why is this significant? Because it corresponds exactly with the Passover chronology and typology of Exodus 12. The lambs that were to be sacrificed on the Passover on the 14th of Nisan (Ex. 12:6) were selected on the 10th of Nisan (Ex. 12:3), which corresponds to the exact day that Jesus entered Jerusalem (John 12:12).¹¹⁷ By this precise chronology, John reveals that Christ presented Himself to Israel as its Passover lamb on the day of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

¹¹³ Ibid., 332-33.

¹¹⁴ Leung, *Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John*, 165.

¹¹⁵ Kvalbein, “Kingdom of God and the Kingship of Christ in the Fourth Gospel,” 215; Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 24.

¹¹⁶ Mark L. Hitchcock, “A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation,” Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2005.

¹¹⁷ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 91.

The final occurrences of βασιλεύς in John's Gospel are bunched together in 18:33–19:22, where this title is applied to Jesus 12 times.¹¹⁸ Like a fireworks grand finale on the Fourth of July, John has saved this cluster of “king” references for the closing, climactic scene of the King's passion. The association between Christ's kingship and His death on the cross cannot be missed. In the Gospel of John, “the royal messiahship of Jesus is inseparable from his crucifixion.”¹¹⁹ Consequently, a crossless “king” would be an imposter. The fact that Christ's kingship is deliberately defined by His sacrificial death is made evident through several compelling ironic images.¹²⁰ The King is one:

- who fulfills the Passover typology (18:39);
- who dies a substitutionary death in the place of undeserving sinners, such as Barabbas—a picture of us all (18:40);¹²¹
- who wears a crown of thorns (19:2, 5), showing that He bore the curse of man's sin;¹²²
- who wears a scarlet robe, symbolizing the blood sacrifice which defined His royal status and identity (19:1–2, 5);¹²³
- who is punished (19:1, 3), but not for His own sins, being faultless in Himself (19:4, 6);
- who is a Man (19:5), yet also the Son of God (19:7);
- whose throne of exaltation is a crucifix (3:14; 12:32–33; 19:14–18);¹²⁴ and
- whose epitaph declares to the world the truth of His true identity—“Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (19:19–22).¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Kvalbein, “The Kingdom of God and the Kingship of Christ in the Fourth Gospel,” 228.

¹¹⁹ Leung, *Kingship-Cross Interplay in the Gospel of John*, 178.

¹²⁰ Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 126-37; David W. Wead, “The Literary Devices in John's Gospel” (Th.D. dissertation, University of Basel, 1970), 55-59.

¹²¹ C. I. Scofield, “Barabbas or Christ?” in *In Many Pulpits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922), 95-105.

¹²² The “thorns” (ἀκάνθινος) that made up Jesus' crown (19:2, 5) came from plants commonly known in Israel to hurt people with their barbs (H. St. J. Hart, “The Crown of Thorns in John 19, 2–5,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 [1952]: 73). From the time of Adam's fall, thorns in the Bible (Gen. 3:17–18; Isa. 32:13; Hos. 10:8) have symbolized God's curse stemming from man's sin (J. H. Balfour, *The Plants of the Bible* [New York: Thomas Nelson, 1885], 128), which was borne by Christ on the cross (Deut. 21:22–23; Gal. 3:13). Jesus' crown of thorns may also have been constructed to appear as radiating spikes, as on the Statue of Liberty, in keeping with the soldiers' attempt to mock Jesus' glory. This radiate type of crown appeared on coins of that era, picturing rulers who supposed themselves to be divine (Hart, “The Crown of Thorns in John 19, 2–5,” 66-75). Christ's crown likely portrayed an ironic double truth—that He was indeed the glorious Son of God and the Curse-bearer.

¹²³ Cauthron, “The Meaning of Kingship in Johannine Christology,” 184-85.

¹²⁴ Van der Watt, “Spatial Dynamics of Jesus as King of Israel,” 2, 6.

Not only does Jesus' death in John's Gospel define Him as "King," it also defines Him as "Christ." Χριστός occurs 21 times in the book, with 18 of these prior to 12:34. The last three occurrences are 12:34, 17:3, and 20:31. Apart from Christ's self-descriptive use of Χριστός in 17:3, the crucifixion of the King in chapter 18–19 is enclosed between Χριστός in the book's purpose statement in 20:31 and the confused Jerusalem crowd's question in 12:34: "We have heard from the law that the Christ [ὁ Χριστός] remains forever; and how can You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?'" John utilizes the crowd's question, delaying the answer until the crucified-King motif in chapters 18–19 to demonstrate the true meaning and identity of the Christ. The Christ would be the King; and the King/Christ would be the one who is cut off in death and lifted up on the cross, who would also "remain forever" because of His resurrection. The Jews did not expect or conceive of a crucified-risen Christ/King. This pattern of usage for "Christ" and "King" in John's Gospel shows that the kingship motif plays a crucial role in defining Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of the world.¹²⁶ This can be seen in the following illustration.

¹²⁵ The titulus attached to the top of the cross publicly declared Christ's true identity in the language of both Israel (Hebrew) and the Gentiles (Greek and Latin), showing that this was a divinely intended evangelistic proclamation to the whole world and not simply to the nation Israel (Pfitzner, "Coronation of the King," 17, 20).

¹²⁶ The title "King of Israel" in Mark 15:32 ("the Christ, the King of Israel") is also significant for the true meaning of "Christ" when considering that "Mark's use of *christos* is almost entirely confined to the passion material, making the association of the term [*christos*] with the death of Jesus more emphatic" (Larry W. Hurtado, "Christ," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 112). Additionally, all four of the Gospels record the capital charge against Christ affixed above Him on the cross as the divine headline, pronouncing that He is "King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). Again, the intended irony cannot be missed: dying for the world is the essence of Jesus' messianic kingship (Joel B. Green, "Death of Jesus," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 151).

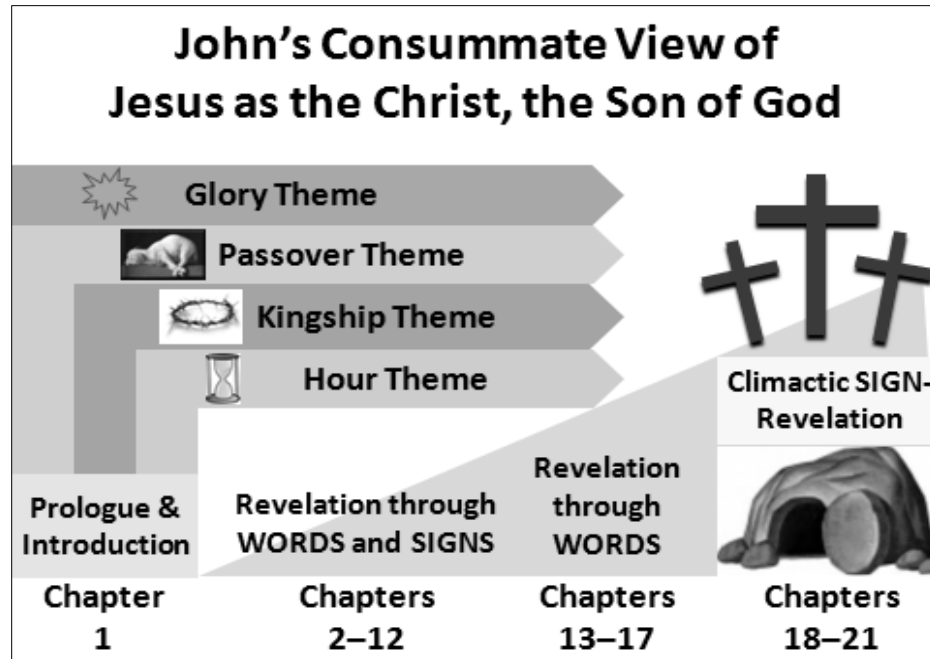


Figure 2. John's Consummate View of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God

The kingship theme runs concurrently throughout John's Gospel with the Glory theme (1:14; 3:14; 12:23, 27–28, 32; 13:31–32; 17:4–5), Passover theme (1:29, 36; 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14), and Hour theme (2:4; 7:6, 30; 8:20; 12:27; 13:1; 17:1; 19:30). These complementary themes flow like movements in a symphony toward the crescendo of the Cross and Resurrection,¹²⁷ presenting to the reader a consummate perspective of the meaning and identity of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God” (20:30–31). The lost do not need to know explicitly the terms “glory,” “Passover,” and “hour” to be saved; nor do they need to know that the term “King” applies to Jesus. But the lost must know the evangelistic message conveyed by these terms. If the entire Gospel of John, from the germ truth of the Prologue, through the revelation about Christ in the signs section and Upper Room Discourse, all point the reader to the Cross and Resurrection, and the purpose of the book is to lead unbelievers to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, then the conclusion is inescapable that belief in the Cross and Resurrection is essential for everlasting life.

This shows that John's saving “message of life” is the same message as “the gospel of the Christ” preached by the apostle Paul (Rom. 1:16 [MT]; 15:19, 29 [MT]; 1 Cor. 9:12, 18 [MT]; 2 Cor. 9:13; 10:14; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 3:2). This conclusion is confirmed by John's rather sudden switch to explicit citations of Scripture once the narrative enters the Passion section. One writer explains:

It is obvious, even to the casual reader, that John, unlike Matthew with his frequent use of the *hina plērōthē* (so that it might be fulfilled) formula, has

¹²⁷ Gerald L. Borchert, “The Fourth Gospel and Its Theological Impact,” *Review and Expositor* 78 (Spring 1981): 249.

few explicit Old Testament citations—though many Old Testament allusions. But when we reach the passion narrative, more exactly, the crucifixion scene, this situation changes. One is forced to ask: Why, suddenly now, these references to the fulfillment of Scripture (12:38; 13:18; 19:24, 28, 36–37)? The reason is surely not hard to find. In showing that the cross was not a sign of shame but of victory, the early church could not only point to Jesus’ own interpretation of his death and its necessity, but they could also turn to the Old Testament and find there, in the Prophets and the Psalms, a picture of the Messianic Suffering Servant and King.¹²⁸

Just as the apostle Paul endeavored to show that the saving message of the gospel he preached was “according to the Scriptures” (Acts 13:27–37; 17:1–3 cf. 2 Thess. 1:8–10; Rom. 1:1–2; 1 Cor. 15:3–4), John also did the same. The evangelistic message of both apostles was the same gospel of the Christ, the Son of God, which must be believed by the entire world to possess everlasting life.

Lordship Salvation Concept of Christ’s Kingship

In concluding this section on Christ’s kingship in John’s Gospel, it is essential to address the question of Lordship Salvation. Some Free Grace proponents may object that if Christ’s kingship in John’s Gospel is synonymous with the book’s evangelistic, saving message, then this leads to Lordship Salvation. However, it should be evident by now that Christ’s kingship in the Gospel of John is a soteriological theme focused on His function as Savior—His person and saving work to provide the gift of eternal life to those who will believe. The condition for eternal life in John’s Gospel is never stated to be obedience to Christ’s rulership over one’s personal life.¹²⁹ The fact that Jesus’ kingship in John’s Gospel is that of a humble, suffering, servant Savior does not support in any way the doctrine of Lordship Salvation (or its latest iteration in the currently popular “King Jesus gospel”), which requires a pattern of obedience and service to Christ as King for eternal salvation.¹³⁰ Reformed theology has historically taught the correct biblical view that Jesus Christ is simultaneously Prophet (Acts 3:22–23), Priest (Heb. 3:1), and King (1 Tim. 6:15).¹³¹ But from the objective fact that Christ is King, Lordship Salvation proponents make the invalid inference that the condition for salvation involves obedience

¹²⁸ Pfitzner, “Coronation of the King,” 16.

¹²⁹ Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, GraceLife Edition (Burlleson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992), 116-17.

¹³⁰ Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 29 (MacArthur says the fact that Jesus is King necessarily makes obedience the test of the reality of one’s justifying, regenerating faith); Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 21 (McKnight equates discipleship in the Christian life with the gospel, rejecting the idea that the gospel is merely the message of individual salvation from hell).

¹³¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647, chapter VIII, article I, “Of Christ the Mediator,” in *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, 6th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 3:619.

to His rulership over one's life. Thus, Tozer says, "I warn you—you will not get help from Him in that way for the Lord will not save those whom He cannot command! He will not divide His offices. You cannot believe on a half-Christ. We take Him for what He is—the anointed Saviour and Lord who is King of kings and Lord of all lords!"¹³² Popular Reformed teacher Paul Washer makes a similar claim but attempts to support his doctrine from the motif of Christ's kingship in the Gospel of John.

It is . . . untenable to think that a person could "receive" Jesus as Savior at one stage in life and then receive Him as Lord and King later. To receive Jesus in a manner that results in salvation and sonship is to receive the whole of Him as prophet, priest, and king. Although the believer's faith in Christ as Savior and submission to Christ as Lord may be meager at first, it will be real, and through the continuing work of salvation, it will grow to maturity. Those of us far removed from the Jewish culture and religion of Jesus' day often forget that the Jews were not merely looking for a deliverer but also for a king. The Messiah was to be a son of David who sat upon the throne of David. He was to rule as an absolute sovereign. For this reason, when the Jews rejected Jesus as the Christ, they did not say, "We have no *savior* but Caesar!" Rather, they said, "We have no *king* but Caesar!" (John 19:15, emphasis added). Thus, the coming Messiah was not only going to extend an olive leaf of peace toward His people as savior, but He was also going to extend a royal scepter toward them as king. The Jews had no concept of a Messiah who would save them and yet not rule over them. If they "received Him" as deliverer, they would also welcome Him as king. What was true for the Jewish nation in the time of Christ continues to be true today for both Jew and Gentile. To receive Christ is to receive the whole of Him and take Him in as Savior and Lord.¹³³

Several points must be made in response to the common errors expressed by Tozer and Washer and the Lordship Salvation position. First, their concept of Jesus as "king" misses the essence of Christ's unique kingship in the Gospel of John. Though Jesus has the prerogative of absolute authority as the King, He does not rule yet with a rod of iron as predicted in the Book of Revelation, where He will one day use His authority to suppress all disobedience and enforce compliance with His will. He is not presently extending a kingly "royal scepter" to demand people's obedience and deterministically make them "grow to maturity" in order to assure them eternal life.

Second, the Lordship Salvation position errs by illogically assuming that the *condition* for salvation derives from Christ's *position* as King. There is a vast difference between believing the objective truth that Jesus is King versus subjectively serving Him

¹³² A. W. Tozer, *I Call It Heresy!* ed. Gerald B. Smith (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1974), 18.

¹³³ Paul Washer, *The Gospel Call & True Conversion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2013), 49-50.

as ruler over one's life for salvation.¹³⁴ Lordship Salvationists often make the same invalid inference from Acts 16:31, where the apostle Paul declares, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." Supposedly, the objective fact that Jesus Christ is Lord means that the condition for salvation is not merely believing that He is Lord but actively living under His lordship or "making Him" Lord of one's life. Thus, according to this view, good works in the form of service to Christ practically become the requirement for salvation, instead of faith alone.

Third, nowhere does the Gospel of John state that the lost must have explicit knowledge of Christ's offices of prophet, priest, and king, and believe that He holds these offices, to receive eternal life. Nor does one have to believe that Christ bears the *titles* Prophet, Priest, and King to be saved. But the lost must believe certain truths about Him, which those titles convey in part. For instance, as Prophet, Christ speaks the words of God. These words are divine revelation and they *contain* the saving gospel message (3:15; 5:24; 6:47; 12:46–48), which the lost must believe; but this is not to say that all of Christ's words are the saving message.¹³⁵ Concerning Christ as Priest, John's Gospel never applies the terms "priest" (ἱερεὺς) or "high priest" (ἀρχιερεὺς) to Jesus; but it certainly teaches the saving truth that Christ is the only mediator between God and man (14:6; cf. 1 Tim. 2:4–6) by virtue of His sacrifice for sin and His two natures as the Son of God and Son of Man. Likewise, concerning Christ as "King of the Jews" and "King of Israel," John's Gospel never says the lost must believe Jesus is the King of a particular ethnic group or nation to receive eternal life. Like the offices of Prophet and Priest, John's Gospel does not actually say the lost must know and believe explicitly that Jesus holds the office of King. But John definitely uses the truth of Jesus' kingship to illustrate the meaning of Him being the Christ, the Son of God, which is essential saving content.

Finally, while Washer, Tozer, and other Lordship Salvationists decry the notion of believing in Christ as Savior without obedience to Him as Lord lest one believe in a supposedly divided Christ, the fact of the matter is that everyone's beliefs about Christ are divided to some extent. Not even the strictest Lordship Salvationist claims that the lost must believe every bit of revelation in the Bible about the Lord Jesus to be saved. Conversely, the "promise-only" view of many Free Grace people today says that all Christological truths are excluded from the content of "saving faith," except the sole truth that Jesus guarantees eternal life. Both the Lordship Salvation view and this Free Grace view are out of balance with the Bible and the evangelistic message of John's Gospel.

JESUS' SECOND COMING

Leading proponents of Free Grace theology associated with the Grace Evangelical Society claim that if belief in Jesus Christ's incarnation, death for sin, and bodily resurrection are all necessary to believe for eternal life, then logically belief in the Second Coming must also be essential.¹³⁶ Are the lost today really required to believe in the doctrine of Jesus Christ's second coming for eternal life?

¹³⁴ Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 117-19.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 116; Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 186.

¹³⁶ Hodges, "The Hydra's Other Head: Theological Legalism," 3; Wilkin, "Scavenger Hunt Salvation without a List," *Grace in Focus* 23 (May/June 2008): 3.

The Lord's return is hardly emphasized in John's Gospel. There are precious few verses in the book that even address the Second Coming,¹³⁷ whether understood as a single-phase return/rapture, as in amillennialism and post-tribulation premillennialism, or as a two-phase event in pretribulation premillennialism.¹³⁸ The usual terms employed throughout the New Testament for Christ's coming are not used in John's Gospel for this event (ἐπιφάνεια, ἀποκάλυψις, παρουσία), with the exception of ἔρχομαι (14:3; 21:22–23).¹³⁹ A few other passages possibly refer to the eschatological event of the Second Coming (14:18, 28; 16:16–19), but more likely these refer to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to His disciples in John 20–21, prior to His ascension.

Even if all five passages in John's Gospel refer to Christ's return, their locations within the book provide convincing proof that belief in the Second Coming is not required for eternal life. All five passages occur either in the Upper Room Discourse or in the Epilogue—sections that are primarily for edification rather than evangelism. In the Gospel of John, the Lord's return is a truth promised specifically to believers, and thus it is edification-truth, not evangelistic content.¹⁴⁰ This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the first promise to the disciples of Christ's coming (14:3) does not occur until Judas has already departed (13:30).

Nowhere does John's Gospel state that belief in Christ's return is necessary for eternal life. Clearly, John's evangelistic book is focused on Christ's first coming, not His second.¹⁴¹ While the Gospel of John focuses on Jesus Christ as the sacrificial Lamb who provided salvation for the world, the Book of Revelation—also authored by John—focuses on Christ as the Lion of Judah returning in judgment upon the world. One book is expressly evangelistic (John 20:30–31); the other is primarily for sanctification and blessing (Rev. 1:3).¹⁴²

¹³⁷ George B. Stevens, *The Johannine Theology: Study of the Doctrinal Contents of the Gospel and Epistles of the Apostle John* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 332-39.

¹³⁸ For convincing evidence that John 14:3 refers to a pretribulation rapture, see George A. Gunn, "Jesus and the Rapture: John 14," in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 99-121.

¹³⁹ W. Robert Cook, "Eschatology in John's Gospel," *Criswell Theological Review* 3.1 (1988): 97.

¹⁴⁰ Other passages speak of Christ's involvement in eschatological judgment at the resurrection for both the saved (6:39–40, 44, 54; 11:24–26) and the lost (5:25–28; 12:48); but these passages do not speak specifically about a return or second coming.

¹⁴¹ Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, 185.

¹⁴² This conclusion in no way implies that John's Gospel contains "realized eschatology," as if the book is void of predictions about real, future events that have yet to be fulfilled. "Realized eschatology" is the view that Christ's predictions of the future only appear to be future, for supposedly they have been fulfilled already in the past or are being fulfilled in the present. According to this view, prophetic events have not been merely "inaugurated" (i.e., they still have some future fulfillment remaining) but have been fully realized (i.e., they have no future fulfillment). This false view was popularized in the 1900s by Rudolf Bultmann and C. H. Dodd, but it effectively denies the historical reality of future events such as the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead (Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955], 2:75-92; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1963], 405). For a critique of this view from a biblically sound premillennial pretribulation perspective, see Cook, "Eschatology in John's Gospel," 79-99.

CONCLUSION

This chapter claims that there is a distinction among various Christological truths as to which ones are essential to believe for eternal life and which ones are not. But is such a distinction arbitrary and subjective? Does drawing such a distinction really amount to theological “cherry-picking” as some Free Grace proponents claim?¹⁴³ While Scripture does not state explicitly why the Christological categories covered in this chapter are not essential elements of “saving faith,” based on the biblical evidence presented in the last two chapters, we can deduce at least three reasons for this distinction.

First, the Christological truths or events covered in this chapter do not provide the grounds for humanity’s eternal salvation, in contrast to the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. On what event in Christ’s life or aspect of His person does the fate of humanity’s eternal destiny hang? Neither Christ’s virgin birth nor His burial paid for sin, or conquered death itself (1 Cor. 15:54–57), or even made it possible to do so, as did Christ’s incarnation. Nor is the Second Coming the grounds of mankind’s redemption from sin and its wages. Nor was it necessary for Christ to be a Son of David to be the substitutionary sacrifice for the rest of humanity—only that He be born a descendant of Adam’s race (Luke 3:38; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45, 47).

Second, none of the Christological categories covered in this chapter are ever stated to be part of the gospel of Christ or the gospel of the grace of God, which must be believed for everlasting life (1 Cor. 1:14–21; Acts 17:3–4 cf. 2 Thess. 1:8–10). Though each of these Christological truths is supportive of the gospel and complements the gospel, these truths are never technically said to be part of the gospel.¹⁴⁴ This is also the case with Jesus Christ being “King of Israel” (John 1:49; 12:13) or “King of the Jews” (18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21). The concept of Jesus as king in John’s Gospel is fundamentally transformed from Him being simply a nationalistic ruler of a small Middle Eastern country (6:15) to Him being the sacrificial substitute for all of humanity (6:51; 19:14–19) and the sovereign God of mankind with the power and ability to grant eternal life or pass

¹⁴³ Hodges, “The Hydra’s Other Head: Theological Legalism,” 3; Myers, “The Gospel Is More Than ‘Faith Alone in Christ Alone,’” 49; Ken Neff, “What Is the Free Grace Gospel?” *Grace in Focus* 24 (March/April 2009): 3-4; Bob Wilkin, “Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:3–11,” 1-2; idem, “Essential Truths About Our Savior,” 1.

¹⁴⁴ This is also true of the Davidic lineage of Christ expressed in 2 Timothy 2:8: “Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel [κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον μου].” The *κατὰ* + *εὐαγγέλιον* construction occurs 5 times in the New Testament (Rom. 2:16; 11:28; 16:25; 1 Tim. 1:11; 2 Tim. 2:8); and in each instance, it shows that the gospel is consistent or harmonious with something else (such as Davidic lineage) but does not consist of, or contain, that other thing. For example, the law is said to be “according to the glorious gospel” (1 Tim. 1:11), but this does not mean that the law is part of the gospel. Rather, the law works consistently or harmoniously with the gospel. The *κατὰ* + *εὐαγγέλιον* construction in Romans 2:16 shows that the good news of the gospel is not the bad news of final judgment; rather it is harmonious or consistent with this fact, with the gospel even being the standard that is used for divine judgment (cf. 2 Thess. 1:8–10). Likewise, Romans 11:28 says “concerning the gospel [κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον] they are enemies”; but this does not mean that the fact of the Jews being enemies of the gospel is actually part of the gospel. Finally, in Romans 16:25, the gospel does not include the truth of the Christian’s establishment in the faith (i.e., edification or Christian life truth), rather the gospel produces or results in sanctification if the Christian holds fast to it by faith. For further explanation, see Stegall, *Gospel of the Christ*, 404-5, 452-54, 455-77.

final judgment (5:25–27; 17:2).¹⁴⁵ Humanity must believe in this God-man—the Son of God and Son of Man—to be eternally saved.

Finally, regarding the Christological categories outlined in this chapter, Scripture does not contain any specific statements requiring belief in these facts about Jesus Christ as necessary for eternal life, unlike explicit statements elsewhere requiring belief in Jesus as God (John 8:24) and the man who died a substitutionary death (John 6:53) and rose from the dead (Acts 13:30–41) to provide eternal life (17:3). Therefore, there are solid, biblical reasons to conclude that God makes a distinction among the many different truths about Jesus as to which ones are fundamental to His identity as “the Christ” and necessary to believe for eternal salvation, and which ones are not.

¹⁴⁵ Halsey, *Gospel of Grace and Truth*, 109-12; Thompson, *God of the Gospel of John*, 47, 52-54.

CHAPTER 8

THE EVANGELISTIC PURPOSE OF OTHER BIBLICAL BOOKS RELATIVE TO JOHN'S GOSPEL

In the first-century church at Corinth, there was an unhealthy and carnal favoritism toward certain spiritual leaders. The Corinthians were saying, "I am of Paul," and "I am of Apollos," and "I am of Peter"; while some were saying, "I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:10). Professing Christians in the twenty-first century are also susceptible to unbiblical fixations and imbalances. Some today teach that God has preserved His Word only in one English version of the Bible, namely, the King James Version. This view is popularly known as "King James Onlyism." Oneness Pentecostals hold to a form of modalism that denies the Trinity and touts "Jesus-Only." Still others within Christendom teach that only Paul's epistles are directly applicable to the church today. This aberrant doctrine has been termed "hyper-dispensationalism" by traditional dispensationalists. One could also say this view is hyper-Pauline and even "Pauline-Only."

In similar fashion, many adherents of Free Grace theology today hold to a hyper-Johannine and "Johannine-Only" doctrine which teaches that John's Gospel is the only book in the Bible given by God for the purpose of evangelism. This chapter tests this new perspective on John by comparing John's purpose and evangelistic message to other New Testament books, specifically Romans and Luke-Acts.

CLAIMS FOR THE EXCLUSIVENESS OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

The following statements represent the views of many within the Free Grace movement who maintain that John's Gospel is the only evangelistic book in the Bible.

Only the Gospel of John is a book written to tell the unbeliever what they must do to have eternal life. And that book, you could argue of course the Holy Spirit knew that believers would use that in order to evangelize. But it's directed, John 20:31, to the unbeliever.¹

We determine what the saving message is not by our experience, but by what God has told us in His Word, especially what He told us in the only evangelistic book in Scripture, John's Gospel.²

¹ Robert N. Wilkin, "Why the Romans Road Ends in a Cul de Sac," Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Dallas, TX, March 1, 2006.

² Robert N. Wilkin, "The Gospel According to Evangelical Postmodernism," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 20 (Spring 2007): 11.

In the Gospel of John, the only evangelistic book in the Bible, the sole condition of eternal life is stated as believing in Jesus Christ.³

It is better to be as clear as we can, and to do that, use the message of everlasting life as found in the only evangelistic book of the Bible: John. The message of life in John is that anyone who believes in Jesus for everlasting life, has it.⁴

Jesus guarantees life everlasting to all who simply believe His promise of everlasting life to them. John's Gospel is the only New Testament book that addresses unbelieving readers.⁵

After the NT was completed, people knew the way of salvation from the Gospel of John. John is the only book in the NT written for the purpose of explaining how to have eternal life (20:30–31). The rest of the NT emphasizes discipleship. While the way of salvation can be found in other NT books, it is rarely found explicitly, and where it is alluded to, the writer assumes that the readers already know it and believe it.⁶

While the “way of salvation” is said to be only “rarely found” in other books besides John, at times those holding this hyper-Johannine view give the impression that people are limited to John's Gospel alone to know the saving message. For example, Bob Wilkin clarifies the position of his late mentor Zane Hodges on this subject.

Let's talk about why Zane Hodges felt it was vital for the Free Grace movement and Free Grace theology that we held to the exclusively evangelistic purpose of John's Gospel. His concern was that if someone saw John's Gospel as having a dual purpose of evangelism and discipleship that would diminish the importance of John's Gospel, and people might not even just go to John's Gospel to find the evangelistic message. And to some degree, that's what happened. . . . I believe that was one of Zane's concerns—that if people felt that John wasn't exclusively evangelistic they might start saying John is not particularly special—Matthew, Mark, and Luke are evangelistic too. Some people have argued that maybe Acts is evangelistic and other books are evangelistic.⁷

³ Robert N. Wilkin, *The Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2012), 181.

⁴ Jeremy D. Myers, “The Gospel is More Than ‘Faith Alone in Christ Alone,’” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (Autumn 2006): 51-52.

⁵ John Niemelä, “Greetings,” Message of Life Ministries. www.mol316.org/pages/greetings.html (accessed February 9, 2014).

⁶ Bob Bryant, “How Were People Saved Before Jesus Came?” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 16 (Spring 2003): 69.

⁷ Robert N. Wilkin, “Why Is Discipleship Material in John?” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 26, 2016.

Consistent with the concern that “people might not even just go to John’s Gospel to find the evangelistic message,” another proponent of this “John-only” view challenged his audience at a national conference “to continue the search” for a verse outside of John that contains the saving message,⁸ implying that such a verse may not exist, at least not explicitly. One attendee triumphantly summarized the lesson from this conference session by stating “that there is not a single expression outside of the gospel of John that gives the saving message, not even one!”⁹

GOSPEL OF JOHN AND EPISTLE OF ROMANS

The view that John’s Gospel is the only evangelistic book of the Bible has also led to a strange aversion to using Romans for evangelism. Wilkin explains:

Another reason why I think it isn’t best, Romans isn’t the best book to use, is in my opinion, *Romans is one of the hardest books in the Bible*. In other words, it’s one of the ones that I think is exceedingly difficult and requires a very deft touch to teach, a very deft touch to preach through, to write a commentary on, etcetera. And that’s not to say that the book isn’t understandable, but it’s certainly not one of the easiest books in the Bible. And here we are trying to evangelize a person who does not know the saving message using one of the hardest books in the Bible, when there are much simpler books and simpler passages we could use. Now the Gospel of John is the only evangelistic book in the Bible. It is written to lead the unbeliever to faith in Christ, John 20:31. And it, not Romans, would be the best book to use to lead a person to faith in Christ.¹⁰

Such dogmatism is unwarranted in light of the absence in Scripture of any clear statement that one book is preferred by the Lord over another in evangelism. Therefore, believers should have the liberty to use whatever book or passage of Scripture they deem “best” as they are individually led by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). But could the Spirit of God ever lead a believer to use Romans instead of John in evangelism? Is John’s Gospel really “the only evangelistic book in the Bible”? Does the absence of an explicit evangelistic purpose statement such as that contained in John 20:30–31 necessarily mean that other books, such as Romans, are not intended by God to be used for evangelism? This appears to be the conclusion of some Free Grace leaders today, such as Wilkin, who states:

Obviously Romans 3 and 4 has a section on justification, 3:21 to the end of chapter 4. But again, that’s instructing believers, not really teaching how to evangelize. *Romans is not designed to lead people to faith in Christ*. Another big problem is the word “salvation.” The Greek word is σωτηρία. Salvation in Romans is not deliverance from hell. It’s not getting

⁸ Bob Bryant, “The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John,” Grace Evangelical Society Conference, Fort Worth, TX, March 6, 2008.

⁹ Antonio da Rosa, “GES Conference Overview,” <http://free-grace.blogspot.com/2008/03/ges-conference-overview.html> (accessed April 22, 2008).

¹⁰ Wilkin, “Why the Romans Road Ends in a Cul de Sac.”

eternal life. It's not the same meaning as the word for example in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith," or John 3:17 about "The Son of Man did not come into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved." Those are dealing with eternal life. In the book of Romans, salvation is to the believer, telling the believer how the believer can be saved from God's wrath here and now.¹¹

Putting aside for a moment this erroneous and imbalanced understanding of "salvation" in Romans,¹² the fact remains that Romans contains an extensive explanation of Paul's evangelistic message that he preached to the lost—the εὐαγγέλιον (gospel). Therefore, Romans should still be considered evangelistic in some sense. This can be seen in Paul's various reasons for writing Romans.

Purpose of Romans

Romans is not, first and foremost, a systematic treatise on Pauline theology. Instead, it is a letter to Christians living in a specific geographical locale for a specific historical purpose, but the occasion of its writing did become an opportunity for Paul to expound upon several doctrines of the Christian faith.¹³ Paul was selective in choosing his content, which explains why some doctrines are treated at length, such as Israel's place in the present and future dispensational plan of God (Rom. 9–11), while other vitally important topics are only alluded to vaguely,¹⁴ such as the imminent return of Christ for His church (13:11–14), which is a prominent theme elsewhere in Paul's epistles.

The selective content of Romans reflects the special circumstances and varied purposes for this letter. Paul wrote to the Romans from Corinth in A.D. 56–58 while concluding his third missionary journey. From Corinth, he planned to sail to Jerusalem (15:31), and from there to visit the saints in Rome. His expressed purposes in coming to Rome were to edify the believers of that city in their faith (1:9–12) and then to be helped onward to Spain for a fourth missionary journey (15:24, 28) since his divinely appointed tasks of preaching the gospel and establishing local churches in the east were reaching their completion (15:23).

But what was the church in Rome like? Did the Christians there agree with Paul on the gospel? Did they need edification? Was there division in the church or were they united among themselves and able to support a large missionary expansion to the west spearheaded by the apostle to the Gentiles? And why should they support Paul anyway? It is not too difficult to envision a potential scenario in the Roman church where, following the expulsion of the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49 under Emperor

¹¹ Wilkin, "Why the Romans Road Ends in a Cul de Sac," (emphasis added).

¹² This specific point is addressed in Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ: A Biblical Response to the Crossless Gospel Regarding the Contents of Saving Faith* (Milwaukee: Grace Gospel Press, 2009), 52-54, 425-27.

¹³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 16.

¹⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 16.

Claudius, many Jewish believers would have filtered back to their city over the next decade subsequent to the death of Claudius and the lifting of the ban. The churches in Rome by the late 50s would have been predominantly Gentile in composition, tendencies, and leadership. Based on this likely situation, some New Testament scholars have speculated that tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers existed.¹⁵ If such were the case, Paul would likely have been informed of this by his close friends and fellow Jewish believers from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla (Rom. 16:3).¹⁶ It is further reasoned that this problem provided the impetus for Paul to write certain sections of Romans, such as chapters 9–11 and 14–15.¹⁷

But such a rift among the churches of Rome is only speculation and is nowhere specified by Paul in the epistle. Thus, it is better not to view pastoral correction as one of Paul's purposes for writing this epistle, true as that may be for many of his other epistles. With respect to Jewish-Gentile relations, it is likely that the complexion of the entire first-century church became predominantly Gentile by the late 50s, and by this time there would have been a growing need for divine revelation and scriptural clarification regarding the place of Israel in the prophetic plan of God, especially in light of the new dispensation of grace and the fact that Israel as a nation had largely rejected the gospel. But was this Paul's sole reason for writing Romans?

Paul likely had multiple purposes for writing and sending this letter,¹⁸ chief among them being the declaration of his saving message to the lost. In the epistle, he explains why he plans to visit Rome. Although the historical occasion of his missionary plans and his reasons for writing are not exactly the same, they are inseparable. Paul certainly used this letter to formally introduce himself, his saving gospel message, and his doctrine to the believers in the empire's most prominent city—a city and a church he did not found and had never visited. Romans was likely written in anticipation of his visit, and this letter would have served as the opportune occasion for Paul to dispel rumors spread by his legalistic adversaries (Rom. 3:8) concerning his teaching on the subjects of law versus grace and Israel versus the church.¹⁹ By writing on these subjects, Paul would be presenting a “defense of the revelation of God's righteousness in the Gospel.”²⁰ Such a letter from Paul would have reassured the Romans about his worthiness to receive support for his plans to evangelize Spain²¹ by setting forth a thorough exposition about

¹⁵ Chip Anderson, “Romans 1:1–5 and the Occasion of the Letter: The Solution of the Two-Congregation Problem in Rome,” *Trinity Journal* 14 (Spring 1993): 25-40; W. S. Campbell, “Why Did Paul Write Romans?” *Expository Times* 85 (1974): 264-69; Robert Jewett, “Romans as an Ambassadorial Letter,” *Interpretation* 36 (January 1982): 5-20; A. J. M. Wedderburn, “The Purpose and Occasion of Romans Again,” *Expository Times* 90 (1979): 137-41.

¹⁶ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 18; Schreiner, *Romans*, 21; Philip R. Williams, “Paul's Purpose in Writing Romans,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 (January 1971): 64.

¹⁷ Schreiner, *Romans*, 13.

¹⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 1:22-24; 2:814-23; Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 20; Schreiner, *Romans*, 19.

¹⁹ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 21.

²⁰ Shawn Gillogly, “Romans 1:16–17: An Apologetic for the Gospel,” a paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Southeastern Regional, March 16–17, 2001.

²¹ Wayne A. Brindle, “‘To the Jew First’: Rhetoric, Strategy, History, or Theology?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (April 2002): 221-22; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary

the need for the gospel (1–3), about the content of the gospel itself (3–5),²² and about its implications for sanctification and spirituality by grace apart from the Law (6–8) and other doctrines (Rom. 9–16). Based on the many parallels in content and structure between the introductory section of 1:1–17 and the closing section of 15:14–33, it appears that such support was the principal reason for Paul writing this epistle.²³

Paul was passionate and driven by the need to spread the gospel (Rom. 1:14; 1 Cor. 9:14–22; 2 Tim. 2:10). He was a “gospel man” who had been commissioned directly by Christ to preach it (Acts 26:12–18; Gal. 1:12) and was separated to it (Rom. 1:1). Romans, therefore, is an epistle about the gospel, though not all of Romans is the gospel. Paul begins in chapters 1–3 by explaining the bad news in contrast to the good news, namely, that all mankind stands justly condemned before a righteous God. Chapters 3–5 explain the work of Christ and justification by grace through faith apart from works. Though Paul later teaches about sanctification, glorification, Israel, and the church (Rom. 6–16), he begins Romans with an extended exposition of his evangelistic message to the lost, which also formed the foundation for all other Christian doctrine.

For this reason, Paul’s purpose in writing must be viewed as integrally connected to the gospel and his relentless desire to spread this message along with the doctrines of grace built upon it. Being in the capital of the empire, the Roman church was ideally situated geographically to play a strategic role in advancing the gospel to the west. Would the Romans partner with Paul in support of his evangelistic intentions? This remained to be seen; but a personal letter explaining his gospel and his doctrine built upon it would certainly be helpful, followed by a personal visit (1:10–15).

In Romans 1:11–15, Paul says he is ready to visit the believers of Rome and to preach the gospel to them. He then goes on to declare, concerning that gospel, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith’” (Rom. 1:16–17).

While admittedly Paul is addressing those who are already believers in Christ, this does not make the gospel a message about “Christian life” truths that are additional to the “saving message.” Rather, it simply means that the common gospel believed by Paul and the Romans was the foundation and starting point for everything in the Christian life. This is why Paul begins this magisterial epistle by carefully defining and articulating the gospel in the first five chapters before addressing Christian-life truth in chapters 6–8. The gospel is also the foundation for correctly understanding the dispensational and eschatological plan of God with respect to Israel, as set forth in chapters 9–11; and of course, the gospel is the foundation for teaching on the body life of the church as contained in chapters 12–16. But Romans 1–5 explicitly sets forth both the *context* of the gospel and its *content* by explaining both the bad news of man’s just condemnation

(Dallas: Word, 1988), lv-lvi; Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 16-20; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), 4-5; Walter B. Russell, III, “An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April 1988): 182; Schreiner, *Romans*, 21-22.

²² Leander E. Keck, *Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 56.

²³ Paul S. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1971), 37.

before a righteous God and the good news of Christ's finished work, the provision of justification by grace, and the sole condition of faith alone. Even though Romans was written to "saints" (1:7) who were already saved (unlike John 20:30–31), this epistle still contains a clear and extensive exposition of Paul's evangelistic message to the lost.²⁴

Problems with Pitting John against Romans

The John-only view faces several serious problems in seeking to maintain its claim that the Gospel of John is the only evangelistic book in the Bible. First, there is not a single verse in Scripture that actually teaches that any one book, including John, is the "only evangelistic book" in the Bible. Proponents of the hyper-Johannine view routinely claim that John's Gospel is the only evangelistic book in the Bible because it is the only book containing an "explicit" evangelistic purpose statement. However, this standard does not appear to be consistently applied. Where is the "explicit" (or even implicit) statement in Scripture declaring that John is the "only" evangelistic book in the canon of Scripture? It is conspicuously absent. One would think with so much riding on one book of Scripture, the Holy Spirit would have been explicit on this point. Even John's evangelistic purpose statement in 20:30–31 simply tells us *why* John wrote—that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing they might have life in His name. But it does *not* say that it is the *only* source for such life-saving revelation. While all Free Grace adherents should readily admit that John is an evangelistic book *par excellence*, this does not mean it is the only book of the Bible designed by God for use in evangelism.

A second practical problem with the claim for John's exclusive evangelistic purpose is the Old Testament pattern. Those espousing the hyper-Johannine view also maintain that the content of saving faith has not changed since the dawn of humanity. For example, Wilkin writes:

Eternal salvation has always been conditioned upon faith in the Messiah. They looked ahead. We look back. We both believe in the Messiah for eternal life. (Of course, prior to Jesus' beginning His ministry people who believed in the Messiah did not know what His given name would be. After that point people had to believe specifically in Jesus, since the coming Messiah had now come and His name was known.)²⁵

If the content of saving faith has not changed through the ages (with the exception of the addition of the name "Jesus" applied to the Messiah),²⁶ and there is now only one

²⁴ In comparing John's Gospel with Romans, Free Grace proponent and former Grace Evangelical Society staff member Richard Christianson concludes, "More than any other book in the New Testament, except perhaps Romans, this Gospel sets forth the answer to the question: 'What must I do to be saved?'" Richard W. Christianson, "The Soteriological Significance of ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ in the Gospel of John" (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1987), 43.

²⁵ Robert N. Wilkin, "Salvation Before Calvary," *Grace in Focus* 15 (Jan-Feb 1998).

²⁶ For a defense of the traditional dispensational view of progressive revelation and the change in the contents of saving faith with the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, see "Has Progressive Revelation Changed the Gospel?" in Stegall, *Gospel of the Christ*, 155-211.

evangelistic book in the New Testament, we should expect that God followed the same pattern in the Old Testament. But where is the sole evangelistic book in the Old Testament for all previous dispensations prior to John? Which of the 39 books of the Old Testament is addressed directly to unbelievers so that they might believe the transdispensational “saving message”? What Old Testament book contains an explicit evangelistic purpose statement akin to John 20:30–31? What Old Testament book actually says that its purpose is for all of its readers to come to faith in the future Messiah for everlasting life? If there is no such book in the Old Testament, and the saving message was dispersed throughout many different Old Testament books, then why would God suddenly change His methods of evangelism by making John the only evangelistic book in the New Testament? This leads to a similar, third major problem.

If “the Gospel of John is the only evangelistic book in the Bible,” and if “Romans is not designed to lead people to faith in Christ,” then what did the Holy Spirit use for evangelism in the early church before the Gospel of John was written? The fourth Gospel was one of the last books of the New Testament canon to be written, even if it was written in the mid-to-late 60s before the fall of Jerusalem.²⁷ Yet, if John is the only evangelistic book in the New Testament, it should have been the very first book written. If John, indeed, is exclusively evangelistic and has priority over Romans, then why did God wait until after Romans and most other New Testament books to breathe out the Gospel of John? Did the Holy Spirit make a mistake by delaying the production of John’s Gospel? If Romans was written in the winter of A.D. 58 while Paul was in Corinth on his third missionary journey (Acts 20:2–3; Rom. 15:25–26; 16:23), then what did the Holy Spirit use for evangelism in the church between the writing of Romans and John? The Lord in His sovereignty chose to have great evangelistic books such as Galatians (A.D. 49), 1 Corinthians (A.D. 54–55), and Romans (A.D. 58) written, not only for believers’ own edification and equipping, but also to evangelize the lost more effectively.

The fourth problem with viewing John as the sole evangelistic book of the Bible is that it practically means that the Holy Spirit has been blessing the misuse of Romans for centuries. The new Free Grace view on the contents of saving faith sees the gospel in Romans as a very broad message, encompassing the entire epistle from chapters 1–16.²⁸ Proponents of this view also believe that the word “salvation” in Romans refers primarily to sanctification, and rarely, if ever, to justification and eternal life. But if this is true, then the conclusion is inescapable that Christians who have used Romans to evangelize the lost have actually been *misusing* it! Yet, despite this apparent *misuse* by the entire church for two millennia, the Holy Spirit has evidently been pleased to greatly bless the church’s ignorance since untold millions have been led to faith in Christ through Romans, contrary to the divinely intended purpose of the book.

A fifth problem with the exclusively evangelistic view of John’s Gospel is that it drives an unnatural wedge between the teaching and ministries of John and the other New Testament writers. Among liberal scholars “there has in past years been too strong a tendency to find a cleavage between the two most coherent theologians among the New

²⁷ Thomas L. Stegall, “Reconsidering the Date of John’s Gospel,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 14.2 (2009): 70-103.

²⁸ René A. López, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield, Missouri: 21st Century Press, 2005), 31-32; Myers, “The Gospel Is More than ‘Faith Alone in Christ Alone,’” 45-46.

Testament writers.”²⁹ Many Free Grace teachers have done likewise. Yet John’s saving gospel is not distinct from Paul’s. When Paul went up to Jerusalem and had a private audience with Peter, James, and John to disclose the evangel he preached among the Gentiles, John responded by extending to him the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:1–10).

Regarding my own salvation testimony, God used a variety of biblical books to open my eyes to the saving message of the gospel, particularly the Gospel of John (the gospel *depicted*), and Romans (the gospel *defined*), and the book of Galatians (the gospel *defended*). These books perfectly complement one another in leading lost souls to faith in Jesus as “the Christ,” which is synonymous with believing the gospel of the Christ.

Parallels between John and Romans

There are several soteriological parallels between John’s Gospel and Paul’s epistle to the Romans, showing that their saving messages are the same. For instance, both teach that eternal salvation comes through faith in Christ apart from human works. In John 5:39–40, Jesus tells the Jews, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” Christ’s point was not that the Jews believed the Old Testament instead of Christ, rather that in searching the Scriptures they were seeking to avoid trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation in order to justify themselves by the Law. Therefore, Jesus continues a few verses later, “Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me” (5:45–46). The reference to Moses is theological shorthand for trusting in works of the Law rather than Christ for eternal life.³⁰ By using the word “accused” (κατηγορήσω) Christ introduces a definite judicial meaning into the passage.³¹ This mirrors the teaching of Paul in Romans 9:30–10:4 on justification by faith in Christ apart from works of the Law. Both John’s Gospel and Romans teach that eternal salvation is a free gift to sinners (John 4:10–14; Rom. 3:24; 6:23).³² While Romans contains explicit statements about eternal salvation conditioned on faith apart from works (Rom. 3:27–28; 4:4–5), this truth is also taught in John, though implicitly in narrative form.³³ John’s Gospel teaches this truth through its 98 uses of πιστεύω as the only stated condition for eternal life, combined with its repeated emphasis on Christ’s

²⁹ J. L. Houlden, “Paulinism and Johannism: A Rapprochement,” *Scripture* 17 (1965): 41-42.

³⁰ Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., “Justification in the Gospel of John,” in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (London: World Evangelical Fellowship, 1992), 131-34.

³¹ Lincoln says this was a “technical legal” term in Greek that became a loanword in “Hebrew juridical usage.” Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 81. Saeed Hamid-Khani identifies thirteen judicial terms in John, concluding, “The frequency of such judicial words . . . suggests that the work of Jesus in John’s Gospel is set against a juridical background” (*Revelation and Concealment of Christ: A Theological Inquiry into the Elusive Language of the Fourth Gospel*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 120 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000], 394).

³² Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 152-53, 163.

³³ *Ibid.*, 145.

finished work (1:29; 5:36; 10:37–38; 19:30) in contrast to insufficient human works (2:25; 3:19–20; 5:39–40, 45–46; 6:28–29; 7:7, 19).

Another soteriological parallel is that of righteousness.³⁴ It is a well-known fact that Romans emphasizes the concept of righteousness—the righteousness that man lacks, that God inherently is, and that God freely provides through faith in Christ. But John’s Gospel is not simply about eternal life to the exclusion of righteousness; nor is Romans all about righteousness instead of eternal life. Both books contain both truths.³⁵ According to John 16:8, the Holy Spirit is seeking to “convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.” But if John’s saving message of life is distinct from Paul’s message in Romans, then why does John 16:8 not just say that the Holy Spirit seeks to convict the world of its lack of eternal life rather than righteousness?³⁶ Righteousness and justification cannot be divorced from eternal life, for both soteriological blessings are received simultaneously, as Romans 5:18 even combines them in one expression—the “justification of life.” Regarding Romans 5:18, Free Grace adherent John Hart writes, “That justification and eternal life are mutually inclusive terms is evident elsewhere in Romans (1:17; 5:17, 21; 6:23; 8:10).”³⁷ Andrew Lincoln explains the relationship between justification and eternal life in Romans and the Gospel of John, particularly in the context of John 3:16:

[B]elievers can experience the positive verdict of the lawsuit in the present. It is difficult not to see here an equivalent of the Pauline notion of justification when the entire pattern of the Fourth Gospel’s narrative is taken into account. After all, because Jesus submits to the sentence of death in the cosmic lawsuit, those who believe can receive the verdict of no condemnation. The sentence of death is reversed and instead becomes the positive verdict of life, the life of the age to come. In Paul, too, Jesus’ death meets the requirements of God’s just judgment (cf. Rom 3:25, 26), reversing the situation of condemnation and enabling the verdict of justification and life (cf. Rom 5:18).³⁸

The key phrase “the justification of life” in Romans 5:18 shows that a person receives justification by virtue of being born again. Just as Paul teaches in Romans that believers have righteousness and justification based on their eternal union with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:39), who is their righteousness (Rom. 3:23–24; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21), John’s Gospel also teaches that salvation is tied to the believer’s union with Christ (John

³⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 56; Stephen Motyer, “Justification in the New Testament outside the Pauline Corpus,” *Vox Evangelica* 22 (1992): 83–84.

³⁵ Even Hodges, who views John’s Gospel as the only evangelistic book, agrees that justification by faith alone is implicit in certain eternal life passages and contexts in the fourth Gospel, especially John 5:28–29. Zane C. Hodges, *Harmony with God: A Fresh Look at Repentance* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 2001), 113–16.

³⁶ Trotter, “Justification in the Gospel of John,” 128–31.

³⁷ John F. Hart, “Why Confess Christ? The Use and Abuse of Romans 10:9–10,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 12 (Autumn 1999): 14 n. 33.

³⁸ Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 218.

17:21)³⁹ and that this union is eternal and unchangeable (10:28–30). Justification and regeneration are also wedded in the key evangelistic verse of John 5:24: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.” The regeneration component of this verse is evident in the phrase “has passed from death into life,” but there is also a forensic, justification component, as Carson explains:

The one who hears and believes in this way *has eternal life and will not be condemned* (*krinō*, here meaning “judged adversely”, as in 3:18). The idea is virtually indistinguishable from the negative component of Paul’s doctrine of justification: the believer does not come to the final judgment, but leaves the court already acquitted.⁴⁰

Free Grace proponents Derickson and Radmacher agree: “Though John’s Gospel clearly communicates the gospel, its description is comprehensive and wholistic. It describes all aspects of salvation, including the unbeliever’s need for justification and the believer’s need for sanctification. It describes both aspects of salvation.”⁴¹ Even Zane Hodges agreed that John’s Gospel implicitly contains Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone. Commenting on John 5:24 and Romans 8:33–34 as these passages relate to John 5:29, Hodges writes:

If the question is asked as to how God can completely bypass judgment for the believer in Jesus (since he “does not come into judgment”!), the answer must be that God has no charge against him! The believer is justified from all things on the basis of his faith!

Some may object to this view by asserting that it is impermissible to read Pauline theology back into the words of Jesus, as recorded by John. But would this be a truly valid objection? Would not Paul himself have been the first to claim that his gospel was received directly by the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11–12)? And if that is really true, would it be unthinkable that the doctrine of justification by faith—which lay at the core of Paul’s proclamation—should be found in latent form in the utterances of the Lord Himself while He was yet on earth? Must it not even be pronounced incredible if, after perusing all of the recorded words of the Savior, one should not find the barest hint of this magnificent and crucial aspect of Christian truth? Would not John the Evangelist—by the time he had written this Gospel—have been alertly attentive to such hints in his Lord’s words, since he is one of the few apostles with whom Paul is explicitly said to have conferred about the content of his gospel (Gal 2:1–

³⁹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 5:143–44; Houlden, “Paulinism and Johannism: A Rapprochement,” 42, 49–51.

⁴⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 256.

⁴¹ Gary Derickson and Earl Radmacher, *The Disciplemaker: What Matters Most to Jesus* (Salem, OR: Charis, 2001), 306.

9)? Indeed, from every vantage point there is excellent reason to suppose that a fundamental harmony and an underlying community of perspective can and should be sought in the teachings of John and Paul, since the Son of God is the ultimate Source of the message they both proclaimed.⁴²

Besides justification by faith alone, a third soteriological truth common to both John and Romans is the content of faith, which explicitly includes Christ's substitutionary, atoning death as a divine judgment on sin.⁴³ John 6:51 states that the purpose of Christ giving His flesh is for the benefit of the "world." Two verses later, Christ issues the evangelistic challenge, saying, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (6:53). According to John, the reference to eating is a metaphorical expression for personally appropriating Christ by faith (6:35).⁴⁴ Therefore, John 6 declares the absolute necessity to believe in Jesus Christ's substitutionary death in order to possess eternal life.⁴⁵ This same truth is reflected in Romans 3:25, which speaks of "faith in His blood" (KJV, NIV). This translation follows the Greek word order, rather than other translations which say, "a propitiation by His blood" (NKJV, NASB). However, even some leading proponents of the crossless saving message hold to the "faith in His blood" translation of Romans 3:25, saying it is "the best and most natural reading."⁴⁶

Finally, the Gospel of John and the Epistle of Romans both teach that belief in Jesus Christ's deity and resurrection are required for eternal salvation. This teaching is expressed by both John and Paul through their use of πιστεύω + ὅτι content clauses. These content clauses express the content of belief. Regarding the use of these clauses in John's Gospel and Romans, Richard Melick writes, "The intellectual aspect of faith is also encouraged by the ὅτι clause objects. These always speak of Jesus' person and work."⁴⁷ Melick goes on to say, "The confessional or dogmatic statements are the ὅτι clauses prominent in both John and Romans. In these, a developed theology is apparent, and one must understand the content of this theology in order to be saved."⁴⁸ In John 8:24, Jesus warns His Jewish audience, "you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that [πιστεύω ὅτι] I am [ἐγὼ εἰμι], you will die in your sins." Four verses later, Jesus says, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [ἐγὼ εἰμι]" (8:28). Both the deity of Christ and His finished work are inseparably connected as part of the contents of faith required for eternal salvation.⁴⁹ There is little dispute about the

⁴² Zane C. Hodges, "Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 6: Those Who Have Done Good—John 5:28–29," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (April 1979): 164–65.

⁴³ Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 203–4, 425–6.

⁴⁴ David Gibson, "Eating Is Believing? On Midrash and the Mixing of Metaphors in John 6," *Themelios* 27 (Spring 2002): 5–15.

⁴⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 340.

⁴⁶ López, *Romans Unlocked*, 79.

⁴⁷ Richard R. Melick, Jr., "A Study in the Concept of Belief: A Comparison of the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Romans" (Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976), 134.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.

⁴⁹ Robert P. Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 204–5.

fact that Jesus' ἐγώ εἰμι statements that characterize John's Gospel show He is no one less than God Himself. John endeavors to lead his readers to belief in Jesus as God. This can be observed from the opening verse (1:1) all the way to Thomas's climactic confession, "my Lord and my God" (20:28) just before the purpose statement in 20:30–31, which is the first time that a character in the narrative explicitly calls Jesus "God."⁵⁰ Thomas's conclusion that Jesus is "Lord" stems from observing the risen Christ, thereby tying together the Lordship of Christ with His resurrection.

Romans also connects belief in Christ's resurrection to His deity or Lordship. In Romans 10:9–10, Paul uses a ὅτι clause to explain the content of faith: "that [ὅτι] if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that [ὅτι] God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Romans 10:9a and 10b state that justifying faith acknowledges the deity of Christ as expressed by the words, "Jesus is Lord."⁵¹ Regarding belief that Jesus is Lord, Foerster explains, "Paul, then, does not make any distinction between θεός and κύριος as though κύριος were an intermediary god; there are no instances of any such usage in the world contemporary with primitive Christianity. . . . it is plain that κύριος is the One through whom God has come into the world to work and to save."⁵² The fact that Paul uses κύριος on the same level as θεός unequivocally establishes that "Lord" is an appellation of genuine deity.⁵³ Paul's use of the ὅτι content clause for Jesus as Lord also shows that in Romans, like the Gospel of John, faith in Christ for eternal salvation is belief both *in* Christ and *about* Christ. Both John and Paul agree that faith in Jesus for eternal life involves belief in both the person of

⁵⁰ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 503.

⁵¹ The traditional view among grace-oriented, dispensationalists is that the declaration "Jesus is Lord" in Romans 10:9–10 is tied to justification by faith and Israel's eternal, national deliverance at the return of Christ. (See Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation, Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*, GraceLife Edition [Burlison, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992], 108-13; Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:379-80; Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation*, 168, 206-7; Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989], 70-73.) On the other hand, Free Grace Christians who teach that John is the only evangelistic book of the Bible and that the saving message of life does not require belief in Christ's deity say that the belief and confession of Christ as "Lord" in Romans 10:9–10 is to be a routine practice of the Christian life for daily sanctification and deliverance from the wrath of God upon carnal and disobedient Christians. (See Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* [Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989], 193-203; Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver*, 212-14; Wilkin, "Why the Romans Road Ends in a Cul de Sac"). One major problem with this latter interpretation is that it is entirely out of sync with the context of Romans 9–11, which deals with the justification and physical deliverance of national Israel, not the church's daily sanctification, which is the subject of Romans 6–8.

⁵² Werner Foerster, "κύριος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:1091.

⁵³ Robert M. Bowman, Jr., and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 157-70; Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 122-24. This is not to say that κύριος always refers to deity in the New Testament, since there are instances where it is simply a respectful form of address such as "sir" (Matt. 21:30; 27:63; Luke 13:8; John 4:11, 15, 19; Rev. 7:14), but this is not Paul's usage.

Christ and the message about His finished work. Regarding this agreement among New Testament authors, Melick concludes:

Both Paul and John conceive of faith as intellectual. Not only is it necessary to have the correct object of faith, but it is also essential to understand properly the object. Both Paul and John describe the Jesus-God relationship in terms of their cooperative work toward the world. John concentrates on Jesus as the Messiah who is accomplishing God's plan for the world. One must believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In a complementary manner Paul describes God's activity in raising Jesus from the dead. For him, the Resurrection is an essential component of faith. The fact that Paul always attributes the Resurrection to God indicates the theocentric nature of the epistle. Even so, one cannot believe in God without believing in the Resurrection of Jesus.⁵⁴

A comparison of salvation passages in John's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Romans reveals that both books harmoniously set forth belief in Christ's deity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection, apart from human works, as the sole condition for the "justification of life." If these books share the same saving message for the lost, then why can both books not serve an evangelistic purpose?

GOSPEL OF JOHN AND GOSPEL OF LUKE

If the Gospel of John were the only evangelistic book in the Bible, then this would mean that the other Gospels were not divinely designed to be "good news" to the *lost* but only "good news" to the *saved*. Those who hold to the possibility of a crossless content of saving faith teach that John's Gospel is the only book of the New Testament written to tell the lost how to have eternal life and that the rest of the New Testament emphasizes discipleship. Virtually all parties would agree that a major purpose of the Synoptic Gospels is to explain God's kingdom program for Israel in relation to Old Testament covenantal and prophetic promises. It is also evident that these Gospels contain much rich discipleship truth. But does this necessarily mean that they exclude the message of salvation? What if they were also intended to convey the "saving message" to a lost world? Bob Wilkin is one proponent of the "promise-only" view who rejects such a possibility.

Matthew's Gospel is not evangelistic in nature. It is a discipleship book.⁵⁵

It has long been a hallmark of the Free Grace position that the Synoptic Gospels are written to the Church for discipleship, not to unbelievers to tell them what they must believe to be born again.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Melick, "A Study in the Concept of Belief," 266.

⁵⁵ Robert N. Wilkin, "The Role of Good Works in Justification: A Review of Chapter 16 of Thomas Schreiner's *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification*," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 28 (Autumn 2015): 14.

There are no evangelistic passages in the Synoptics. That is, nowhere do we find the Lord sharing the promise of everlasting life by faith in Him in Matthew, Mark, or Luke.⁵⁷

Bob Bryant is another proponent of modern Free Grace theology who maintains that John's Gospel alone is evangelistic. He states:

If Matthew, Mark, and Luke were writing to tell people how to have eternal life—to put it mildly—they did a very poor job. In fact, I want to use a stronger word, or a couple of stronger words. If Matthew, Mark, and Luke were writing to tell people how to have eternal life, they were *totally irresponsible*, because the words “believe in Jesus” I don't think are even in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, let alone “believe in Jesus for eternal life.”⁵⁸

Such boldness is stunning. We might initially be prone to mistake his confidence for the correctness of his claim. One wonders whether those who hold to the John-only position realize that the Gospel of John itself does not even contain the words, “believe in Jesus” or “believe in Jesus for eternal life.” Careful readers of John's Gospel will, however, recognize in his Gospel the similar phrases, “believe in Me” and “believe in Him.” But these expressions also have their equivalents in the Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew 18:6 and Mark 9:42, Christ says, “believe in Me” (πιστευόντων εἰς ἐμέ). And in Matthew 27:42, the Gospel writer Matthew records the divine irony intended for the reader, as the Jews mock Jesus for supposedly not being the true Christ because He was dying on the cross. They say, “Let Him come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him [πιστεύσομεν ἐπ' αὐτόν].” The unbelieving Jews believed in a crossless Christ. But this account is intentionally placed in Matthew's Gospel so that his readers will know that to “believe in Him” means to believe that the Christ dies for them.

Luke's Gospel also lacks the exact expression “Believe in Jesus” or the *sine qua non* of saving faith according to the “promise-only” position: “Believe in Jesus for everlasting life.” But just like John, the Gospel of Luke instructs the reader to believe in Jesus as the Christ. This is accomplished through the divinely designed progression of Luke's narrative. The reader is expected to realize that Jesus is the biblical Christ precisely *because* He went to the cross and rose from the dead, all of which was “according to the Scriptures” (Rom. 1:1–4; 1 Cor. 15:3–4). In the wake of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, which were headline news in Jerusalem, Jesus Himself expressed the content of faith found in Luke's Gospel by saying, “believe in [πιστεύειν ἐπὶ] all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25). In the immediate context, “all that the prophets have spoken” refers to Jesus being “crucified” (24:20) and risen from the

⁵⁶ Robert N. Wilkin, “A Review of Thomas L. Stegall's *The Gospel of the Christ*,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 23 (Spring 2010): 20.

⁵⁷ Robert N. Wilkin, “Our Evangelism Should Be Exegetically Sound,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 27 (Autumn 2014): 28.

⁵⁸ Bryant, “The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John,” (emphasis original).

dead (24:22–24) in order to provide redemption (24:21).⁵⁹ Not coincidentally, this is the same message the church is commissioned to take from Jerusalem to all the nations (24:45–47; Acts 1:8). Though the Great Commission obviously involves making disciples (Matt. 28:18–20), it starts with people believing the gospel (Mark 16:15)—believing that Jesus is the Christ—who was crucified for them and rose again (Luke 24:45–47).

Though there are obvious differences between John and the Synoptics in terms of style and their selection of certain signs and discourses, and even distinctive emphases in their theologies, the four Gospels form a perfect gospel quartet, singing in four-part harmony about the “saving message.” Their terminology and emphases differ, but their doctrines are all completely consistent, including their soteriology. For instance, the terminology and theme of “life” or “eternal life” is certainly more pronounced in John than the Synoptics, but this is still soteriologically interchangeable with the terminology of “forgiveness” and “salvation” more prevalent in the Synoptic Gospels. It may even be admitted that John is more evangelistic in emphasis and focus than the other Gospels, but this does not mean the other Gospels are *nonevangelistic*. In fact, when it comes to being evangelistic in purpose, the Gospel of Luke in particular presents a stiff challenge to the claim that John is the only evangelistic book in the Bible. This is based on the twofold testimony of Luke’s prologue in Luke 1:1–4 and the actual content of Luke-Acts.

Prologue of Luke-Acts

Luke is one of only a few books in the New Testament that has an explicit “purpose statement” (John 20:31; 1 John 1:4; Jude 3). A careful, fair-minded reading of this purpose statement in Luke’s prologue (1:1–4) must leave open the likelihood that Luke was written evangelistically to an unbeliever named Theophilus, who having been informed previously about Jesus Christ, still lacked the certainty and assurance that Luke’s authoritative account could provide. It must be remembered that the recent “John-only” view *cannot* permit Luke to have an evangelistic purpose, whereas according to the classical Free Grace perspective, John’s purpose can be *either* evangelism or edification. So what is Luke’s purpose? Does the exegetical evidence point to, or even permit, an evangelistic purpose for this Gospel?

Luke 1:1–4

- 1 Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us,
- 2 just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us,
- 3 it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus,
- 4 that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

⁵⁹ John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 79.

A general summary of the contents of Luke 1:1–3a is necessary before focusing on 1:3b–4 and seeking to answer the question of whether Luke’s purpose is evangelism or edification. Luke 1:1 opens by referring to “many” (πολλοὶ) others who have undertaken the task of presenting orderly narratives about Christ, and now Luke is doing the same for Theophilus. This raises a question concerning the identity of the “many.” Do the “many” other narrators mentioned in verse 1 consist of the other canonical Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and John? Or, does “many” refer to noninspired writings that may no longer be extant? And is this even a reference to written narratives, as opposed to oral transmissions of narrative? These are important questions that have an indirect bearing on the question of whether John is the only evangelistic Gospel and even whether the writing of John preceded Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and thus whether John has priority over the other Gospels, as some promise-only proponents are now claiming. For, if the “many” other “narrative” accounts in Luke 1:1 refers to the other Gospels, including John, then perhaps Luke’s purpose is purely discipleship and edification, and perhaps Luke merely builds on the evangelistic purpose of John.

In order to determine who the “many” are that Luke is referring to in verse 1, it will be helpful to consider first what he means by the phrase, “to set in order a narrative.” What kind of “narrative” (διήγησιν) is this referring to? Another written canonical Gospel, such as John? Though the term διήγησις was frequently used by classical Greek writers for “historical writing,”⁶⁰ it need not be restricted to such a technical meaning in Luke 1:1. The reference to “many” other orderly accounts (διήγησις) in Luke’s prologue could possibly mean orderly *oral* declarations,⁶¹ or *written* narratives,⁶² or both.⁶³ The noun διήγησις is a *hapax legomenon*, being found only here in the New Testament. But the related verb διηγέομαι occurs eight times in the New Testament, with five of these in Luke’s writings (Luke 8:39; 9:10; Acts 8:33; 9:27; 12:17).⁶⁴ In every instance, διηγέομαι refers to an oral declaration. However, in Luke 1:1, διήγησιν occurs in combination with the word ἀνατάξασθαι, which means “to

⁶⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 292. It has also been argued that Luke’s prologue has more in common with ancient “scientific writing” than biographical or historical writing, and thus Luke did not intend to write a formal history or biography. Loveday Alexander, “Luke’s Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing,” *Novum Testamentum* 28 (1986): 48–74.

⁶¹ Gerhard Dellling, “ἀνατάσσω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:32–33; Richard J. Dillon, “Previewing Luke’s Project from His Prologue (Luke 1:1–4),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981): 208–9; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 38; Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 190; Robert H. Stein, “Luke 1:1–4 and Traditionsgeschichte,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (December 1983): 423.

⁶² I. I. Du Plessis, “Once More: The Purpose of Luke’s Prologue (Lk I, 1–4),” *Novum Testamentum* 16 (1974): 262.

⁶³ Darrell L. Bock, “Understanding Luke’s Task: Carefully Building on Precedent (Luke 1:1–4),” *Criswell Theological Review* 5.2 (1991): 189; Friedrich Büchsel, “διήγησις,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:909. Büchsel writes, “The word is found from the time of Plato and simply denotes an oral or written record as such.”

⁶⁴ See also Mark 5:16; 9:9; and Hebrews 11:32.

arrange, organize, set in order, compile.”⁶⁵ Based on this connection between the two terms, some believe this specifies a written narrative,⁶⁶ but not all are convinced of this point.⁶⁷ Since there is nothing in the context of Luke 1:1 that necessitates διήγησιν meaning only written narratives, the possibility must be left open that Luke is referring to either orderly oral declarations about Christ or to a combination of oral and written narratives.

If Luke 1:1 is referring merely to the other three canonical Gospels by the clause “many [πολλοὶ] have taken in hand/undertaken [ἐπεχείρησαν] to set in order [ἀνατάξασθαι] a narrative [διήγησιν],” then it seems strange for him to say that “many” (πολλοὶ) had done so. Three Gospels does not constitute “many.” Furthermore, since John did not write his Gospel before Luke, this leaves just two other Gospels, making it even less likely as a reference to the canonical Gospels.⁶⁸ Therefore, it seems best to interpret the “many” other narratives referred to in Luke 1:1 as meaning either ordered, oral “tellings” about Christ or noninspired, nonextant written accounts about Him, rather than the inspired canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John.

Some interpreters might be inclined to favor a meaning for ἐπεχείρησαν (“have taken in hand”) in verse 1 as that which is “handwritten” or a “written account.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 61-62; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), §62.3, “Arrange, Organize” (1:612).

⁶⁶ Du Plessis, “Once More: The Purpose of Luke’s Prologue,” 262.

⁶⁷ Bock, “Understanding Luke’s Task,” 189; Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* 190; Delling, “ἀνατάσσω,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 8:32-33. Delling states, “ἀνατάσσω διήγησιν can hardly mean that the πολλοί set the oral tradition in writing.”

⁶⁸ According to John Niemelä’s view, the “many” would be limited even further to only *one* canonical Gospel—the Gospel of Matthew. In his dissertation, Niemelä presents a powerful challenge to the dogmatic assumption of Markan priority, arguing from statistical analysis that Mark must have come *after* Matthew and Luke since Mark utilized these two Gospels. See John H. Niemelä, “The Infrequency of Twin Departures: An End to Synoptic Reversibility?” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000). Niemelä does not, however, believe Mark was literarily or theologically dependent on Matthew and Luke simply because he consulted these two Synoptic Gospels (John H. Niemelä, “The Case for the Two-Gospel View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002], 127). Niemelä postulates that Luke would have been aware of Matthew’s Gospel and certainly would have utilized it; but this is speculation and cannot be proven. Niemelä goes on to qualify that although Luke would have used Matthew, his purpose in writing a separate Gospel was not because he deemed Matthew to be spiritually defective but only because he needed a different literary-thematic base on which to build his second book, Acts, since he intended them to be one literary unit (*ibid.*, 130-31, 183). Other scholars who hold to an “Independence” view of Synoptic origins, rather than Niemelä’s “Two-Gospel View” (Matthean-Lucan priority to Mark), are convinced that though Matthew may have been written before Luke, Luke was not aware of, or did not utilize, either Matthew or Mark when composing Luke-Acts. See Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 29 n. 1; F. David Farnell, “The Case for the Independence View of Gospel Origins,” in *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 282-83; Paul W. Felix, “Literary Dependence and Luke’s Prologue,” in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, ed. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 276.

⁶⁹ The *NET Bible*, First Beta Edition (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), 1831 n. 2.

This would mean that the orderly narratives of Luke 1:1 must refer specifically to noninspired *writings* about the life of Christ, rather than orderly oral accounts. While the stem of this word is χεῖρ (“hand”), a strictly etymological meaning of “to set one’s *hand*” is not required in the passage. The word ἐπιχειρέω is used only two other times in the New Testament, and both are by Luke. In Acts 9:29, where the apostle Paul is opposed by the Hellenistic Jews for preaching Christ, it says, “they attempted [ἐπεχείρουν] to kill him.” Here the physical use of the *hands* is clearly implied. But in Luke’s second use of ἐπιχειρέω, the term is used in the context of speaking. “Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves [ἐπεχείρησαν] to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches’” (Acts 19:13). How did the exorcists take it upon themselves (ἐπεχείρησαν)? By “call[ing]” and “saying.” So, it is best to interpret this term to mean simply an undertaking or attempt of some kind,⁷⁰ which in Luke 1:1 could be either an oral or written narrative.⁷¹

However, if Luke’s terminology in verse 1 is meant to include orderly *written* narratives, then this must also mean that such noninspired, written narratives about Christ perished early in church history. There is no clear, subsequent patristic testimony to the existence of “many” noninspired, written Gospel-type narratives in the early church.⁷² In addition, such narratives cannot include the Gnostic “Gospels” that came after the first century.⁷³ Luke is not guilty of historical anachronism. Besides, if Luke was thinking of the Gnostic Gospels in his reference to “many” other orderly narratives in Luke 1:1, he

⁷⁰ The standard Greek-English lexicon defines it: “set one’s hand to, attempt, try” (Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 304); Louw & Nida’s Lexicon define it, “Try, Attempt” (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1988], 1:662, §68.59).

⁷¹ Some might also attempt to restrict the meaning of ἐπεχείρησαν in Luke 1:1 to written accounts by appealing to Luke 1:3, which says, “it seemed good [ἔδοξε] to me also [καὶ μοι, καί + μοι], having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write [γραφαί] to you an orderly account [καθεξῆς], most excellent Theophilus.” Some might be inclined to think that Luke is saying, “Just as many others have undertaken an orderly narrative (1:1). . . . It seemed good [ἔδοξε] for me [μοι] to write [γραφαί] also [καί].” However, in verse 3, καὶ μοι (“to me also”) modifies ἔδοξε (“It seemed good”) rather than the infinitive, γραφαί (“to write”). Instead, γραφαί is connected to καθεξῆς (“an orderly account”). See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 62; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 298. The grammatical parallel for Luke’s use of καὶ μοι in Luke 1:3 is found in Acts 10:28, where it says, “But God has shown [ἔδειξε] me [καὶ μοι] that I should not call [λέγειν] any man common or unclean.” Here, as in Luke 1:3, καὶ μοι modifies the main verb ἔδειξε (“has shown”) rather than the infinitive λέγειν (“to call, to speak”).

⁷² This is true notwithstanding the statement of Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.15, where he offers his own interpretation of “many” in Luke 1:1 but cites no early church precedence for the existence of pre-Gospel, written narratives. Likewise, Papias’s “*ta logia*” comment recorded in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16 has been the subject of endless speculation and most likely is just an expression for the Gospel of Matthew itself, not a group of pre-Matthean sayings of Jesus, or the mythical and elusive “Q” document. See Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church,” in *The Jesus Crisis*, 39-46.

⁷³ Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* 190.

could not possibly have said two verses later, “it seemed good to me also” (Luke 1:3). There is nothing “good” about the Gnostic so-called Gospels.

The term ἐπεχείρησαν in Luke 1:1, translated “have taken in hand” (NKJV) or “have undertaken” (NASB), is significant and requires further explanation. When Luke refers to these previous attempts at compiling orderly narratives, he is not necessarily demeaning their efforts. Some interpreters might be prone to see in Luke’s use of the Greek term ἐπιχειρέω a tinge of deprecation based on the fact that the term is employed negatively in its only other uses by Luke (Acts 9:29; 19:13). This would mean in the context of Luke’s prologue that Luke was subtly expressing his disapproval of those previous attempts at narration. But that is reading too much into the term in verse 1, as John Niemelä explains, “The Greek word for ‘have undertaken,’ ἐπεχείρησαν, does not discuss the sufficiency or insufficiency of earlier attempts. Neither does the fact that Luke mentioned his predecessors. If nothing else, Luke 1:3 links Luke with his predecessors positively: ‘It seemed good to me *also*.’”⁷⁴ In Luke 1:3, the term κάμοι (καὶ + ἐγώ [or μοι, the accusative of ἐγώ], i.e., “and to me”) is used by Luke to associate himself with those in verse 1 who had previously undertaken a narration. He would hardly have done this if he viewed their previous efforts negatively.⁷⁵

However, the very fact that Luke has also undertaken a narration means that he believes he has something beneficial to add.⁷⁶ The reason for Luke’s additional narrative of Luke-Acts is stated in the main clause of the prologue in verse 3, “it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus.” Luke is in the advantageous position of writing “an orderly account” or narration because he has come to possess a full and accurate knowledge of his subject matter. We know that Luke traveled in Paul’s company on missionary trips (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16), and therefore he had access to firsthand testimony from apostles and other original “eyewitnesses” (Luke 1:2). Luke was ideally situated to write an inspired, authoritative book about Christ (Luke) and the mission of the early church (Acts). Why is this relevant? Because only such a written account would have provided assurance and been persuasive to Theophilus. So far, these exegetical facts fit with Luke writing an evangelistic treatise to convince an unbeliever, Theophilus, to believe in Jesus the Christ for salvation.

In seeking to correctly interpret Luke’s prologue in order to discern whether Luke was writing evangelistically or for edification, it must also be recognized that there are at least two generations of Christian witnesses mentioned in Luke 1:1–2. There is a broader meaning of “us” in verse 1 and a narrower meaning of “us” in verse 2. Luke was a second-generation witness for Jesus Christ. According to Luke 1:2, Luke is

⁷⁴ Niemelä, “The Case for the Two-Gospel View,” 130.

⁷⁵ Bock, “Understanding Luke’s Task,” 189; Dillon, “Previewing Luke’s Project,” 208; Du Plessis, “Once More: The Purpose of Luke’s Prologue,” 266; Stein, “Luke 1:1–4 and Traditionsgeschichte,” 423.

⁷⁶ Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1: 1:1–9:50*, 59; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, “ἀνατάσσω,” by Gerhard Dellling, 8:32 n. 3; Felix, “Literary Dependence and Luke’s Prologue,” 279; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 296; Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*; 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 1:60.

distinguished from the first generation of Christian witnesses, who are described in verse 2 as “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.” In verse 2, Luke says that he received the personal testimonies of these first-generation witnesses. This is implied by the phrase “delivered them to us.” These witnesses certainly consisted of the apostles, but perhaps also the 70 (Luke 10:1, 17) and the 120 disciples (Acts 1:15).

As to the content Luke received from these witnesses, Luke 1:1 says that he received from them the various testimonies of what God had “fulfilled [πεπληροφορημένων] among us.” This refers to detailed, firsthand, eyewitness descriptions of the events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, which were a fulfillment of God’s plan of redemption for the human race, just as predicted in the Old Testament.⁷⁷ Regarding the exact nature of this fulfillment and its connection to Christ, Paul Felix writes, “Luke puts emphasis on the fulfillment of God’s plan in both Luke and Acts (for example, Luke 1:20, 57; 2:6, 21–22; 4:21; Acts 9:23; 13:25; 24:27). These fulfilled events and time periods refer to the carrying out of God’s plan in the world in connection with the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷⁸

The reference in verse 1 to the “things which have been fulfilled among us” indicates a broader group of witnesses than just those who observed the earthly life of Christ. This reference encompasses the first-generation eyewitnesses plus Luke himself.⁷⁹ Luke was a constituent of the “us” in verse 1. The things “fulfilled among us” in Luke 1:1 would include not only the events of the earthly ministry of Christ but also the events recorded in the Book of Acts that Luke observed personally, which were the evangelistic fulfillment of God’s plan and program for man’s redemption. In Luke 1:1, the events fulfilled “among us” (ἐν ἡμῖν) therefore point to a group of Christian witnesses who observed the events recorded in Luke-Acts. The perfect tense of the participle for “fulfilled” (πεπληροφορημένων) “can include a reference to a group that was not originally present at these events. Past and present believers are united by these events and share in their significance.”⁸⁰

What all of this indicates is that Luke was well-positioned to write Luke-Acts as an authoritative two-volume literary unit covering the events of Christ’s life and the subsequent mission of the church. Such an authoritative resource would have fostered faith within an unbeliever such as Theophilus and within any reader willing to be convinced by the saving message contained in Luke-Acts. In this regard, Green writes, “For Luke, an ‘orderly account’ is concerned above all with persuasion. He has ‘ordered’ the events of his narrative so as to bring out their significance, to persuade Theophilus.”⁸¹ While it is true that Luke did not view his predecessors’ attempts at narration disparagingly, his own orderly account offered something extremely advantageous over that of his predecessors—a God-breathed document! Luke’s account was inspired by

⁷⁷ Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke, I–IX*, 293.

⁷⁸ Felix, “Literary Dependence and Luke’s Prologue,” 277.

⁷⁹ Dillon, “Previewing Luke’s Project,” 209; Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke, I–IX*, 293–

⁸⁰ Bock, “Understanding Luke’s Task,” 190–91.

⁸¹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 36.

God.⁸² This fact, combined with the purpose statement of the prologue in Luke 1:4 (“that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed”), means that Luke’s Gospel was completely reliable and of the highest authority, and it could provide Theophilus with the certainty and assurance he needed. This interpretation is perfectly consistent with an evangelistic purpose for Luke-Acts.

Theophilus: Believer or Unbeliever?

One would think that the question of whether the Gospel of Luke is intended for the evangelism of unbelievers or the edification of believers (and thus whether John is the only evangelistic book in the New Testament) is ultimately decided by the status of Luke’s recipient, Theophilus. Was he a believer or an unbeliever? One proponent of the John-only view states with dogmatic certainty that Theophilus was already a believer:

It’s been suggested that Theophilus, the recipient of Luke was an unsaved man. I think if Luke and Theophilus heard that suggestion they would be appalled. You’ve got to be kidding. The content of Luke’s Gospel proves that Theophilus had to be saved. Luke was writing to instruct a believer in discipleship; and discipleship demands works.⁸³

We may never be certain on this side of heaven whether or not Theophilus would be appalled at the suggestion that he was an unbeliever. Precious little space is afforded to this man in Scripture. The only other reference to him is in the preface to Acts, where Luke wrote, “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). But sufficient evidence exists to support the conclusion that Theophilus was likely an unbeliever.

Etymologically, the name Theophilus means “beloved of God” (or as Niemelä says, “friend of God”). Some interpreters, following Origen, have speculated based on this that there was no individual to whom Luke was directly addressing this Gospel who bore this actual name. Instead, they say, “Theophilus” was a generic, figurative name representative of all potential readers who are beloved of God or who love God.⁸⁴ But such subtlety and vagueness hardly befits a document that so precisely describes people, places, and events in order to deliver “certainty” (Luke 1:4);⁸⁵ nor was this the practice of

⁸² In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 24:14–15 and Luke 10:7, referring to both passages as “Scripture.” Since Paul also told Timothy that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), this means the Gospel of Luke is also divinely inspired.

⁸³ Bryant, “The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John.” See also Bob Bryant, “The Surprising Purpose of Acts,” Grace Evangelical Society National Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 2011, and Wilkin, “Our Evangelism Should Be Exegetically Sound,” 23. In addition, Niemelä concludes that Theophilus was already a believer in Christ for two reasons: (1) Luke 1:4 says that he was already catechized, and (2) Luke-Acts lacks an emphasis on the saving message or promise of life that John’s Gospel clearly contains, and thus the emphasis of Luke-Acts demonstrates that it was written for those who are already believers. See John Niemelä, “Luke 1 Is the Edifying Introduction to Both Luke and Acts,” Grace Evangelical Society National Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 2011; idem, “The Message of Life in Acts,” Grace Evangelical Society National Conference, Fort Worth, TX, April 2011.

⁸⁴ Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 30.

⁸⁵ C. Marvin Pate, *Luke*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 45.

any other biblical writer. Besides, “Theophilus” was a common name used by both Jews and Gentiles from the third century B.C. forward.⁸⁶ It is not difficult to conceive that Luke had one such “Theophilus” in mind. Others have suggested that Theophilus was a wealthy patron who underwrote the production of Luke-Acts.⁸⁷ They base this upon Luke’s respectful and formal manner of address in his prologue, which would indicate that Theophilus was a person of high social standing and thus a man of means. While all of this may be possible, there is no way either to confirm it or to deny it. Still another scholar, Werner Marx, has suggested that Theophilus can be precisely identified with Agrippa II, the king who was evangelized by Paul in Acts 25–26, who “almost” became persuaded “to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28).⁸⁸ If such a specific identification can be proven, then Theophilus was definitely an unbeliever, and Luke’s purpose is indisputably evangelistic. But Marx’s suggestion has not gained serious consideration. Another more recent suggestion that is gaining some traction is that Luke was Jewish and wrote to another Jew⁸⁹ Theophilus who was one of the five sons of Annas and had formerly served as the high priest from A.D. 37–41, who either had become a Christian by the time Luke was written⁹⁰ or was an unbeliever considering the claims of Christianity.⁹¹

One strong piece of evidence that Theophilus was an unbeliever is based on the honorific title Luke uses to address him. The secular title “most excellent” (κράτιστε) occurs three other times in Acts and in each instance it applies to unbelieving Roman rulers—Felix (23:26; 24:3) and Festus (26:25). It is a startling fact that there is not a single instance in the first two centuries of church history where one Christian addresses another with a secular title.⁹² Furthermore, throughout the New Testament when one believer addresses another, there is *always* an indication in the address or greeting that the recipient is regarded as a fellow brother or believer in Christ.⁹³ This is true whether the writer is addressing believers collectively in epistles to local churches or individually, such as to Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and 2–3 John. If Theophilus were a fellow believer, the manner in which he is addressed by Luke is completely anomalous.

Even though Theophilus was a real, historical individual, and likely an unbeliever, it seems best to recognize that Luke also wrote his two-volume set for a broader audience. Bock says, “Nevertheless, just because the work is dedicated to Theophilus does not mean that Luke intended his work for just one individual. Other ancient writers dedicated their works to individuals knowing full well that they were

⁸⁶ Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke, I–IX*, 299.

⁸⁷ Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 30-31; G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1931), 9-10. For evidence to the contrary, see Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 44-45 n. 57.

⁸⁸ Werner G. Marx, “A New Theophilus,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 52 (January 1980): 17-26.

⁸⁹ Rick Strelan, *Luke the Priest: The Authority of the Author of the Third Gospel* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2008), 106-13.

⁹⁰ David L. Allen, *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 327-37.

⁹¹ Richard Anderson, “Theophilus: A Proposal,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 69.3 (1997): 195-215.

⁹² Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 13; Strelan, *Luke the Priest*, 108; Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. John Moore Trout et al., 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909), 3:42.

⁹³ Sydney Dean Dyer, “The Complexity of Luke’s Evangelistic Appeal: A Study on the Purpose of Acts” (Ph.D. dissertation, Bob Jones University, 1984), 156.

writing for a larger audience (Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.I.1–5).⁹⁴ This view seems most reasonable. It also implies that if Theophilus was already a neophyte believer, Luke's larger intended readership still would have included the unsaved Gentile world; and his purpose, therefore, still would have been evangelistic.

There exist at least four main interpretative positions on the identity of Theophilus in connection with the purpose of Luke-Acts. Some view Luke's purpose as primarily evangelistic and that Theophilus, like the average reader, was someone who was not yet persuaded that Jesus is the Christ.⁹⁵ Others see Theophilus as a recent convert to the faith who lacked certainty and assurance but that the larger audience of Luke's Gospel was still unconverted, primarily Gentile, readers.⁹⁶ Other interpreters are open to either possibility for the status of Theophilus.⁹⁷ I. Howard Marshall holds a fourth view, suggesting that Luke-Acts was written to a mixed audience with more than one objective in mind. Luke wrote to a converted young Christian named Theophilus to provide him with assurance for his faith, and to Gentiles in order to evangelize them with God's plan of salvation, and finally to the Christian churches for their own equipping.⁹⁸ Marshall explains:

Where is Luke to be situated in the early church? The question is not easy to answer. In the first place, our attempts to locate the aims of Luke have suggested that he was largely concerned simply to present salvation to his readers. He wished to confirm the faith of a Theophilus by a fresh account of the historical basis of faith. At the same time his presentation is an effective basis for the evangelism of those who had not yet come to faith. Thus the purpose is primarily evangelistic, although other issues are also important for Luke. If this is the case, it means that in terms of its primary aim Luke's work is to a large extent timeless. It is not written to deal with a particular problem or situation in the church, but rather to help in the

⁹⁴ Bock, "Understanding Luke's Task," 198.

⁹⁵ Anderson, "Theophilus: A Proposal," 195-215; Robert Creech, "The Most Excellent Narratee: The Significance of Theophilus in Luke-Acts," in *With Steadfast Purpose: Essays in Honor of Henry Jack Flanders*, ed. Naymond Keathley (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1990), 121; Roman Garrison, *The Significance of Theophilus as Luke's Reader* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2004), 28; D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament, Volume One: The Gospels and Acts* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 132-33; John Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989), 1:xxxii-xxxiii, 11-12; J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting* (London: SPCK, 1961), 172-85; W. C. van Unnik, "The 'Book of Acts'—the Confirmation of the Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 4 (1960): 59; Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 3:42. O'Neill is most emphatic in this position, declaring, "The book of Acts, together with Luke's Gospel, is probably the only work in the N.T. which was specifically addressed to unbelievers" (*Theology of Acts*, 185). In this, he is as imbalanced toward Luke-Acts as promise-only proponents are toward the Gospel of John.

⁹⁶ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 210-12; Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 62-64; I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 43-44; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, International Critical Commentary, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901), xxxiv.

⁹⁷ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 109 n. 3.

⁹⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 38.

church's constant task of evangelism. It could be used anywhere, at any time. This is part of the explanation of the constant appeal of Luke's writings; they are valid for all time.⁹⁹

Marshall's conclusion about the timeless, evangelistic purpose of Luke appears to be the most balanced and biblically-accurate interpretation, despite his opinion that Theophilus was already a believer. Even if Theophilus was a believer in Christ, it still must be concluded that he was a believer who lacked assurance. But could Theophilus not also be an *unbeliever* who lacked assurance? Is not the number-one reason why lost people do not possess the assurance of salvation simply because they have never personally believed in Jesus Christ? Perhaps Theophilus had never been persuaded of the person and work of Christ, and Luke was writing to lead him to faith in Christ for eternal salvation. In either case, whether it is a believer lacking assurance or an unbeliever who needs to be evangelized, is not the solution to a lack of assurance the same, namely, to point people to the gospel of Christ, the gospel of their salvation (Eph. 1:13)? That is precisely what Luke does in Luke-Acts. That is also why he could be writing to a mixed audience with varying purposes.¹⁰⁰ These would include: (1) providing *Theophilus* (whether believer or unbeliever) with assurance; (2) evangelizing an *unbelieving*, mostly Gentile world with the message of salvation in Jesus Christ; and (3) equipping and edifying the existing *churches* of Christ in order to assist them in their evangelism.

It must be kept firmly in mind that the classical Grace position does not *require* viewing the purpose of Luke's Gospel as being either evangelism or edification. That burden lies upon the John-only, crossless-content-of-saving-faith position. Those who claim that John's Gospel alone is evangelistic must prove that Luke *cannot* be evangelistic. But there is further evidence yet to be considered from Luke's prologue to establish the possibility that the intended recipient of Luke's Gospel, Theophilus, was an unbeliever.

Certainty and Assurance

According to the prologue in 1:1–4, Luke wrote for the purpose of providing Theophilus with certainty or assurance. After the main clause of the prologue in 1:3 where Luke expresses his intention to write an orderly account, he then gives his reason for writing in verse 4, saying, “that [ἵνα] you may know [ἐπιγνῶς] the certainty [τὴν ἀσφάλειαν] of [περὶ] those things [λόγων] in which you were instructed [κατηχήθης].” Luke 1:1–4 is one long sentence in the Greek text, and Luke has saved his “purpose statement” until the last clause of the prologue in verse 4. The ἵνα clause of verse 4 indicates that this is a statement of purpose (“that” or “in order that”).

Luke writes for the purpose of giving assurance to Theophilus. The word ἀσφάλεια and its related terms (ἀσφαλής, ἀσφαλῶς) in contexts dealing with a physical state or one's spiritual welfare (Acts 5:23; 16:23; Phil. 3:1; 1 Thess. 5:3) indicate “a state

⁹⁹ Ibid., 219.

¹⁰⁰ Schuyler Brown, “The Role of the Prologues in Determining the Purpose of Luke-Acts,” in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), 99.

of safety and security, implying a complete lack of danger.”¹⁰¹ In other contexts dealing with a psychological state (Luke 1:4; Acts 2:36; 21:34; 22:30; 25:26; Heb. 6:19), the word denotes “a state of certainty with regard to a belief.”¹⁰² It could be legitimately translated “assurance.”¹⁰³ In Luke 1:4, ἀσφάλειαν (“certainty” or “assurance”) is a noun functioning as the object of the subjunctive verb ἐπιγνῶς (“may know”). God wanted Theophilus to “know” from Luke-Acts “the certainty” or “assurance” of His plan of salvation in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁴ Such a purpose is made emphatic by the placement of ἀσφάλειαν at the end of the Greek sentence—the position of emphasis.¹⁰⁵ Luke wrote to persuade Theophilus, which is perfectly consistent with an evangelistic purpose, as Sidney Dyer states,

This suggests an attempt by Luke to convince his reader of the truth of Christianity. It would, of course, have been beneficial for Christians to know that their beliefs were true, but it would have been non-Christians who needed convincing. Luke’s statement of his purpose in his preface does not prove that his aim was evangelistic, but it does support this probability because it shows that he sought to be persuasive; and evangelistic literature is definitely persuasive.¹⁰⁶

So far, Luke’s purpose statement corresponds perfectly with the view that Theophilus is an unbeliever in need of assurance regarding his eternal destiny. Those who promote the “promise-only” position correctly conclude that “assurance is of the essence of saving faith.”¹⁰⁷ They are dogmatic in their insistence that if a person has never been convinced, persuaded, or certain that Jesus is the Christ, then such an individual has never been born again.¹⁰⁸ Bob Wilkin has even titled a chapter in one of his books, “Certainty: The Definition of Assurance.”¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, Wilkin explains his view of saving faith.

Most people today have never considered whether or not assurance of salvation is of the essence of saving faith. In fact, most gospel tracts don’t get to the issue of assurance until *after* a person has supposedly been born again. I call this the two-step approach to evangelism. Step one is to

¹⁰¹ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, §21.9 “Safe, Free from Danger” (1:239).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, §31.41 “Believe to be True” (1:370-71).

¹⁰³ Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1: 1:1–9:50*, 64-65; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, I–IX*, 289-91, 300-1; Guy D. Nave, Jr., *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 13 n. 30.

¹⁰⁴ Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 13.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 n. 54.

¹⁰⁶ Dyer, “The Complexity of Luke’s Evangelistic Appeal,” 33-34.

¹⁰⁷ Zane C. Hodges, “Assurance: Of the Essence of Saving Faith,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 10 (Spring 1997): 3-17.

¹⁰⁸ Robert N. Wilkin, “Saving Faith in Focus,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 11 (Autumn 1998): 42-45.

¹⁰⁹ Robert N. Wilkin, *Secure and Sure* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2005), 17.

believe the gospel. Step two is to gain assurance. The problem with this two-step approach is that it contradicts the gospel.¹¹⁰

If certainty or assurance (ἀσφάλεια) is not something to be acquired *after* salvation but is a critical matter for *initial* salvation, then it should not be too difficult to acknowledge that Luke was presenting the one and only “step” of faith or assurance to Theophilus. Such a one-step approach is also perfectly compatible with Peter’s gospel preaching on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:36 is a significant parallel passage to Luke 1:4; and it is indisputably evangelistic.¹¹¹ In Acts 2:36, Peter proclaims to the unbelieving Jews who rejected their Messiah, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know [γινωσκέτω] assuredly [ἀσφαλῶς] that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Peter does not merely want these Israelites to “know” that Jesus is the Christ, he wants them to know this “assuredly”—he wants them to believe it!

Acts 2:36 has a number of similarities with Luke 1:4, making it a legitimate parallel passage. First, the adverb ἀσφαλῶς occurs here, similar to the cognate noun form ἀσφάλειαν in Luke 1:4. Second, the verb for “know” in Luke 1:4, ἐπιγνῶς, shares the same root (γνῶ) as the word for “know” in Acts 2:36, γινωσκέτω. And third, in this verse, like ἀσφάλειαν in Luke 1:4, ἀσφαλῶς is in the emphatic position in the Greek sentence. Just as Peter wants his unbelieving audience in Acts 2 to “know assuredly” that Jesus is the Christ, so Luke wants Theophilus to “know the certainty” of God’s plan of salvation in Jesus the Christ. It is clear that Luke’s task toward Theophilus, like Peter’s preaching to unbelieving Jews, was not merely to report the historical events of Christ’s life, but to accurately recount Jesus’ life-events with the objective of convincing Theophilus that Jesus is the Christ. In this regard, Du Plessis explains the proper meaning of ἀσφαλῶς in Acts 2:36 and relates it to Luke’s prologue in Luke 1:1–4.

The adverbial use of ἀσφαλῶς in Acts ii 36 might therefore help our understanding of this concept. Here ἀσφαλῶς expresses the certain knowledge that God made Jesus Messiah and Lord! This is Luke’s intention right through his Gospel. And this is the *truth* which Luke wants to report. This truth is presented as complying to the conditions set out in [Luke] i 3 for a reliable report. The ἀσφάλεια thus consists of the historically verified *and* theologically reflected truth about God acting in Jesus the Christ. The historical facts he reports, are important because they reflect the acts of the one God who sent his Son as Messiah to save this world. Faith in this God who acts in history is the motive of Luke’s writing and thus his purpose is not to write an apology but to witness to the fact that it is this God who acted in the salvation event. For Luke the

¹¹⁰ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 54.

¹¹¹ Even though Hodges and many who follow his teaching see the saving faith of the Israelites occurring in 2:37 rather than 2:38 (Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 2nd ed. [Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992], 117-18; idem, *Harmony with God* [Dallas: Redención Viva, 2001], 98-99), the point remains unaffected. An assured knowledge that Jesus is the Christ is still presented by Peter in verse 36, *before* the moment of regeneration.

historical events correspond with his faith concept. Mere *historical research* is not sufficient for a reliable report; the right *theological understanding*, based on the belief in the God who acts in history gives the historical data meaning; and only both together can give ἀσφάλεια—because both are focused on the *same truth* as revealed in the salvation event.¹¹²

This is an expansive way of saying that Luke wrote more than a history book, and more than a theology book; he wrote an evangelistic book that is capable of leading its readers to the personal certainty that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world. In short, he wrote to induce “saving faith” in his readers! Luke would agree with Wilkin, at least on one point, that unbelievers need to be convinced by the evidence of Scripture. “When the evidence that something is true persuades people, they believe it. When they aren’t persuaded, they don’t believe it. . . . We are guided by our perception of the evidence. We believe evidence that we perceive as true. We don’t believe evidence that we perceive as false.”¹¹³ Therefore, it was important for Luke to write an accurate, reliable, and authoritative account that would lead his readers to the verdict that Jesus is the Christ.

Catechized or Evangelized?

A legitimate question might be raised at this point regarding the purpose statement of Luke’s prologue. Even if Luke wrote to provide Theophilus with ἀσφάλεια, does this mean he wanted to convey certainty and assurance about the “saving message” in particular, or did he just want Theophilus, as an existing believer, to be certain about facts that would affect only his discipleship in the Christian life? What does the purpose statement say? In Luke 1:4, Luke wanted Theophilus to have assurance concerning “[περὶ] those things [λόγων] in which you were instructed [κατηχήθης].” The aorist, passive, indicative form of κατηχέω indicates that Theophilus had already received information about certain “things” (λόγων) related to Christianity sometime in the past. The meaning of “things” (λόγων) and “instructed” (κατηχήθης) must be carefully considered in order to determine whether Luke wanted Theophilus to have an *initial* assurance of saving faith or *reassurance* as a doubting Christian. When these critical terms are examined under the biblical microscope, we discover again that each leaves the door wide open to the possibility of an evangelistic purpose for Luke-Acts.

The “things” (λόγων) that Theophilus had been previously informed about may simply have been the facts of the gospel message. Perhaps he was open-minded and willing to hear more about these matters but needed to be convinced, persuaded, or certain. This merited another attempt at evangelism through Luke’s reliable, authoritative, and inspired account, as “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). The term λόγος in the plural in Luke 1:4 refers to “words” that Theophilus had previously heard about Christ and Christianity; and the term may indicate specifically the saving information contained in the gospel. Regarding His approaching

¹¹² Du Plessis, “Once More: The Purpose of Luke’s Prologue,” 270-71.

¹¹³ Wilkin, “Saving Faith in Focus,” 43.

death, the Lord says to His disciples in Luke 9:44, “Let these words [λόγους] sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.” Likewise, this term is employed by the Lord in commissioning the disciples with the message they were to preach to the nations.

Luke 24:44–47

- 44 Then He said to them, “These are the words [λόγοι] which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled [πληρωθῆναι] which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.”
- 45 And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.
- 46 Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day,
- 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Regarding this plural use of λόγος in Luke 24:44, Dillon writes: “We note, first of all, that this security [ἀσφάλεια; assurance; certainty] is to affect *‘the words you have been taught,’* rather than the facts or events. Not that λόγοι could not have the latter meaning in biblical speech, but it happens to be this author’s specific designation of the κήρυγμα of salvation, first enunciated by the earthly Jesus and learned anew by his ‘witnesses’ from the Christ of Easter” (i.e., Luke 24:44).¹¹⁴ Dillon is correct that the term κήρυγμα is used sometimes synonymously with the “saving message” of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:21; 2:4; 15:14; Titus 1:3), as is the term λόγοι, even in Luke 1:4. Once again, the terminology of Luke’s prologue leaves open the possibility, even the likelihood, that Luke-Acts has an evangelistic purpose.

A second key term to consider from Luke’s purpose statement in Luke 1:4 is “instructed” (κατηχήθης). Does this word indicate systematic Christian instruction or evangelism? Had Theophilus been *instructed* in the “words” (λόγων) of Christian doctrine and now just needed reassurance for his Christian faith, or had he been *informed* about the facts of Christianity, perhaps even hearing the gospel, and now he needed to be re-evangelized? In other words, does the verb κατηχέω indicate that Theophilus had been “catechized” already as a Christian, or had he been only “evangelized” as an unbeliever? It would be grossly anachronistic to pour the ecclesiastical concepts of “catechism” and “catechumens” back into this biblical term since such institutionalized approaches to educating converts did not develop in Christendom until after the first century.¹¹⁵

For this reason, the term κατηχέω in Luke 1:4 does not necessarily mean “instruct,” implying discipleship. Schneider says the thesis that κατηχέω is a technical

¹¹⁴ Dillon, “Previewing Luke’s Project,” 224. See especially 224-26 for further support of λόγοι referring to the salvation message in Luke-Acts.

¹¹⁵ The first such reference occurs in 2 Clement 17:1 (Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 12).

term referring to Christian instruction “cannot be demonstrated.”¹¹⁶ While some type of formal instruction is clearly intended in some New Testament contexts, especially Paul’s four uses of the term (Rom. 2:18; 1 Cor. 14:19; Gal. 6:6 [2x]),¹¹⁷ this does not determine its meaning in Luke-Acts. In Luke’s five uses of *κατηχέω*, this word means either “to inform” or “to instruct” as determined by each context.¹¹⁸ Those who see Theophilus as a Christian disciple tend to favor the more formal meaning “to instruct” in Luke 1:4.¹¹⁹ But Luke uses this term four other times besides Luke 1:4, where twice the meaning is clearly “to inform” (Acts 21:21, 24), and once it means “to instruct” (Acts 18:25), and once it has neither meaning (Acts 27:3). Even in the lone instance of “instruct” in Acts 18:25, where Apollos is said to have been “instructed [*κατηχημένος*] in the way of the Lord,” this does not refer to *Christian* instruction per se since his knowledge is still limited to “the baptism of John”¹²⁰ at this point. It is only after Aquila and Priscilla explain the way more perfectly to Apollos in the following verse (18:26) that he is able to begin proclaiming that “Jesus is the Christ” (18:28). Clearly, Luke does not restrict the term *κατηχέω* to any kind of formal instruction for Christian discipleship.¹²¹

Two additional syntactical observations should be considered in seeking to determine the meaning of *κατηχέω* in Luke 1:4. In the other two instances where *κατηχέω* means “to inform” (Acts 21:21, 24) rather than “to instruct,” the preposition *περί* + genitive case occurs. This parallels Luke 1:4. In addition, in the context of the two “inform” uses of *κατηχέω* in Acts 21:21–24, the term *γνωσόνται* (“may know”) also appears in conjunction with *κατηχέω*, 21:24), as does its cognate *ἐπιγνώως* in Luke 1:4. These two factors strengthen the possibility that *κατηχέω* means “to inform” in Luke 1:4,¹²² which would permit a primarily evangelistic purpose for Luke rather than edification being the primary purpose.¹²³

Even if the term *κατηχέω* favors the meaning “to instruct” rather than “to inform,” would this necessarily *prove* that Theophilus was a Christian disciple rather than an unbeliever? Many unbelievers in our world today are given systematic instruction before they believe the gospel. For example, New Tribes Mission (now called Ethnos360) has used very effectively the chronological method in tribal evangelism, where tribal

¹¹⁶ *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, “*κατηχέω*,” by Gerhard Schneider, 2:273. See also William J. Larkin, Jr., “The Recovery of Luke-Acts as Grand Narrative for the Evangelistic and Edification Tasks in a Postmodern Age,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (September 2000): 411.

¹¹⁷ Klaus Wegenast, “*κατηχέω*,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 3:771.

¹¹⁸ Bock, “Understanding Luke’s Task,” 200; Du Plessis, “Once More: The Purpose of Luke’s Prologue,” 269; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 301; Stein, “Luke 1:1–4 and Traditionsgeschichte,” 428.

¹¹⁹ Bock, “Understanding Luke’s Task,” 200; Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, 301.

¹²⁰ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 46.

¹²¹ Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 44.

¹²² Du Plessis, “Once More: The Purpose of Luke’s Prologue,” 269; Stein, “Luke 1:1–4 and Traditionsgeschichte,” 428; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, “*κατηχέω*,” by Hermann W. Beyer, 3:640.

¹²³ Dillon, “Previewing Luke’s Project,” 226–27; (possibly) Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 46; Larkin, “The Recovery of Luke-Acts,” 411–12.

people with no prior exposure to Christianity or the Bible are systematically instructed in the major biblical themes of monotheism, righteousness, sin, judgment, and redemption, all the way from creation in Genesis to the coming of God's Lamb in the Gospels.¹²⁴ Evangelistic Bible Studies occur daily in homes and on campuses across the globe, where unsaved seekers are led to faith in Christ for salvation through some type of formal week-to-week instruction. This is often far more effective in reaching hearts and minds for Christ in our hardened, cynical generation than one-shot evangelistic encounters.

Whether or not Theophilus was "instructed" or "informed" is ultimately not determinative of his spiritual status as either a believer or an unbeliever. But it has been demonstrated that the many details of Luke's prologue can be faithfully interpreted to view Theophilus either as a believer in need of reassurance or as an unbeliever in need of initial persuasion that Jesus is the Christ. The bottom-line is that the John-only position logically *requires* that Theophilus be a believer and cannot permit him to be a seeking unbeliever in need of evangelism from the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Content of Luke-Acts

Sometimes when studying the Word of God it is easy to miss the forest from the trees. If the four verses of Luke's prologue represent the trees, then we dare not neglect the forest of the remaining 2,153 verses in Luke and Acts. If the previous interpretations and conclusions made about Luke's prologue are correct, then they must also agree with the larger content and theme/s found in Luke-Acts. We are reminded of this fact by Bob Bryant. In seeking to defend the view that the Gospel of John is the only evangelistic book in the Bible, Bryant explained at a national conference of the Grace Evangelical Society why the Gospel of Luke cannot be evangelistic. After stating that Theophilus must have been a believer already, Bryant proclaimed, "The content of Luke's Gospel proves that Theophilus had to be saved. Luke was writing to instruct a believer in discipleship; and discipleship demands works."¹²⁵

Despite Bryant's claim, it was demonstrated in the previous section that the details of Luke's prologue in Luke 1:1–4 reveal clearly that Theophilus could have been an unbeliever seeking the initial assurance and certainty that comes with first-time faith in Jesus as the Christ for eternal salvation. In the following section, it will be demonstrated that the *content* of Luke's Gospel yields the same conclusion. A survey of Luke's content shows that his purpose for writing was to set forth the fulfillment of God's plan of worldwide salvation through Jesus the Christ. Manfred Kober summarizes Luke's purpose as wishing "to present such a complete and historical account of the Son of Man as a universal Savior, that Theophilus and other Gentile readers could know with certainty and would believe in truth this universal Gospel of salvation."¹²⁶ Though Luke

¹²⁴ Trevor McIlwain, *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ*, 2nd ed. (Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission, 2009). See also the similar evangelistic approach of GoodSeed International: John R. Cross, *by this Name* (Olds, Alberta: GoodSeed International, 2007); idem, *The Lamb* (Olds, Alberta: GoodSeed International, 2004); idem, *The Stranger on the Road to Emmaus*, 5th ed. (Olds, Alberta: GoodSeed International, 2010).

¹²⁵ Bryant, "The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John."

¹²⁶ Manfred E. Kober, "A Theology of the Gospel of Luke" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1970), 40.

had several other purposes in writing to Theophilus, such as to explain the Jewish roots of Christianity and how contemporary first-century Judaism related to the largely Gentile church and its leading figures (Peter, Paul), these must be viewed as secondary and complementary to Luke's main objective.

Any attempt to determine Luke's purpose must also consider several factors. First, the purpose of Luke's Gospel must be in harmony with Acts, since both books were addressed to the same individual, Theophilus, and they were intended as a two-part literary unit. Second, the purpose for Luke-Acts must involve the prominent theme of fulfillment, which is found not only in the prologue but throughout Luke and Acts. Third, the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is the most prominent aspect of Luke-Acts, not Peter, Paul, Israel, the church, or Rome. Therefore, the purpose of Luke's Gospel centers in Christ. Finally, if salvation is also a dominant theme in Luke-Acts, does this necessarily mean that it is part of Luke's main purpose? And if so, what kind of salvation would this entail? Is this salvation limited only to a temporal, physical deliverance? Or does the purpose of Luke-Acts address eternal, spiritual deliverance as well?

Luke-Acts: A Unit

When seeking to determine Luke's purpose for writing, the question must be addressed whether Luke intended to cover only the Gospel of Luke or Luke-Acts. If Luke intended Acts to be the continuation of the same theme and purpose developed in his Gospel, then there must be one unified purpose that spans both books and is not unique to one book versus the other. In Lucan studies in the last century, there has been a general consensus that Luke and Acts form one literary unit, usually abbreviated as Luke-Acts;¹²⁷ and thus the scope of Luke's prologue encompasses Acts as well.¹²⁸ Of course, as with everything,

¹²⁷ C. K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth, 1961), 53; Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1: 1:1-9:50*, 49; Paul Borgman, *The Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 6; Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London: SPCK, 1958), 8-9; Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 6-10; Andrew Gregory, "The Reception of Luke and Acts and the Unity of Luke-Acts," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29.4 (2007): 459-72; Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 16-17; Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 3-4; Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 35, 39; idem, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 40; John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989), 1:xxxiii; Robert F. O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology: An Analysis of Luke-Acts* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984); Patrick E. Spencer, "The Unity of Luke-Acts: A Four-Bolted Hermeneutical Hinge," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5.3 (2007): 341-66; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 3; Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986-90); Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 8. For the current state of the question about the unity of Luke-Acts, see Michael F. Bird, "The Unity of Luke-Acts in Recent Discussion," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29.4 (2007): 425-48 and the collection of articles in *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, ed. Joseph Verheyden, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 142 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999).

¹²⁸ Morna D. Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 1997), 53.

there are a few dissenters.¹²⁹ But this has not been an issue of disagreement among Free Grace people, as even one scholar who holds to the John-only view acknowledges: “Luke’s Gospel is only the first volume of an integrated two-part work, Luke-Acts.”¹³⁰

Another relevant fact to note is that Luke and Acts are roughly the same length. This can be observed even by our standard chapter and verse divisions that were not part of the inspired, original text. The Gospel of Luke contains 1,151 verses in its 24 chapters, while the book of Acts has 1,006 verses in its 28 chapters. For Luke to have combined all 52 chapters into one long book would have been quite impractical in the ancient world. Luke and Acts each would have required scrolls that exceeded 30 feet. Imagine the time and difficulty required in unrolling a scroll to a passage at the end of Acts, some 60 feet from Luke’s prologue! Moreover, papyrus rolls were not even manufactured at that time beyond 35 feet.¹³¹ Luke and Acts individually would have approached this outer limit of maximal length for a first-century book in papyrus-scroll form. The practical solution was to write Luke and Acts on two separate scrolls as two separate books. But this does not mean that Luke conceived of them as completely separate and unrelated books. No doubt he carefully thought through the themes and content of both books before Luke was ever penned. This is a valid deduction considering Luke’s own claims to carefulness in his prologue. There was a fair amount of fact-checking and meticulous detail that went into the production of these two inspired, orderly accounts. Thus, we should not view the book of Acts as a mere afterthought by Luke,¹³² nor should we see the purposes and themes of these two books as separate and distinct from one another.

Theme and Purpose of Fulfillment

When Luke and Acts are viewed together, the dominant theme of “fulfillment” emerges for both books.¹³³ In the opening verse of his Gospel, Luke refers to the “things [πραγμάτων] which have been fulfilled [πεπληροφορημένων] among us.” Two verses later, in Luke 1:3, he states his intention to write about these very “fulfilled” things. Thus, we can anticipate reading about fulfillment in Luke-Acts. Though the verb πληροφορέω was used in secular Koine Greek for the satisfaction of a legal obligation or financial debt,¹³⁴ it has a more general connotation in Luke-Acts, namely, the bringing to pass of

¹²⁹ J. Dawsey, “The Literary Unity of Luke-Acts: A Question of Style—A Task for Literary Critics,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 48-66; Mikael C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); C. Kavin Rowe, “Literary Unity and Reception History: Reading Luke-Acts as Luke and Acts,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29.4 (2007): 449-57.

¹³⁰ Niemelä, “The Case for the Two-Gospel View,” 131.

¹³¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5-6.

¹³² Cadbury, *Making of Luke-Acts*, 8.

¹³³ Anthony M. Fox, “The Literary Theme of Luke’s Gospel” (Ph.D. dissertation, Bob Jones University, 1990).

¹³⁴ Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (New York: George H. Doran, 1927; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 86 nn. 5-9; J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary*

God's sovereign plan of man's salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.¹³⁵ Historical events and episodes are central to Luke-Acts, but only as the fulfillment of God's salvation plan.¹³⁶

In Luke 1:1, the perfect-tense participle of πληροφορέω indicates that the events Luke has in mind have already come to pass from his standpoint, and they are continuing in their effects in his present.¹³⁷ In other words, the saving events of Christ's life contained mainly in the Gospel of Luke have their everlasting effect of salvation as recorded mainly in the book of Acts.

The passive participle of πληροφορέω in Luke 1:1 also has a theological point. It does not indicate that the events recorded by Luke occurred by sheer happenstance. If they were fulfilled among us, then *how* were they fulfilled? *What* or *who* caused them to be fulfilled? Though unstated in the prologue, the implication from the rest of Luke-Acts is clear that *God* actively accomplished their fulfillment.¹³⁸ He is the active agent in the fulfillment of His plan. That is why there is a strong sense of divine sovereignty pervading Luke-Acts, as we are told constantly that certain events "must" (δεῖ) take place.¹³⁹ The word δεῖ occurs 99 times in the Greek New Testament, with 40 of these occurrences in Luke-Acts alone.¹⁴⁰ All of these details correspond perfectly with the interpretation that Luke's purpose was to provide for Theophilus an account of how God's plan of world redemption had been enacted through the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴¹ Anthony Fox explains:

Luke's purpose for his Gospel was to provide an accurate historical account which would provide assurance to Theophilus, as well as any other readers, that the πραγμάτων (incidents) surrounding Jesus Christ's life on earth prove that He is the long-awaited fulfiller of Old Testament prophetic phenomena concerning mankind's Redeemer. Luke arranged his contents according to this concept of fulfillment, rather than strictly according to chronology.¹⁴²

The theme of fulfillment as it relates to God's plan of salvation in Christ can also be seen in the use of the word πληρόω (fulfill, complete, accomplish). This term occurs from beginning to end in Luke-Acts.¹⁴³ It is used to describe the fulfillment of the

of the Greek Testament (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 519.

¹³⁵ Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 35.

¹³⁶ Pate, *Luke*, 27.

¹³⁷ Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, 292.

¹³⁸ Du Plessis, "Once More: The Purpose of Luke's Prologue," 263; Fox, "The Literary Theme of Luke's Gospel," 80.

¹³⁹ Charles Cosgrove, "The Divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts: Investigations into the Lukan understanding of God's Providence," *Novum Testamentum* 26 (1984): 168-90; Guy D. Nave, Jr., *The Role and Function of Repentance in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 13-24.

¹⁴⁰ Darrell L. Bock, "A Theology of Luke-Acts," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 94.

¹⁴¹ Both John and Luke use the word δεῖ in reference to Jesus' death being necessary in order for Him to be the true Christ or Messiah (John 3:14; 12:34; Luke 24:44, 46).

¹⁴² Fox, "The Literary Theme of Luke's Gospel," 81.

¹⁴³ Bock, "A Theology of Luke-Acts," 91; Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 186.

angel Gabriel's words (Luke 1:20), the fulfillment of a person's ministry (Acts 12:25; 13:25; 14:26), the fulfillment of Scripture (Acts 1:16), and the fulfillment of prophetic events yet future (Luke 21:24; 22:16). But πληρώω is used particularly to emphasize the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. After the Lord Jesus reads His "mission statement" from Isaiah 61:1–2a while in the synagogue at Nazareth, He pronounces: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled [πεπλήρωται] in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Though it is Scripture that has been fulfilled, it is Scripture that relates particularly to Christ and His coming. The fulfillment theme of Luke-Acts lays special emphasis on the fulfillment of Scripture as it relates to Christ's passion on the cross (Luke 9:31; 24:44–47; Acts 3:18; 13:27). Luke 24:44–47 is the *climactic* fulfillment passage of Luke-Acts. It contains Jesus' own explanation to His disciples (and thus by divine-design, to Luke's readers) that the Messiah "must" (δεῖ [MT]) suffer death and rise from the dead in order for repentance and remission of sins to be proclaimed to all nations.¹⁴⁴

Theme and Purpose of Salvation in Christ

Tied to the theme of fulfillment in Luke-Acts is the undeniable theme of salvation. This can be seen from the prominence given to the "salvation" word group. Significantly, in the Greek text the nouns for "Savior" (σωτήρ) and "salvation" (σωτηρίας, σωτήριος) occur 8 times in the Gospel of Luke and 9 times in the book of Acts; but they *never* occur in the other Synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Mark. The verb for "save" (σῶζω) is also prominent throughout Luke-Acts, occurring 28 times. The various terms in the "salvation" word group also appear evenly distributed throughout Luke-Acts, from beginning to end, giving credence to the view that the theme of salvation is integral to Luke's overall purpose.

While these terms often refer to a physical, temporal deliverance (Luke 8:36; 17:19; Acts 4:9; 7:25; 14:9; 27:20, 31, 34), Luke-Acts definitely speaks of salvation as an eternal, spiritual deliverance as well (Luke 7:50; 8:12; 19:9–10; Acts 4:12; 13:26–47; 15:1, 11; 16:31). Nor is Luke bound by the words "save" and "salvation" when speaking of soteriological benefits to those who believe in Christ. Divine deliverance is variously depicted as forgiveness of sins (Luke 7:48); peace with God (Luke 7:50); salvation from suffering in the fiery torments of Hades (Luke 16:23–31); justification in God's sight (Luke 18:14); entering paradise (Luke 23:43); and even everlasting life itself (Acts 13:46, 48). The theme of salvation is extensive and comprehensive in Luke and Acts.

With good reason, therefore, Lucan scholars normally recognize that salvation is a primary theme and purpose for Luke's Gospel.¹⁴⁵ For instance, Frederic Godet says

¹⁴⁴ Stanley E. Porter, "The Messiah in Luke and Acts: Forgiveness for the Captives," in *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 158, 162. The same "must" (δεῖ) occurs in John 3:14, 12:34, and 20:9 to show that Jesus as the Christ must die and rise again (Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988], 113).

¹⁴⁵ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 43–45; Green, *Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 21, 54, passim; Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 77–102, 116, 157; J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting* (London: SPCK, 1961), 172–85, esp. 185; Robert F. O'Toole, *The Unity of Luke's Theology: An Analysis of Luke-Acts* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984), 17, passim.

that Luke's purpose was to set forth "that twofold principle of the universality and free grace of salvation which constituted the substance of what Paul calls *his gospel*."¹⁴⁶ Regarding Luke's theology, D. Edmond Hiebert also writes:

His theology is summarized in the statement that "the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk 19:10). He died that He might redeem not only the people of Israel but all mankind. All four gospels indicate that the good news of salvation in Christ is for all mankind, but this fact is most emphatically set forth in the third gospel.¹⁴⁷

Luke and Acts have a special emphasis on the universality of Christ's Saviorhood and God's offer of free salvation through His Son.¹⁴⁸ Free forgiveness with God is available to all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, religious background, or social standing. In Luke-Acts, we see the length, and breadth, and height, and depth of God's redeeming love and mercy for all mankind. Why? Because of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world to be "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). Thus, Luke and Acts depict people from all walks of life receiving God's saving grace. The summary by Geldenhuys on this point is unsurpassed, as he writes regarding the Gospel of Luke:

Time and again the point is stressed in this Gospel that Jesus offers forgiveness and redemption to all—freely and independently of the privileges of a particular race, generation or merit. Admission to the Kingdom is open to Samaritans (ix. 51–56, x. 30–37, xvii. 11–19) and pagans (ii. 32, iii. 6, 38, iv. 25–7, vii. 9, x. 1, xxiv. 47) as well as to the Jews (i. 33, ii. 10); to publicans, sinners and outcasts (iii. 12, v. 27–32, vii. 37–50, xix. 2–10, xxiii. 43) as well as to respectable people (vii. 36, xi. 37, xiv. 1); to the poor (i. 53, ii. 7, vi. 20, vii. 22) as well as to the rich (xix. 2, xxiii. 50); and to women as well as to men. So universal and all embracing, according to the Gospel, is the redeeming work of Christ!¹⁴⁹

Yet, it is incredible that those who hold to the John-only position have a completely different impression of Luke's Gospel. Some John-only proponents believe that an unsaved individual who is seeking salvation from the Lord may not even be able to find the "saving message" in the Gospel of Luke. For example, Bob Bryant declares regarding the evangelistic use of the popular "Jesus Film" based on the Gospel of Luke:

To their credit, they go to the Gospel of John after presenting the life of Christ through the Gospel of Luke. But you know what? They had to, because there's not a verse in Luke that they could go to. There's not one,

¹⁴⁶ Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 1:64.

¹⁴⁷ Hiebert, *Introduction to the New Testament, Volume One: The Gospels and Acts*, 133.

¹⁴⁸ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 102-3; Hiebert, *Introduction to the New Testament, Volume One: The Gospels and Acts*, 142-44.

¹⁴⁹ Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 43.

to my knowledge. And to their credit, and I mean this, to their credit, they come to the Gospel of John at the beginning and end of the film to present the message.¹⁵⁰

Does the Gospel of Luke really omit the “saving message” so that we must find it only in John’s Gospel?

Person of Christ

The saving message of the gospel is developed thematically and systematically by Luke in his Gospel. In Luke and Acts, the Lord Jesus is vividly set forth as the Christ, the Son of God. Just as in John’s Gospel, the Christ is no one less than God-incarnate¹⁵¹ who dies on behalf of sinners and rises from the dead to provide forgiveness of sins (i.e., salvation) through faith in His name. The person and work of Christ are repeatedly set forth in Luke as the fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation, along with the gracious condition and promised provision of salvation so that anyone who is willing may believe and be saved.

In Luke 1, the reader is immediately arrested by the distinctiveness of Jesus. Who is this One whose miraculous virgin conception is heralded by an angel? He is “the Son of the Highest” (1:32) and “the Son of God” (1:35). Does this not mean He is God?¹⁵² In response to such wonderful news, the virgin Mary exclaims, “My spirit has

¹⁵⁰ Bryant, “The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John.”

¹⁵¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 20 (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature and Scholars Press, 1974), 115-19; idem, *Luke and the Gnostics: An Examination of Lucan Purpose* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 101-3. The same purpose is sometimes posited for John’s Gospel (George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 258). The testimony of Christ’s real humanity is undoubtedly *part of* Luke and John’s evangelistic purpose and message, but neither book limits the saving message to this facet of Christology.

¹⁵² Bock claims that “Son of God” in Luke 1:35 does not indicate Jesus’ deity or divine nature but merely refers to His regal, Davidic role as the Messiah (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 123-25). Citing a parallel usage of “birth from God” terminology in the Qumran literature, Bock believes that this merely “describes a nondivine child who is born with a special kinship to God through an anointing by God’s Spirit. Thus, in contemporary Judaism, the phrase could describe a person, without necessarily requiring ontological overtones” (ibid., 124). He continues, “The presence of a divine element in Jesus’ birth does not require or focus upon an *explicit* statement of Jesus’ metaphysical divinity” (ibid.). Bock concludes regarding Gabriel’s “Son of God” explanation to Mary in Luke 1:35 that “she certainly is not portrayed as perceiving an announcement of a divine child here” (ibid., 125).

In response, it should be observed that within Luke 1 there is indeed a “birth from God” parallel to the Qumran usage of “Son” or “Son of God” being a messianic but strictly human figure. Luke 1:13–15 and 1:36–37 indicate that the conception of John the Baptist in Elizabeth’s womb was definitely a “birth from God.” This provides the more suitable parallel to the Qumran citation about sonship since John the Baptist, not the Lord Jesus, was “a nondivine child who is born with a special kinship to God through an anointing by God’s Spirit” (ibid., 124). As great as John the Baptist was, he was still set in stark contrast to the infinitely greater Son who is introduced in the very next section of Luke 1:26–35. According to Luke, John was to serve this “Son of the Highest” as His forerunner and prophet (1:76). Even though John’s birth is also a “birth from God” in Luke 1, he is never described there in the superior manner that Christ is, namely, as “Son of God,” “Son of the Highest,” “Holy One,” and “Lord.” Though the Spirit of God was supernaturally involved in the birth of both John and Christ, the contrasting description of them points to the deity of the latter and the mere humanity of the former.

rejoiced in God my Savior” (1:47). In Luke 2, the reader is presented with further good news that Jesus, the Son of God, is also the “Savior, who is Christ, the Lord” (2:11). Luke does not insult our intelligence. By deduction, if God is the Savior (1:47) and Jesus Christ is the Savior (2:11), then Jesus Christ is God.¹⁵³ But is the Savior also truly human? In Luke 3, we read that He is nothing less than a direct descendant “of Adam” (3:38). In Luke 4, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, announces His mission to Israel (4:18–21) and demonstrates His sovereign authority as the Lord God by exercising the demons. Even demons know at this point that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of God” (4:41, MT). In Luke 5, Jesus continues to demonstrate His deity by performing miracles and forgiving sins, which is the sole prerogative of God (5:21).¹⁵⁴ Finally, He who said “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25)—the One who is the author of life (1:4; 14:6)—further demonstrates His deity by raising the dead (Luke 7:11–18; 8:49–56).¹⁵⁵

Gracious Savior

By this point, the sovereign authority and divine nature of the Lord Jesus, along with His genuine humanity, are firmly revealed to the open-minded, God-fearing reader of Luke’s Gospel. But we also begin to see the grounds and condition of salvation unfolding through the Savior, Jesus Christ. Luke 7 presents a touching portrait of divine forgiveness and salvation by faith alone. A notoriously sinful woman (7:37) comes to the Lord in contrite humility, as she anoints His feet with her tears, kisses, and oil. The Lord Jesus goes on to explain that He “freely forgave” (ἐχαρίσατο) her (7:42, 48–49). In Luke 7:42, the root word for the phrase “freely forgave” is the word for “grace” (χάρις). The lesson is clear. Though this woman was a debtor to God because of her sin, as we all are (7:41), and consequently though she did not deserve forgiveness from Christ, He forgave her on

Bock also claims, wrongly, that Mary did not perceive Gabriel to be announcing a divine child to her. However, evidence from the context leads to a different conclusion. In the immediately following section of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, *both* women express belief that Jesus is “the Lord” (1:43–46). In Luke 1:43, Elizabeth calls the babe in Mary’s womb “my Lord.” Only two verses later, in Luke 1:45, when referring to the One who sent Gabriel, Elizabeth speaks unmistakably about God as “the Lord.” Immediately in the next verse, Mary herself magnifies “the Lord” (1:46), whom she then describes as “God my Savior” (1:47). In Luke 1:43–46, there is no syntactical break that would indicate two different “Lords”—one a “nondivine child” and the other the “Lord” God Almighty. Moreover, Mary exclaims in reference to God in Luke 1:49, “holy is His name.” This parallels the announcement to Mary by Gabriel that her child Jesus would be the “Holy One” (1:35), which is also a title for deity in the Old Testament (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 145:17; Isa. 43:15). Though Mary probably did not comprehend the metaphysical complexities of the Incarnation and Hypostatic Union at this time, she certainly does appear to have perceived the divine nature of the Son announced to her by Gabriel, and Luke faithfully records these details pointing Jesus’ deity.

¹⁵³ The title “Savior” applied to Jesus is also an indication of His deity. From the time of the writing prophets (Isa. 43:3, 10–11; Hos. 13:4), “Savior” became a title reserved for God rather than man, preparing the way for its application to Jesus as the unique Son of God, who is equal in deity with the Father (Eph. 5:23; Phil. 3:20; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:3, 4; 2:10, 13; 3:4, 6; 2 Peter 1:1).

¹⁵⁴ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 241; John A. Martin, “Luke,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 217; Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 236.

¹⁵⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1984), 64, 90.

the sole condition of faith, not her worthiness.¹⁵⁶ When Christ says to her, “Your sins are forgiven [ἀφέωνταί]” (7:48) and “Your faith has saved [σέσωκέν] you. Go in peace” (7:50), He uses the perfect tense for both “forgiven” and “saved.” She was forgiven prior to Christ’s statements to her in verses 48 and 50, and she remained forgiven and saved.¹⁵⁷ This woman was not saved because she cried at the feet of Jesus or because of her great gratitude and devotion. She was saved through her prior faith,¹⁵⁸ and her devotion was simply the expression of a thankful, forgiven heart.

The lessons on salvation by faith alone continue. In Luke 8, the Lord Jesus uses the parable of the sower, the seed, and the four soils to teach on regeneration and spiritual fruitfulness. Though the passage addresses discipleship in addition to regeneration, it nevertheless demonstrates that the people represented by soils two and three received the Word of God and were saved simply by believing the Word (vv. 11–14).¹⁵⁹ Here is another passage in Luke that teaches the sole condition of faith for salvation. Though most adherents of Reformed theology view the people represented by soils two and three as having spurious, nonsaving faith because they did not persevere and bring forth fruit “to maturity” (v. 14) as did the fourth soil (v. 15),¹⁶⁰ the passage itself indicates that there was life or regeneration.¹⁶¹ It says the seed of God’s Word germinated, albeit briefly (v. 6); and at least internally the soil-two believer had “joy” (v. 13), which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

The theme of unmerited salvation through faith alone continues in the Gospel of Luke in another vivid parable of the Lord Jesus. In Luke 18:9–14, the Lord Jesus contrasts the only two approaches to salvation known to mankind—the works approach and the grace approach (Rom. 4:4–5; Gal. 3:7–10).¹⁶² The religious approach of the Pharisee represents those who have “trusted in themselves, that they are righteous” (18:9), who pride themselves in their accomplishments for God (18:11–12). This approach results in a person remaining unjustified in God’s sight (18:14).¹⁶³ In contrast, there is the humble approach in Luke 18:14. With this approach, a person sees himself as a sinner and unrighteous in God’s sight and depends on God to meet his need for propitiation,¹⁶⁴ which results in justification before God (18:14). Some proponents of the promise-only saving message doubt whether this passage is teaching forensic justification

¹⁵⁶ Thomas L. Constable, *Expository Notes on Luke* (Garland, TX: Sonic Light, 2017), 128.

¹⁵⁷ Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 707.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. See also, Constable, *Expository Notes on Luke*, 128.

¹⁵⁹ Constable, *Expository Notes on Luke*, 133–34.

¹⁶⁰ Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1932), 191; James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary, 2000), 292.

¹⁶¹ Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*, 28.

¹⁶² F. F. Bruce, “Justification by Faith in the Non-Pauline Writings of the New Testament,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 24 (April 1952): 66–69.

¹⁶³ Constable, *Expository Notes on Luke*, 273.

¹⁶⁴ Though our English translations often read “be merciful to me,” the actual language of the publican involved God being “satisfied” or “propitiated” (ἰλάσθητι). No man can be justified in God’s sight on the basis of sheer leniency, but only on the basis of a propitious sacrifice—the basis on which the publican approached God. For an excellent explanation of this passage, see Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:390–92.

in the sight of God,¹⁶⁵ but the essence of this passage exudes justification by grace alone through faith alone just like Paul teaches, so that Kevin Zuber writes, “This parable is one of the most significant lessons on the crucial truth of justification (cf. Rm 3:21–28).”¹⁶⁶ Bruce concurs, explaining further:

The first principle of justification, that it is *sola gratia*, could not be more plainly taught. And here it is, in Luke’s report of our Lord’s teaching. There is no reason to suspect Pauline influence here. But here in a nutshell is the doctrine elaborated by Paul. If, according to the Biblical doctrine, justification is *sola gratia* on God’s side, it is *sola fide* on man’s. There is no express mention of faith in this parable; but if the word is not there, the thing itself is. For where is justifying faith more evident than in the trustful and repentant attitude of mind which, completely divested of self-satisfaction and self-reliance, eagerly seeks and gratefully accepts that pardoning mercy which is the free gift of God’s grace?¹⁶⁷

One important clarification regarding this passage is in order. The passage says that the publican prayed to God in the Temple, and on this basis some may object that this disqualifies the passage from containing the “saving message” since prayer is a work, and works do not save. While prayers certainly do not save, it should be noted that the passage never actually states that the publican was justified by his prayer.¹⁶⁸ Rather, the passage corrects the Pharisees who “trusted in themselves” (18:9) as they sought justification by their works (18:11–12). The obvious point of the passage is the publican’s humble posture of heart, propitiation toward God, and the necessity of not trusting in one’s own righteousness or works. The publican’s prayer in this passage is simply an expression of the faith that was in his heart (cf. Luke 23:42; Rom. 10:6–10), for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Matt. 12:34–37).

¹⁶⁵ Wilkin questions the view that Luke 18:9–14 is an example of the saving message. He writes: “It should be noted, however, that the Lord might not be referring to forensic justification in Luke 18:9–14. There is no other place in the NT where the Lord speaks of forensic justification. That has led some to conclude that Jesus was not speaking of forensic justification there at all, but of being *vindicated* before God. Some see this as an issue of which man *pleased God* that day, not who went home forensically justified” (Wilkin, “A Review of Thomas L. Stegall’s *The Gospel of the Christ*,” 10-11). But even Zane Hodges, Wilkin’s mentor, considered Jesus to be teaching the saving gospel message in Luke 18:9–14. Hodges wrote: “It is interesting to observe that Jesus uses here the great Pauline word ‘justified.’ Interesting, yes, but not surprising. Even Paul himself acknowledged that the gospel he preached was received ‘by the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Gal. 1:11–12). So the doctrine of justification by faith alone, apart from works, is not simply a Pauline construct. In the final analysis, it is the doctrine of Jesus Christ our Lord” (*Absolutely Free!*, 182).

¹⁶⁶ Kevin D. Zuber, “Luke,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 1587.

¹⁶⁷ Bruce, “Justification by Faith in the Non-Pauline Writings of the New Testament,” 67-68.

¹⁶⁸ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:389-92.

Thief on the Cross

The message of salvation is also set forth in Luke's Gospel through the account of the thief on the cross. In Luke 23:39–43, Luke records a powerful lesson on deathbed conversion. It is never too late, in this lifetime, to receive salvation by believing in Jesus as the Christ. One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus expresses his unbelief, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us" (23:39). The crowd gathered around the cross utters the same taunt of unbelief (23:37). Both the criminal next to Jesus and the unbelieving bulls of Bashan encircling the Lord (Ps. 22:12) express in ironic terms the whole point of Calvary. By *not* coming down from the cross and saving Himself the Lord Jesus actually *was* providing salvation!¹⁶⁹ This transparent truth is recorded in all of the Gospels (Matt. 27:40–43; Mark 15:29–32; John 19:17–22) for the reader to understand the true meaning of Jesus being "the Christ."

But amidst the people's unbelief and blasphemies present at Calvary, something wonderful happens in the heart of the other criminal next to Jesus. He fears God (23:40) and recognizes he is a sinner being justly condemned (23:40–41). He even believes in the innocence of Jesus, exclaiming, "This Man has done nothing wrong" (23:41). He then expresses his faith in Jesus as the Christ, saying, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (23:42). To say that a man dying on a cross is "Lord" and will possess a "kingdom" is an obvious expression of faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁷⁰ For the thief to say that the dying Lord would enter His kingdom also means that he most likely believed Christ would rise from the dead.¹⁷¹ Based on such a lucid example of faith in Christ, the Lord promises the believing thief: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise" (23:43). Is this not a promise of salvation?¹⁷² Can this great guarantee not be repeated to every soul in our day who believes in Jesus Christ? Is this not saving truth?

¹⁶⁹ Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 821.

¹⁷⁰ H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Gospel of Luke* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1947), 684; J. Vernon McGee, "Luke," in *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5 vols. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 4:354; Morgan, *Gospel According to Luke*, 272; W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950; Reprinted, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 356-57; William H. Van Doren, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1981), 1020-22.

¹⁷¹ We should not assume that the repentant thief expected only a spiritual form of the kingdom or soul salvation, as if he held an amillennial eschatological view of the spiritualized kingdom or a pagan, Greek dualistic notion of the afterlife with the immortality of the soul and the discarding of the body. There is no reason to doubt that this man expected to enter Christ's kingdom in conjunction with his bodily resurrection since this was the normal perspective of first-century Jews based on Old Testament promises of bodily resurrection (Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4 vols. [Chicago: Moody, reprinted 1958], 1:661; Alexander B. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 5 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1990], 1:641; Philip S. Johnson, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002], 218-30) and a coming geophysical kingdom. The denial of bodily resurrection by the Sadducees was the minority view within Judaism at that time (Richard Bauckham, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in Second Temple Judaism," in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 82). Therefore, if the repentant thief expected his own bodily resurrection in order to enter Christ's kingdom, by deduction he must have expected Christ to rise from the dead as well since He would be "Lord" of all the redeemed who enter His coming "kingdom."

¹⁷² Constable, *Expository Notes on Luke*, 347.

While this timeless story of salvation does not set forth the content of the “saving message” in explicit terms, it contains far more than most proponents of the John-only view are willing to admit. Implicitly, by way of the thief’s example, it teaches that the lost must recognize their need for salvation, that they are sinners before God and justly condemned (Rom. 1:18–3:21). It teaches the innocence of Christ and His deity (“Lord”). Through the rhetorical use of irony, the Lord’s death is a saving event and the very essence of what it means for Him to be “the Christ.” The resurrection is implied, and the condition of faith alone in Christ alone is clearly illustrated by the thief’s example.¹⁷³ There is no baptism, church membership, commitments to serve, or even coming forward at an altar call—just faith alone, resulting in the assuring promise of salvation straight from Christ’s own mouth. So, does this passage contain the “saving message”? Or, is this merely nonevangelistic discipleship truth being conveyed? Could a lost person be saved by reading the story of the thief on the cross, especially if he or she has also read the content of Luke’s Gospel leading up to Luke 23:39–43? Some crossless advocates, like Bob Bryant, are not sure: “And I would hope, and would like to think, that perhaps there have been people that have read this story of the thief on the cross and have come to believe in Jesus for their eternal well-being—I don’t know.”¹⁷⁴

Finally, the themes of “salvation” through Christ and “fulfillment” meet together at the end of Luke in the definitive passage on Jesus being “the Christ.” Luke 24:44–47 sets forth not only the Great Commission for the church but also, for an unbelieving reader, the essential saving content of Jesus’ Messiahship and thus the content of saving faith. Jesus has “fulfilled” (24:44) the Old Testament predictions of who “the Christ” (24:46) would be as the One who would “suffer and rise from the dead” (24:46) in order to provide “remission of sins” on the sole condition of “repentance” (24:47).

Since this chapter is comparing the Gospels of Luke and John, it must also be noted that Luke 24:47 and John 20:31 are parallel passages in several respects. Both present a post-cross, post-resurrection, consummate view of Jesus as “the Christ.” Both present the sole condition for salvation (“repentance” / “believe”).¹⁷⁵ Both books describe

¹⁷³ Warren W. Wiersbe, “Luke,” in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 1:275-76.

¹⁷⁴ Bryant, “The Search for the Saving Message Outside of the Gospel of John.”

¹⁷⁵ Repentance is simply a change of mind. Since faith in Christ as one’s Savior inherently involves a change of mind about Him as the sole object of one’s trust, repentance is inherent to faith in Christ for eternal life. The omission of the words “repent” (μετανοέω) and “repentance” (μετάνοια) in John’s Gospel reflects the fact that repentance is inherent to believing in Christ. This view of repentance has been held by the majority of Free Grace proponents over the last century (Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 60-92; Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:372-78; G. Michael Cocoris, *Repentance: The Most Misunderstood Word in the Bible* [Milwaukee: Grace Gospel Press, 2010], 13-21; Lightner, *Sin, the Savior, and Salvation*, 167; Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 89-100; *The Scofield Study Bible, New King James Version*, ed. C. I. Scofield, E. Schuyler English, et. al. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 1526; Richard A. Seymour, *All About Repentance* [Hollywood, FL: Harvest House, 1974]). Zane Hodges once held this view of repentance but changed his position with the publication of his book *Absolutely Free!* in 1989. Hodges’s second position on repentance—a view also held and promoted primarily by the Grace Evangelical Society—is that repentance is not necessary for eternal life since it is turning from sin in order to avoid God’s temporal judgment (Zane C. Hodges, *Harmony with God: A Fresh Look at Repentance* [Dallas: Redención Viva, 2001], 57; Wilkin, *Ten Most Misunderstood Words in the Bible*, 108).

the provision of salvation (“remission of sins” / “life”). And both describe the sphere and basis of salvation (“in His name”). In light of this divine design for each book, how can sincere Christians continue to claim that John is the only evangelistic book in the Bible?

Having analyzed Luke’s prologue and having just surveyed the content of his Gospel, it is impossible to conclude that Luke does not contain the “saving message” and is therefore not an evangelistic book. Space will not permit a survey of Acts, which would only serve to validate this conclusion further. Everything revealed in Luke is reinforced and amplified in Acts. As we think of the classic gospel texts in Acts, are we really to believe that Acts 16:30–31 is *not* an evangelistic passage but John 6:47 *is* evangelistic? How is “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved” significantly different from “He who believes in Me has everlasting life”? The same could also be said for Acts 10:43, “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” Is there really some critical, soteriological distinction between this verse and John 1:12 or John 6:47? Consider also Acts 13:38–39, which says, “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” Are we honestly to conclude that Acts 13:38–39 is not as clear, or evangelistic, as any passage in John? Luke-Acts is indeed a wonderful evangelistic complement to the Gospel of John.

Political Purpose

There are many different theories that have been proposed to explain Luke’s purpose for writing Luke-Acts. An evangelistic purpose is just one of them. But it is not the objective of this chapter to provide an in-depth analysis of each of these theories which have been amply treated elsewhere. However, two significant theories for Luke-Acts merit further discussion.

One popular view that has been proposed, which has more recently been defended by John Mauck, is that Luke-Acts was written primarily as a legal brief to defend the apostle Paul at his approaching trial before Caesar in Rome.¹⁷⁶ In such a case, Theophilus would have served as a high-ranking Roman government official or legal clerk, previewing materials such as Luke-Acts before Paul’s case was heard by the

¹⁷⁶ John W. Mauck, *Paul on Trial: The Book of Acts as a Defense of Christianity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001). Mauck maintains that his legal-defense-of-Paul view complements an evangelistic purpose for Acts (ibid., 216-18), but his argument would be more convincing if he stressed more heavily that the primary divine objective of Luke-Acts was evangelism and secondarily Luke’s defense of Paul before men. Mauck writes, “I propose that Luke wrote *Acts* primarily as a legal defense of Paul against charges brought against him by Jews who did not accept the message of Jesus. As he wrote, Luke also was actively aware that the decision concerning Paul would determine the freedom of believers throughout the empire to follow and spread the teachings of Jesus. One of the vehicles of that defense (the brief), meanwhile, was constructed to carry the message of salvation to the reader” (ibid., 21). For a shorter defense of the more typical legal-political-defense theory that is less overtly evangelistic than Mauck’s proposal, see A. J. Mattill, Jr., “The Purpose of Acts: Schneckenburger Reconsidered,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 108-22.

Emperor.¹⁷⁷ In the process of writing to exonerate Paul, Luke would have fulfilled the further purpose of legitimizing Christianity as a legally-sanctioned religion in the Roman Empire. Judaism ostensibly enjoyed such a privilege with the government of Rome,¹⁷⁸ but the jury was still out on Christianity as a younger, more suspect, religion. Was it simply a harmless extension of Judaism, or was it a destabilizing factor for the Empire? Could it peacefully coexist with Rome's state-sponsored pantheon of idolatry and polytheism? Such questions would have been especially relevant since Christianity was rejected as a heretical sect by the first-century Jewish establishment, and the apostle Paul would have been considered the chief agitator of this new movement. Typically, this political, legal-defense view has not focused on the evangelistic objective of Luke-Acts, but Mauck presents a compelling case for this view that incorporates an evangelistic purpose. He concludes:

The evangelistic purposes of *Luke-Acts* are independent of and, if successful in reaching Theophilus, Nero, or other Roman officials, complementary to the legal objectives. Those purposes are most typified in Paul's second trial before Felix when Agrippa exclaims: "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." Accordingly, it can be fairly concluded that the emphatic assertion of Jesus as Messiah permeates even the legal brief format and defense of faith purposes. Put another way, the proclamation to Theophilus of what Luke believed to be truth about Jesus was an inextricable part of winning his case, but he still was writing a legal brief to defend Paul and the Jewish Christians against specific charges.

Theses based on an assumption that Christians are the intended audience of *Luke-Acts* are inconsistent with the conclusions of this book. We can best learn from *Acts* not by seeing it as a catechism or epistle, but by seeing it as a forthright assertion to Rome of the truth and Jewishness of faith in Jesus the Messiah.¹⁷⁹

The political, legal-defense view seems plausible and it has many points in its favor. First, it would explain why there is such a disproportionate emphasis in Acts given to the ministry of Paul versus the other apostles.¹⁸⁰ Second, it corresponds neatly with the special interest Luke takes in documenting the various stages of Paul's progression toward Rome in Acts 21–28, starting with his arrest in Jerusalem and on to his various defenses before the Jewish Sanhedrin, Felix, Festus, and Agrippa.¹⁸¹ Third, this view also provides a convincing reason for the extensive treatment of the Jew-Gentile-church

¹⁷⁷ Mauck, *Paul on Trial*, 25-33.

¹⁷⁸ Maddox presents evidence to show that the existence of a supposed permitted-religion (*religio licita*) status is highly questionable in the first century (*Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 91-93). Though Tertullian applied the phrase *religio licita* to the Christian church at the end of the second century, in contrast to Judaism, which was *certe licita* in the Roman Empire (*Apology* 21.1), there is no evidence that these phrases were technical legal terms in the first century.

¹⁷⁹ Mauck, *Paul on Trial*, 217-18.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5-7, 154-82.

relationship in Acts and even the fulfillment theme, showing that Christianity is truly the continuation and fulfillment of God's plan predicted in the Old Testament.¹⁸² Therefore, Christianity can come under the legally-protected umbrella of Judaism and is worthy of acceptance by the Empire. Fourth, the political-legal view is also consistent with Luke's decision to record the various riots and upheavals that accompanied Paul's evangelism, which would have been of special concern to any governing officials reading these documents.¹⁸³ Fifth, this view is consistent with the universal theme of Luke-Acts, that the Christianity preached by Paul is for all members of Roman society who are open to its gospel message. Finally, the political-legal view explains the supposed Rome-friendly tenor of Luke and Acts,¹⁸⁴ with their generally negative outlook towards the obstinate followers of Judaism,¹⁸⁵ who antagonized and persecuted the early Christians.

But as appealing as the political-legal defense view might initially appear, there are still serious questions about its validity. For instance, this theory does not appear to adequately account for the unity of Luke-Acts. While it provides a stronger explanation for the book of Acts as a legal defense of Paul and Christianity, it must be remembered that Luke and Acts share a literary unity of purpose and theme, and Acts cannot be isolated from Luke. This theory is weak in explaining the relationship of Luke to Paul's defense, especially considering that the apostle Paul is not even mentioned or alluded to in the first half of such a two-part legal document.¹⁸⁶ However, if Luke's purpose was primarily evangelism and secondarily a legal defense as an attempt to validate Paul and early Christianity, then including the entire Gospel of Luke as part one of a legal document seems fitting.

Second, there is not a single reference or allusion anywhere within Luke-Acts to the fact that these are legal documents. If Luke was writing a defense of Paul and his message, then why did he not simply say so? This omission is glaring, especially when considering that Luke and Acts make up over 27 percent of the entire New Testament and that together they are longer than all of Paul's epistles put together. Yet there is not a single explicit reference to their legal purpose in their 2,157 verses.

Third, their combined length and spiritual content argue somewhat against the legal defense view. As a pre-trial legal brief, Luke-Acts is anything but brief! In terms of their length and spiritual content, the patience of a pagan, Roman lawyer might have worn thin if he had to read such concentrated theological content as part of a legal document. Consequently, Barrett objects to the political view: "No Roman official would ever have filtered out so much of what to him would be theological and ecclesiastical rubbish in order to reach so tiny a grain of relevant apology."¹⁸⁷ But if much more than Paul's own defense was at stake (i.e., the acceptance of an entirely new and rapidly-growing movement within the empire and its message of salvation in Jesus Christ), then Barrett's objection is vitiated.

¹⁸² Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 54-55.

¹⁸³ Mauck, *Paul on Trial*, 12-13, 140-43, 162-63.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 94-96, 101-2,

¹⁸⁵ Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 42-54; Mauck, *Paul on Trial*, 184-87.

¹⁸⁶ Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 20.

¹⁸⁷ Barrett, *Luke the Historian*, 63.

Fourth, the purpose of Luke-Acts being a strictly legal or political defense does not seem consistent with a high view of divine inspiration or a biblical perspective of the world as embodied by the Roman Empire. Would the Spirit of God place a secular end before an evangelistic one? Luke-Acts was not crafted first of all as a legal document in order to secure the favor of the world's most powerful court. In fact, Luke 4:5–8 declares that the kingdoms of this world are in the hand of Satan!¹⁸⁸ Moreover, several passages in Luke-Acts are not nearly as Rome-friendly as many assume (Luke 23:22–25; Acts 4:27; 18:12–17; 24:26; 25:9–11).¹⁸⁹ Was Luke-Acts designed as an evangelistic document to win the lost world to Christ, including even Caesar? Yes! Was Luke-Acts designed primarily to secure the political approval of Rome? No!

Lastly, the primarily legal- or political-defense view suffers from the fact that the emphasis of Luke-Acts, even Acts 21–28, is not on any man, including the apostle Paul.¹⁹⁰ It is upon the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the central figure of these books.¹⁹¹ Peter, Paul, and even Luke himself are simply the bondservants of the Master and Savior whom they serve. The book of Acts is not ultimately about Paul being on trial and traveling to Rome. It is about Jesus Christ, first and foremost, as the victorious, risen Lord and Savior to all men; and it is about His gospel advancing to all nations, whether or not Rome approves, and whether or not Paul lives or dies. Therefore, the legal-defense theory is possible as one purpose for Acts, but only if viewed as secondary to evangelism.

Ecclesiastical Purpose

Besides a political or evangelistic purpose for Luke and Acts, others have proposed the view that Luke wrote primarily for the edification of the church. Robert Maddox has written the premiere defense of the “ecclesiastical” view, arguing that Luke-Acts was written around A.D. 90 to the church for instructive purposes in order to explain the late first-century relationship between Gentiles and Jews in light of the advancement of Christianity beyond its Jewish roots as it awaited the Lord's return.¹⁹² Maddox sees the emphasis of Luke-Acts as primarily ecclesiastical and eschatological, not soteriological or evangelistic.¹⁹³

However, the emphasis of Luke-Acts is not primarily upon eschatology, though this theme is surely present in these books. Rather Luke-Acts has a strong emphasis on “fulfillment” in the present with the first coming of the Lord Jesus. This helps explain the relevance of the term “Today,” which appears at significant points throughout Luke and Acts (Luke 4:21; 5:26; 19:9; 23:43; Acts 13:33).¹⁹⁴ In defending the

¹⁸⁸ Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 95.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹² A date of A.D. 90 is unacceptable and inconsistent with New Testament evidence. Paul's martyrdom in the mid 60s is a well-established fact. But if Acts was completed in A.D. 90, then why does the book end in chapter 28 with Paul's imprisonment in Rome and not his martyrdom? This omission is glaring and inexplicable for the A.D. 90 view. For an assessment of proposed dates and reasons for A.D. 62 as the most likely date of completion, see Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. C. H. Gempf (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 365-414.

¹⁹³ Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 100-157, 183-87.

¹⁹⁴ Bock, “A Theology of Luke-Acts,” 92-93; Green, *Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 94-95.

view that Luke wrote primarily for the church to get its bearings in relationship to Judaism and persecution, Maddox objects that the extended section in Acts 21–28 dealing with Paul’s arrest and imprisonment argues heavily against a salvation theme and purpose.¹⁹⁵ Maddox poses his principal objection to the evangelistic view, saying, “This theory suffers further because of our observations about the shape of Luke’s work, for the concluding section, Acts 21–28, is hard to reconcile with this idea.”¹⁹⁶ But is it really so hard to reconcile?

Could not the emphasis in Acts 21–28 on Paul’s imprisonment at the hands of the unbelieving Jews simply be the result of Luke wanting to warn Theophilus about the Judaizers and their influence, as well as explain the status of imprisoned Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles? Could not the extensive section in Acts 21–28 have been written, in part, because there were many unbelieving Jews seeking to influence early Christianity back toward a legalistic view of salvation and the Christian life, and Luke wanted Theophilus to be forewarned about them, if he had not been already? This is a prominent theme throughout Luke-Acts and the rest of the New Testament. Along these lines, Niemelä writes, “Part of establishing Theophilus included, for example, the warning in Acts about Judaizers.”¹⁹⁷ But if this can be said about “establishing” Theophilus (assuming he is a believer), then why could it not be said about “evangelizing” him—that is, helping clarify the critical law and works versus faith and grace distinction?

Evangelism, Edification, or Both?

In all fairness, Luke probably had more than one purpose for writing—a purpose that encompassed both evangelism and edification, just like John’s Gospel.¹⁹⁸ Why should we be forced to pick only one purpose? There is no question that the historical record of Acts was helpful for the church’s own self-understanding of its roots and relationship to Judaism. Nor is it too difficult to conceive how Acts might have effectively brought any recent convert around A.D. 60 “up to speed” on the church that such a person had recently joined. Luke-Acts obviously has rich eschatological truth in it, as well as edifying ecclesiological content; but could not these themes simply be viewed as complementary to Luke’s greater purpose of persuading unbelievers with the gospel in order to believe that Jesus is the Christ who saves? Undoubtedly, the Spirit of God intended Luke-Acts to be applied by believers as well for their own equipping in the Christian life. Second Timothy 3:16–17 proves this, since Luke and Acts constitute part of the “All Scripture” referred to in that passage. But does this discount an evangelistic intent for Luke-Acts?

Too often commentators and interpreters have asserted that Luke was writing to Theophilus as a new Christian to ground him in his faith, yet without realizing that the basis for their assertion applies equally to Theophilus being an unbeliever who is still considering the claims of Christ. This point is illustrated in the following paragraph by Carson and Moo, who give several reasons for Luke being written to a Christian convert.

¹⁹⁵ Maddox, *Purpose of Luke-Acts*, 181.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹⁷ Niemelä, “The Case for the Two-Gospel View,” 131.

¹⁹⁸ Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 35, 43-44.

However, the reasons they give and the questions they raise could all apply equally to Theophilus as an unbeliever.

The word “certainty” (*asphaleia*) has the notion of assurance. Luke wants Theophilus, and other converts like him, to be certain in their own minds and hearts about the ultimate significance of what God has done in Christ. By the time Luke wrote his gospel, the early church had separated from Judaism and was, indeed, experiencing hostility from many Jews. At the same time, the new and tiny Christian movement was competing with a welter of religious and philosophical alternatives in the Greco-Roman world. Why should Theophilus think that Christianity is the one “right” religion out of all these alternatives? Why should he think that Christians and not Jews constitute the true people of God, those who are the true heirs of God’s Old Testament promises? Why, to put the matter to its most foundational level, should Theophilus continue to believe that God has revealed himself decisively in Jesus of Nazareth? Luke’s gospel, along with the book of Acts, is intended to answer these questions and to give new converts to the faith a “reason for the hope that is within them.”¹⁹⁹

One might think that Carson and Moo were writing about the reasons why Theophilus ought to become a Christian in the first place. In a bit of irony, they happen to quote 1 Peter 3:15 at the end of the paragraph. This verse instructs Christians to “sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.” The only problem is that Carson and Moo apply this verse to Theophilus, who is supposedly a believer in Christ already. By doing so, they make 1 Peter 3:15 teach that it is believers who need a reason to have hope within! But the verse actually speaks of Christians witnessing to non-Christians, and in the process giving *unbelievers* a reason for the hope that only believers in Christ possess. If anything, the verse assumes that believers already have a reason within and just need to be ready to give it to others in everyday evangelism. Luke-Acts is certainly able to accomplish just that—to give unbelievers a reason to believe in Jesus as the biblical Christ that they might be saved.

CONCLUSION

The prologue of Luke’s Gospel and the book’s content indicate that an evangelistic purpose for Luke-Acts is more than plausible. Likewise, an evangelistic purpose behind the epistle of Romans cannot be ruled out since it contains a thorough presentation of the gospel that an unsaved person must believe to be justified in God’s sight. Therefore, the exclusive claims for John’s Gospel made by some well-meaning Free Grace Christians today are unfounded and unbiblical. It remains to be demonstrated by proponents of the promise-only saving message that John is the *only* evangelistic book in the Bible and that Luke, Romans, and other New Testament books *cannot* be evangelistic.

¹⁹⁹ Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 212.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to answer several key questions about John's Gospel. When was John written and published? To whom was it written? Why was it written? What is its primary message? What does it teach about the nature of belief in Jesus Christ for eternal life? What must the lost believe about Christ to receive eternal life? What does John's Gospel *not* require the lost to believe for eternal life? How do other New Testament books compare to John's evangelistic purpose and message? Previous chapters have already answered these questions in detail and summarized their findings in their respective concluding sections. Therefore, this final chapter will provide a brief assessment of the practical implications of John's teaching for everyday evangelism and Free Grace theology.

DATE, AUDIENCE, AND PURPOSE

Chapters two through four on the date, audience, and purpose of John's Gospel provided the necessary setting and context for the study of the nature and content of belief in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Chapter two showed that a date of composition and publication ranging from the 60s to 90s A.D. accords with the evidence, meaning that the fourth Gospel was written during the lifetime of the apostle John and is a reliable record of Jesus Christ's life and ministry by a firsthand eyewitness. The claim of some promise-only Free Grace proponents that John finished his Gospel in the 30s to mid-40s will not lead to greater confidence in the book since it contradicts the internal, biblical evidence. Chapter three demonstrated that the intended audience of John's Gospel is not a particular ethnic or religious group but all ethnic or religious people—the entire world! Likewise, chapter four demonstrated that John's Gospel does not have only one purpose. Evidence from within the book reveals that its intended recipient ranged from an unbelieving, first-time reader to a believer who read the fourth Gospel repeatedly.¹ John is able to be read and comprehended even by the unbeliever who possesses only the slightest familiarity with Jesus Christ and the events of His life.² Chapters four and eight showed that John's

¹ Edward W. Klink, III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 237-38.

² It is doubtful that in the first century a copy of the Gospels was given directly to an unbeliever to read without any word of explanation or introduction by a believing owner (Richard Bauckham, "The Audience of the Gospel of John," in *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 122). Books of such length as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John probably were not read without some prefatory explanation of their content, characters, or storyline. This is true even with books today, as readers ask, why should I take

Gospel is not the only evangelistic book in the New Testament, but it is especially suited for the evangelization of the lost since it was written expressly to persuade unbelievers that Jesus is the Christ in order that they might have eternal life (19:35; 20:31).

Practically, this means that if already existing believers desire to read John's Gospel for their own edification rather than evangelization, they must still read it as a primarily evangelistic book. Of course, such believing readers will not need to be re-evangelized by John for the purpose of regeneration since this soteriological blessing and event can occur only once. Instead, believing readers will find themselves agreeing with John's evangelistic thrust as they proceed to have their existing faith in Christ built up and strengthened. In the process, they will enjoy to a greater degree the eternal life they already possess. If the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were intended to be used first by believers in the church, as some contend,³ this still would not exclude their use outside the church for the evangelization of unbelievers. It is doubtful that God intended any of the Gospels, including John, to have strictly edification or evangelism as their purpose. They likely served both purposes. A bit of common sense and a little historical perspective clarifies this point.

In the first century, the four canonical Gospels would not have been used like modern-day gospel tracts. In modern society, multiple copies of a document can be produced with lightning speed at an affordable price. A thousand gospel tracts might cost the average American Christian only a couple hours' worth of wages. To purchase an entire Bible for one's own edification would cost about the same. But for the average, unskilled Christian worker in the first century, purchasing just the raw papyrus needed to make a scroll of the Gospel of Mark would cost between 2–12 days' worth of wages.⁴ Then would come the time required to manually copy the entire Gospel. After such great expense and personal effort, do you think multiple copies of each Gospel were indiscriminately passed out like modern-day gospel tracts? The evangelism team from Rome Bible Church probably did not plan to make multiple copies of each of the Gospels, including John, and then meet at the Coliseum before the next big sporting event just to pass out "Gospels."⁵

More often, Christians evangelized simply by verbally proclaiming the saving message of the gospel. If unbelievers were interested in what they heard and desired to learn more, undoubtedly, believers would invite these seekers to sit down for a reading from their own prized copy of one of the Gospels. It is also possible that unbelievers may have been invited to "church," much like ancient synagogues being attended by interested, God-fearing Gentiles (Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26; 14:1; 17:1, 4, 17; 18:4–7). There they would hear a copy of one of the Gospels read aloud and expounded (1 Tim. 4:13). We know from Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 14:23 that unbelievers were

the time to read or listen to such a book? Though the typical reader or listener of John's Gospel would normally have been given some prior introduction to the book, this was not essential to comprehend John's primary message—his evangelistic saving message about Jesus being the Christ, the Son of God.

³ Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9-10.

⁴ John H. Niemelä, "The Infrequency of Twin Departures: An End to Synoptic Reversibility?" (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000), 429 n. 75.

⁵ David R. Anderson, "Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?" Unpublished paper, Chafer Theological Seminary Conference, Houston, TX, March 21, 2007.

sometimes present among the assemblies of early Christians, just like today. Thus, it is not too difficult to see how a “Gospel” such as John or Luke or even an epistle such as Romans could have fulfilled the purpose of edification and equipping toward those who were already believers in Jesus Christ, while simultaneously fulfilling an evangelistic objective toward those who were unbelievers. In the same way today, John’s Gospel may be used effectively to evangelize unbelievers, but it is by no means the only book intended by God for evangelism. Therefore, the recent teaching of many Free Grace proponents that the Gospel of John is solely evangelistic in purpose and the only evangelistic book in the Bible is out of biblical balance.

This imbalance either already has had or will have several negative effects. First, it will practically lessen the use of other biblical books in evangelism, such as Romans and Luke-Acts, which the Lord has greatly blessed over the centuries in everyday evangelism. Second, this imbalanced view will lead to unique definitions and doctrines for John’s Gospel versus other New Testament books, which has already happened with respect to the definition of the term “Christ.” Supposedly, this term means only the guarantor of eternal life in John’s Gospel⁶ but something different and fuller in the rest of the New Testament, where it includes the Lord’s deity, humanity, death for sin, and resurrection from the dead.⁷ Third, the evangelistic priority with which John’s Gospel is viewed has already led to the historically anachronistic conclusion that John’s Gospel was the first New Testament book written (with the possible exception of James). Fourth, this imbalance will have the effect of further marginalizing the Free Grace movement. Free Grace theology will be perceived as overly reliant on John’s Gospel in its soteriology and therefore less biblically credible,⁸ just as hyper-dispensationalism has practically elevated Paul’s writings to a higher level of authority and application for Christians today and consequently this extreme position has become marginalized among dispensationalists.

MEANING AND NATURE OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ

John’s Gospel has often been misunderstood within Reformed theology as providing personal examples or test cases of the quality and genuineness of a person’s faith. Supposedly, “believers” may not be believers after all, if they do not prove the reality of their faith by ongoing faithfulness and good works. Catholicism and Arminianism also interpret John’s Gospel to teach that people’s faith in Christ must endure to the end of

⁶ Zane C. Hodges, “Assurance: Of the Essence of Saving Faith,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 10 (Spring 1997): 6-7; idem, “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 4-5; Robert N. Wilkin, “John,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin, vol. 1 (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 427, 476.

⁷ Similarly, Hodges concludes that the “overcomer” of Revelation 2–3 has an entirely different meaning from John’s earlier use of the same term in 1 John 5:5. Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God’s Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 216-17; idem, *Grace in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1987), 108.

⁸ This is similar to one author’s opinion that Wilkin practically has a “canon within the canon” because of his overreliance on two texts (John 5:24; Rev. 20:11–15) through which future judgment in the rest of the canon is viewed. James D. G. Dunn, “Response to Robert N. Wilkin,” in *Four Views on The Role of Works at the Final Judgment*, ed. Alan P. Stanley (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 57.

their lives and be coupled with obedience and good works to truly possess eternal life. Leading Lordship Salvation proponent John MacArthur says that John in his Gospel “teaches that all true believers love the light (3:19), come to the light (3:20–21), obey the Son (3:36), practice the truth (3:21), worship in spirit and truth (4:23–24), honor God (5:22–24), do good deeds (5:29), eat Jesus’ flesh and drink His blood (6:48–66), love God (8:42, cf. 1 John 2:15), follow Jesus (10:26–28), and keep Jesus’ commandments (14:15).”⁹ If any of these elements are lacking, the genuineness of a person’s “saving faith” in Jesus is called into question and oftentimes deemed spurious, superficial, and nonsaving.

When the Gospel of John is interpreted this way, the believer’s personal assurance of everlasting life is completely eroded by shifting the basis of eternal salvation from Christ’s person, finished work, and promise to one’s own performance. Not only is assurance of salvation lost, but this teaching may even lead a person who has never trusted in Christ to base his eternal destiny upon the supposedly necessary outcomes of genuine faith listed above by MacArthur. The result may be that a person trusts in himself and his own righteousness rather than Christ alone for eternal life, and thus, he remains eternally lost. This understanding of salvation in John’s Gospel constitutes a false gospel of works (Gal. 1:6–9) that tragically nullifies God’s unmerited, undeserved favor, and Christ’s finished work (Gal. 2:21).

Thankfully, Free Grace theology has consistently opposed this erroneous interpretation of John’s Gospel and doctrine of “saving faith” that includes not only the elements of knowledge, assent, and trust, but also active, persevering obedience to Christ. Instead, Free Grace theology generally interprets belief in Christ for eternal life as an instantaneous, nonmeritorious assent to, or persuasion of, the truth of God’s saving message, which necessarily and inherently includes trust or reliance upon that message and Jesus Christ as the sole object of faith.

OBJECT AND CONTENT OF ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ

Although Free Grace theology has rightly opposed unbiblical teaching on the *nature* of “saving faith,” it is currently a house divided on the *object* or *content* of “saving faith.” Free Grace adherents aligned with the teachings of the Grace Evangelical Society openly deny that John’s Gospel requires belief in Jesus’ deity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection for eternal life, whereas other Free Grace Christians maintain that John’s Gospel requires belief in some, if not all, of these Christological truths for eternal life.

Previous chapters in this study have shown that John develops the meaning and content of the salvific terms “Christ” and “Son of God,” which the reader is expected to comprehend and believe with respect to Jesus.¹⁰ These titles are not vacuous concepts within the Gospel of John; nor are they limited in content simply to Jesus being the guarantor of eternal life, as Zane Hodges has taught:

⁹ John MacArthur, “Repentance in the Gospel of John,” www.gty.org/library/print/articles/A238 (accessed May 6, 2017).

¹⁰ George E. Meisinger, “A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content,” in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Grace Theology*, ed. J. B. Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 85.

In the final analysis, therefore, salvation is the result of believing in Jesus to provide it. Salvation is not the result of assenting to a detailed creed. Salvation does not even require an understanding of how it was provided for or made possible. All it requires is that the sinner understand the sufficiency of the name of Jesus to guarantee the eternal well-being of every believer. Thank God salvation is so wonderfully simple!¹¹

While all Free Grace Christians would agree that salvation is not predicated on assent to “a detailed creed” or that the lost must come to fully comprehend Jesus Christ before they can be born again, faith in Him for eternal life still requires at least an “embryonic”¹² understanding or “rudimentary”¹³ recognition of basic truth about His person and work besides the bare fact that He guarantees eternal life.

If “Christ” in John’s Gospel means only that someone named “Jesus” is the guarantor of eternal life, regardless of what misconceptions one may have about this person, then such a “Christ” bears a striking resemblance to the false christs of many cults and religions—one who is not fully God, who did not die a propitious death, and who did not rise from the dead to guarantee eternal life. For instance, the messiah of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism is considered to be someone who is superhuman, who is able to bring in God’s kingdom, yet who is not divine. Nor is the “Messiah” of Judaism someone who dies for mankind’s sins.¹⁴ There is also the “Christ” of Islam. Its holy book, the Qur’an, hails Jesus as a great prophet¹⁵ but not someone who is God-incarnate since God has “no equals.”¹⁶ In Islam, Jesus neither died on a cross nor rose from the dead.¹⁷ Then there is the “Christ” of the cults. According to Mormonism, Jesus is just one of many gods, which Mormons are told they may also become.¹⁸ They also teach that “Christ” did not provide atonement for all of man’s sins by his death since man himself must still provide atonement for the particularly heinous sins he commits.¹⁹ Jehovah’s Witnesses regard Jesus Christ to be a mighty god who is actually a spirit-being—Michael the archangel to be precise.²⁰ Nor did this “Christ” rise from the dead in the same body that he died with, for Jehovah supposedly “disposed” of his earthly body.²¹

¹¹ Zane C. “How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 10.

¹² Meisinger, “A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content,” 85.

¹³ J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, rev. ed. (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013), 63.

¹⁴ Louis Goldberg, *Our Jewish Friends* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1983), 92-93.

¹⁵ Sura 4:163.

¹⁶ Sura 3:59; 4:171-72; 19:88-89.

¹⁷ Sura 4:157-58.

¹⁸ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:286, www.journalofdiscourses.org (accessed September 21, 2008).

¹⁹ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:247, 4:220, www.journalofdiscourses.org (accessed September 21, 2008).

²⁰ *The Watchtower* (May 15, 1969): 307; idem, (December 15, 1984): 29.

²¹ *The Kingdom Is at Hand* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1944), 259; *Things in Which It Is Impossible for God to Lie* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1965), 354; *The Watchtower* (September 1, 1953): 518; idem, (August 1, 1975): 479.

Then there is the New Age “Christ,” who, we are told, was a mere man who actualized the divinity inherent in every one of us and in the process achieved personal at-one-ment with the cosmic consciousness, leaving us a similar path to follow.²² Nor did this “Christ” truly die, for we are told that we must liberate our minds from the notion that God judged His own Son upon the cross for sin. At least this is what the channeled spirit of “Jesus” claimed in 1966 to the author of the now popular *Course in Miracles*.

You will not find peace until you have removed the nails from the hands of God’s Son and taken the last thorn from his forehead. The Love of God surrounds His Son whom the god of the crucifixion condemns. Teach not that I died in vain. Teach rather that I did NOT die by demonstrating that I live IN YOU. For the UNDOING of the crucifixion of God’s Son is the work of the redemption, in which everyone has a part of equal value. God does not judge His blameless Son.²³

If this were not enough, there is also the “Christ” of Gnosticism, who supposedly never became incarnate and who never died on the cross²⁴ as an atonement for man’s sins,²⁵ nor rose from the dead.²⁶ At least one Gnostic source claims that “Christ” also supposedly taught “salvation in the world with a promise”—a promise of “salvation in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . the author of our life.”²⁷ This sounds eerily similar to the crossless, resurrectionless, deityless “promise of life” message espoused by many modern Free Grace proponents. The early church was besieged by two primary forms of false teaching about the person of Jesus Christ—Gnosticism (in its various forms),²⁸ which denied the humanity of Christ, and Arianism, which denied His deity. Though each plague subsided for the better part of church history, both demonic doctrines have persisted to the present day. Therefore, we must remain vigilant against any form of new Arianism and neognostic false teachings arising in our day, regardless of the community or familiar quarters from which they may originate.

In fairness to many “promise-only” Free Grace adherents, virtually all would affirm in their own personal beliefs the biblical truths of Jesus Christ’s deity, humanity, death for sin, and bodily resurrection. In this sense, their own personal beliefs are not comparable to Arianism or Gnosticism. On the other hand, their “saving message” *will not permit* the definition of “the Christ” in John’s Gospel to include the Lord’s deity,

²² David Spangler, *Reflections on the Christ* (Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Publications, 1981), 14.

²³ *Jesus’ Course in Miracles*, ed. Helen Schucman and William Thetford (n.p.: Course in Miracles Society, 2000), 104 (capitalization original).

²⁴ “The First Revelation of James,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 327; “The Revelation of Peter” (*ibid.*, 495-96); “The Second Discourse of Great Seth” (*ibid.*, 480).

²⁵ April D. DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 5.

²⁶ “The Letter of Peter to Philip,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 589.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 591-93.

²⁸ Ignatius of Antioch, *Trallians* 9–10; *Smyrnaeans* 2; *Ephesians* 7 (cf. Polycarp, *Philippians* 2); Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I.26.1; Epiphanius, *Adversus Haereses* 28.1.

humanity,²⁹ death for sin, and bodily resurrection. The conclusion seems inescapable. According to the “promise of life” view, unregenerate people may believe in a Gnostic or Arian “Jesus” and still receive everlasting life, provided they believe that this “Jesus” guarantees them eternal life. The “saving message” of many modern Free Grace adherents allows unregenerate people to believe in “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4),³⁰ or any “Jesus,” as long as they believe he guarantees them eternal life.

Ironically, one such “Jesus” arose in the Latin-American world at the same time that the “crossless gospel” controversy was peaking in the Free Grace community during the years 2007–2008. It is no exaggeration to say that José Luis de Jesús Miranda (April 22, 1946 – November 17, 2013) was a modern-day antichrist. This man claimed to be God-incarnate³¹ and even “much greater” than Jesus Christ.³² Jesús Miranda’s ministry, known as “Growing in Grace,” was based out of Miami and boasted “a following of 2 million people” throughout the world,³³ though the actual number is

²⁹ Proponents of the “promise of life” view are reluctant to concede that belief in Jesus for eternal life requires belief in His humanity as “the Christ.” In one article, Hodges states repeatedly that the lost must believe in the “historical person” of Jesus or “the historical Jesus” to have eternal life (Zane C. Hodges, “The Spirit of the Antichrist: Decoupling Jesus from the Christ,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 20 [Autumn 2007]: 42-45). Hodges even says one characteristic of the “historical person” of Jesus as “the Christ” based on 1 John 2:18, 22, and 4:3 is that He had “flesh and blood” (ibid., 45). But, conspicuously, Hodges never states the obvious and logical conclusion that belief in Jesus as “the Christ” for eternal life must therefore include belief in His humanity or that He possessed flesh and blood. In personal conversations in the last decade with proponents of the “promise of life” view, I have observed that they often *deny* that people must believe in Christ’s humanity for eternal life since “humanity” requires essential defining content—content which goes beyond the *sine qua non* of their saving message of the three elements of the name Jesus, believe, and eternal life. Similarly, proponents of the “promise of life” view are hesitant to state that belief in Jesus’ deity or that He is God is necessary for eternal life since “deity” or “God” would require further definition or content beyond their three-part saving message. According to them, any so-called saving message that requires more than their three-part “message of life” is legalism. Regarding the humanity of Jesus Christ, it appears that those who subscribe to the “promise-only” position either deny that Jesus’ humanity is part of the contents of saving faith, or at best, they are unresolved among themselves on the question and refuse to address it openly and directly.

³⁰ Murphy-O’Connor argues from the use of “Jesus” throughout 2 Corinthians that Paul’s use of “Jesus” in 11:4 likely implies Christ’s humanity and death: “In addition to connoting the earthly existence of Christ, ‘Jesus’ in 2 Cor 11:4 carries the specific nuance of humiliation and suffering culminating in death. Paul uses it to counteract the propaganda of those whose distaste for a crucified Christ led them to invent ‘another Jesus’” (Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Another Jesus (2 Cor 11:4),” *Revue Biblique* 97 [April 1990]: 238). Fee responds to this view with a more biblically-accurate interpretation: “I would agree that the use of ‘Jesus’ here reflects the usage in [2 Cor.] 4:10, and thus probably emphasizes the earthly Jesus who died. But it is difficult to sustain that this means anything different from [Paul’s] use of ‘preaching Christ’ in 1 Cor. 15:12 or Phil. 1:15–18, in which instances he clearly means ‘preach the gospel which has Christ’s death and resurrection as its primary content’” (Gordon D. Fee, “Another Gospel Which You Did Not Embrace’: 2 Corinthians 11:4 and the Theology of 1 and 2 Corinthians,” in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994], 246 n. 25).

³¹ Johnny Dwyer, “The Hallelujah People,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2007; Juan Carlos Llorca, “‘Antichrist’ Coming to Guatemala,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 21, 2007; Jeanette Rivera-Lyles, “Faithful come to hear ‘Antichrist,’” *Orlando Sentinel*, May 7, 2007.

³² John Roberts, “Greater than Jesus,” *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees* Television Broadcast on CNN, USA, September 28, 2006.

³³ Llorca, “‘Antichrist’ Coming to Guatemala.”

almost impossible to determine and has been more conservatively estimated at 250,000.³⁴ Besides the United States, Miranda's message reached about 16 countries in Latin America, primarily through internet³⁵ and his cable television channel, Telegracia.³⁶

In 1991, Jesús Miranda "introduced himself to his flock as El Otro, or the Other, a sort of transitional deity that prefigured the Second Coming of Christ. In 2004, Mr. Miranda announced to the world that he was Jesus Christ."³⁷ Then, in January of 2007,³⁸ Miranda used the title "Antichrist" as a positive description of himself, being one who supposedly came in the place of Jesus Christ rather than against Him.³⁹ The antichrist Miranda taught that the biblical Jesus died to pay for the sins of the world⁴⁰ so that there is no more sin and people are now perfect in God's eyes.⁴¹ After Miranda had the numbers 666 tattooed on one arm and the letters SSS on the other, his followers began to tattoo themselves with the same markings. The numbers 666 are an obvious reference to the mark of the beast in Revelation 13:18, while the letters SSS stand for "Salvo, Siempre Salvo" in Spanish, meaning "Saved, Always Saved"⁴² or "Once Saved, Always Saved."⁴³ Miranda's message contained a strong guarantee of eternal security and well-being purportedly based on God's grace. While he was regarded as a "guarantor of eternal life," he was truly a deityless, crossless, and resurrectionless "Christ." Jesús Miranda did not match "the Christ, the Son of God" set forth in the Gospel of John.

Some people within the Free Grace community feel that the debate of the last decade over the contents of faith for regeneration is simply a tempest in a teapot and much ado about nothing. They scoff at the notion that a saving message such as the "promise of life" view could ever possibly permit a lost person to believe in "another Jesus" as the guarantor of eternal life. But the case of Jesús Miranda proves that this is not even a hypothetical possibility. It has already happened with thousands of people who have believed Miranda's lies.

Belief in a false concept of messiah will not lead to salvation but to eternal condemnation. The Lord Jesus warned about "false christs" arising prior to His return to earth (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22). The apostle John also teaches in the Book of Revelation that one day a particular false christ will arise from the sea of humanity, and under satanic influence, he will deceive the world into embracing him as a substitute christ (Rev. 13:1-18). The Antichrist will be the ultimate false concept of the messiah. Perhaps this coming beast will deceive professing believers in Christ during the Tribulation by telling them he is really "Jesus" who has returned in fulfillment of the prophesied Second Coming. Many who do not know and believe the true Christ of John's Gospel and the Scriptures will worship the Antichrist and take his mark. They will probably place their

³⁴ Dwyer, "The Hallelujah People."

³⁵ Tara Dooley, "'666' Miami minister becomes lightning rod," *The Tuscaloosa News*, June 9, 2007.

³⁶ Dwyer, "The Hallelujah People."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ David Van Biema, A Different Jesus to Believe in? *Time*, May 9, 2007.

⁴⁰ Dwyer, "The Hallelujah People"; Llorca, "'Antichrist' Coming to Guatemala."

⁴¹ Dooley, "'666' Miami minister becomes lightning rod."

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dwyer, "The Hallelujah People"; Rivera-Lyles, "Faithful come to hear 'Antichrist.'"

trust in this man for their eternal well-being, only to perish forever since they have the wrong object and content of faith (2 Thess. 2:3–12; Rev. 14:9–11). Our concept of “the Christ” has eternal consequences!

Satan has certainly foisted many false christs upon the human race in an effort to divert man’s attention away from the true Christ (2 Cor. 4:3–7; 11:1–4). But there is only one proper object of saving faith—the Christ of the gospel—even as He is set forth in John’s Gospel. It is no coincidence, therefore, to observe that down through the centuries Satan has attacked with concentrated diabolical ferocity not only the truth of justification by grace through faith alone but also the very pillars of Christ’s person and work—His deity, humanity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection. If Satan cannot undo the miracle of the incarnation or the work of Calvary and the empty tomb, then why does he bother trying to dissuade mankind from believing these key Christological truths? It is precisely because he knows something that many Free Grace people have lost sight of, namely, that these are the essential, defining characteristics of Jesus as “the Christ” that are the very contents of the gospel that must be believed for eternal salvation—the very gospel that he actively resists (2 Cor. 4:3–4; 11:1–4).

These elements of the gospel of salvation and of Jesus being “the Christ” also constitute the very grounds of mankind’s salvation. The Gospel of John and the rest of God’s Word teach that the only way a lost, condemned sinner can be accepted by God is to meet Him on the same grounds that He Himself has established and provided for man’s salvation. The Old Testament tabernacle with its sacrificial system illustrated this truth of God’s appointed meeting place and grounds (Exod. 25:22; 29:36–43). Jesus Christ fulfilled this typology as the only way to God (John 14:6) by being the tabernacle or meeting place (1:14; 2:19), its mercy seat (Rom. 3:25), and its sacrificial offering (John 1:29). Christ-crucified and risen is the only safe ground or place where a person is accepted before God (Rom. 5:9–10; 8:34; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Therefore, when an unbeliever, who stands justly condemned before a holy God, comes to God’s Lamb by faith (John 6:35) and thereby rests his or her salvation upon the same ground that God has provided for man’s salvation (the person and work of His Son), he or she instantly becomes a child of God and is saved eternally (1:12; 3:16–18). The teaching of John’s Gospel about Jesus being the Christ is in perfect harmony with the saving gospel of the Christ and the grounds of eternal salvation.

As this relates to Jesus Christ as the object of faith for eternal life, the sagacious words of C. I. Scofield from a century ago could not be more fitting for our day:

It has been said, and I believe it is true, that the world seems increasingly desirous of having a Christless religion called by Christ’s name. It is a very serious charge, but it would be abundantly easy to prove that it is a true charge. There is no desire to lay aside the name of Christ, but there is a great desire to lay aside the Christ who gives us the name. And first of all, there is a manifestation of this desire in the effort constantly made to eliminate the cross and the blood of Christ as the foundation of all and the

beginning of all. Let us have that, then, distinctly understood. Let no soul ever think of beginning with God anywhere but with Christ crucified.⁴⁴

A crossless “saving message” is an oxymoron. If such a message were to prevail in our day, it would surely result in fewer cases of regeneration and more people perishing, for it is an impotent and ineffective message. The primary reason people come to believe in Jesus for eternal life is because they come to realize that He resolved their sin problem by His finished work and they can trust in Him rather than their own good works for the certainty of eternal life. Consequently, for the sake of people’s eternal destinies, it is imperative to tell the lost that they must believe, at a decisive moment in time, that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31) as He is set forth in the Gospel of John—the unique, theanthropic Savior, who finished the work of salvation by paying for sin completely and rising from the dead to secure the gift of everlasting life to all who believe in Him for it. This is the evangelistic purpose and message of John’s Gospel.

⁴⁴ C. I. Scofield, *Where Faith Sees Christ* (New York: Our Hope, 1916; reprinted, Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2014), 21.

APPENDIX

BORN OF WATER AND SPIRIT (3:5)

What did Jesus mean in John 3:5 when He said to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God”? John 3:5 has been one of the most hotly contested soteriological passages in John’s Gospel throughout church history. As a result, there are four main interpretations of the phrase “born of water and Spirit” (γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος). The first of these is doctrinally false and contradicts the rest of Scripture. The other three views are all doctrinally in agreement with the rest of the Bible, but the last interpretation best fits all the exegetical evidence.

View #1: The Roman Catholic and majority interpretation within Christendom contradicts biblical teaching on salvation by grace apart from works. This view concludes that “born of water and Spirit” refers to the rite or sacrament of water baptism which supposedly bestows regeneration.¹ The Roman Catholic Church even requires that the phrase “born of water” in John 3:5 be interpreted as a reference to the sacrament of water baptism and anathematizes anyone who interprets it otherwise. One online Catholic apologetics source responds to a questioner:

The Living Bible for Catholics has a distressing footnote on John 3:5 (“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God”). The footnote says that the water in the passage may refer to “the normal process observed during every human birth.” Aren’t Catholics required to say that this refers to water baptism rather than to the “waters” of human birth? Yes, they are. This is one of the passages in Scripture that the exact meaning of which has been infallibly defined by the Church. The word “water” cannot refer to amniotic fluid or anything other than natural water, and the passage *must* be understood as referring to baptism.

The Council of Trent defined, “If anyone shall say that real and natural water is not necessary for baptism, and on that account those words of our Lord Jesus Christ, ‘Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit’ [John 3:5], are distorted into some sort of metaphor, let him be anathema” (*Canons on the Sacrament of Baptism*, 2). The footnote in the *Living Bible for Catholics* is out of sync with the magisterium in

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Bloomington, OH: Apostolate for Family Consecration, 1994), 320, §1257; Everett Ferguson (Church of Christ), *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 142-45; John Theodore Mueller (Lutheran), *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934), 500.

suggesting that any interpretation other than baptism is possible for a Catholic.²

View #2: The majority view among Protestant Reformed Christians interprets “water” as a figure of speech for the Holy Spirit, with Jesus saying essentially, “born of water, even the Spirit.” According to this view, one must be born again by a “water-Spirit” birth.³

View #3: A popular but still minority view among Protestants also is that “water” is figurative, not as a reference to the Holy Spirit, but to the Word of God and its cleansing effect, similar to Ephesians 5:26, “the washing of water by the Word.”⁴

View #4: A prominent view among evangelicals is that “water” refers to literal water—the amniotic fluid of a mother’s womb that breaks in childbirth, so that “water” refers to a physical, womb birth, while “Spirit” refers to one’s rebirth or regeneration by the Holy Spirit.⁵ Thus, “born of water and Spirit” refers to two *kinds* of birth (a womb birth + a Holy Spirit birth) rather than two *means* to be born again (such as water baptism + the Holy Spirit). In John 3:5, Jesus not only answers Nicodemus’s question and misunderstanding from verse 4 about re-entering his mother’s womb and being born physically a second time, but He clarifies for Nicodemus that physical birth alone is not enough to qualify a person for entrance into God’s kingdom—a person must also receive a second birth to be spiritually reborn from above. This interpretation is faithful to the details of the inspired text of John 3 and harmonizes with the truth found elsewhere in Scripture that salvation is solely God’s work for man, received by His grace alone, apart from human merit, on the condition of faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

² www.catholic.com/quickquestions/does-the-water-mentioned-in-john-35-refer-to-the-water-of-baptism-or-can-it-mean-amni (accessed October 27, 2014).

³ Richrd Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 82-93; Linda Belleville, “Born of Water and Spirit: John 3:5,” *Trinity Journal* 1:2 (Fall 1980): 140; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 194-95; Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Light in the Darkness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 60; Robert V. McCabe, “The Meaning of ‘Born of Water and the Spirit’ in John 3:5,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 4 (Fall 1999): 97-99; A. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945), 1:110-11.

⁴ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5 vols. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 4:383-84; John G. Mitchell, *An Everlasting Love* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 54-55.

⁵ Russell Fowler, “Born of Water and the Spirit (Jn 3:5),” *Expository Times* 82 (1971): 159; Michael D. Halsey, *The Gospel of Grace and Truth: A Theology of Grace from the Gospel of John* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2015), 138-42; J. Carl Laney, *John*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 77-78; Robert P. Lightner, *Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 20; Margaret Pamment, “Short Note on John 3:5,” *Novum Testamentum* 25 (1983): 189-90; Sandra M. Schneiders, “Born Anew,” *Theology Today* 44 (1987): 189-96; D. G. Spriggs, “Meaning of ‘Water’ in John 3:5,” *Expository Times* 85 (1973-74): 150; Elmer Towns, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1990), 78; Robert N. Wilkin, “John,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1:374; Ben Witherington III, “The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6–8,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 155-60.

“BORN AGAIN OF WATER”?

Before examining the context, the first step in correctly interpreting this passage is to observe the actual words of the text. Note, the Lord does *not* say to Nicodemus, “Unless one is born *again* of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Though the word “again” (ἄνωθεν) appears in the Greek text in verse 3, it is not found in verse 5. Early in church history when the Greek New Testament was being translated into Latin, the Latin word *renatus* (“born again”) was incorrectly used to translate the Greek word γεννηθῆναι (“born”) in verse 5, rather than the correct Latin word *natus* (“born”). The incorrect reading of *renatus* soon prevailed among the majority of Latin manuscripts, so that it became the standard reading of the Latin Vulgate.⁶ Hence, a textual basis for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration quickly became ensconced in western Christendom. Already by the second century, John 3:5 was “the most cited baptismal text.”⁷ Even today many Protestants are adversely affected by the ancient Latin textual error, often wrongly assuming that Jesus in verse 5 speaks of two requirements for being “born *again*” (water + Spirit), rather than two ways of simply being “born” (physical + spiritual).

While the Roman Catholic Church’s official interpretation of this verse has been directly affected by this textual error, Protestant interpretation has also been affected, albeit indirectly. As a carryover from Catholic tradition, many Protestant expositors have assumed that Jesus is speaking of being “born again” in verse 5 rather than being “born.” Thus, even among many Protestants both “water” and “Spirit” are assumed to be the necessary requirements for the second, spiritual birth.

Besides the word “water” in verse 5, another interpretative approach that obscures the two different types of birth in “born of water and Spirit” is to interpret the word “born” as meaning “begotten.”⁸ Roman Catholic Johannine scholar Raymond Brown translates the Greek word for “born” (γεννάω) simply as “born” elsewhere in John, but in John 3 he translates it “begotten” when he feels the birth is in reference to spiritual birth versus physical birth. Not surprisingly, in John 3:5 he offers the following theologically-driven translation for the same Greek word: “begotten of water and spirit.”⁹ This translation is theologically, rather than contextually, driven in its attempt to make Jesus teach two means of new birth rather than two types of birth.

Regardless of textual and translational errors involving γεννηθῆναι and γεννάω, there are several exegetical reasons to support the natural, first-birth interpretation of “water” in John 3:5. In this verse, Jesus is simply referring to two kinds of birth. By doing so, He not only answers Nicodemus’s question from verse 4 but clarifies for him that physical birth is not enough to qualify a person for entrance into God’s kingdom—he or she must also receive a second birth to be spiritually reborn from above.

⁶ H. A. G. Houghton, *Augustine’s Text of John: Patristic Citations and Latin Gospel Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 132, 172.

⁷ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 143.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 142-43; Maarten J. J. Menken, “‘Born of God’ or ‘Begotten by God’? A Translation Problem in the Johannine Writings,” *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 352-68.

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John, I-XII*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 141-42.

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT & FLOW OF THOUGHT

Immediate context is the primary factor in determining the meaning of a word or phrase in any given passage. The physical birth explanation of “water” in verse 5 accounts best for the change in phraseology from “born again” (v. 3) to “born” (vv. 5–6) and the fact that Jesus’ statement in verse 5 (“born of water and Spirit”) occurs between the reference to “womb” in verse 4 and “flesh” in verse 6. Some interpreters object that “water” in verse 5 cannot be a reference to physical birth since such a statement by Jesus would be too simple and obvious to be correct, like saying, “In order to born a second time you must be born the first time.” Free Grace proponent Zane Hodges states:

[It] is like affirming that a man must be born once, before he can be born twice, but the reason for affirming such a trivial idea remains unexplained, as does the reason for affirming it with a term [water] which is both strange and without reasonable parallel. In short, this interpretation may justly be described as purely verbalistic. It accounts for the words as words, but not for the choice of words nor for their real appropriateness in the setting where they appear.¹⁰

Like Hodges, Reformed writer Sam Storms calls the physical birth view of “water” in verse 5 an “interesting but somewhat bizarre interpretation.” He protests: “Would Jesus have wasted words on something so patently self-evident? It seems out of character with the genius of Jesus for him to affirm that a man must be born once before he can be born twice!”¹¹ But the interpretation that views “born of water and Spirit” in verse 5 as a reference to two different kinds of birth (physical and spiritual) fits most naturally with the flow of the conversation.

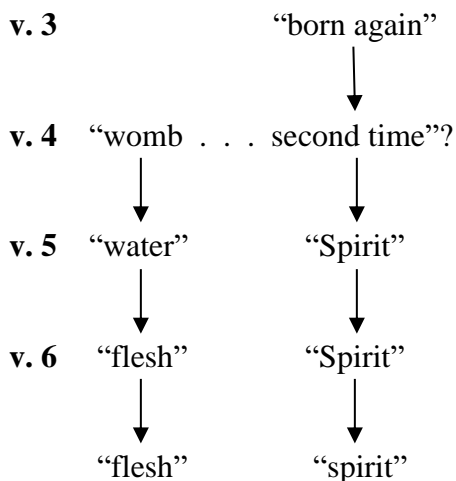


Figure 3. The Flow of Thought in John 3:3–6

¹⁰ Zane C. Hodges, “Problem Passages in the Gospel of John, Part 3: Water and Spirit—John 3:5,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135 (July 1978): 212-13.

¹¹ www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/john-3:5—part-ii (accessed October 30, 2010).

The reason Jesus uses “water” in verse 5 to describe the “womb” birth of verse 4 is simply because He is using a term synonymous with both birth and its physical nature in contrast to the second, spiritual birth. In the immediate context of verses 3–8, Jesus is addressing the “what” of the new birth, not the “how” of the new birth. Verses 3–8 explain the *necessity* and *nature* of the new birth—that it is something spiritual in contrast to physical and that it comes from above by the Holy Spirit. The “how” of the new birth, in terms of the human requirement to obtain it, only comes later, starting in verse 9 with Nicodemus’s question, “How can these things be?” The answer to the question of “how” and the human condition for regeneration is found 7 times in verses 10–18 as simply to “believe.” Regeneration by the Holy Spirit occurs only when the human condition of faith in Christ has been fulfilled. But if “water” in verse 5 refers to the human means to obtain the new birth (such as baptism), then the reference to “water” should also occur somewhere later in the context of verses 9–18; yet it is completely absent.

The figurative interpretation of “water” in verse 5 as a reference to the Word of God also does not fit the context of verses 3–8. Though the truth of God’s Word being the agent used by the Holy Spirit in regeneration is consistent with biblical teaching, it is completely foreign to the context of John 3 and out of place in a discussion where the word “Spirit” is used repeatedly to convey the spiritual nature of the new birth. If, in Jesus’ clarification in John 3:5, He really meant “the Word of God” when He said “water,” the connection surely would have been missed by Nicodemus. The interpretation that views “water” as a reference to God’s Word can only be employed by reading passages such as Ephesians 5:26, James 1:18, and 1 Peter 1:23 back into John 3:5.

PATTERN IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

Nicodemus’s misunderstanding about a second “womb” birth in verse 4 and its clarification and restatement by Jesus as “water” in verse 5 fits a common pattern in John’s Gospel. In John, people routinely misunderstand the spiritual significance of Jesus’ words and works because they lack faith and can see or understand only the physical.¹² In response to such misunderstanding, Jesus often uses repetition (and sometimes rephrasing and reaffirmation) of a previous objection when responding with His clarification.

For example, in John 4:10–14, Jesus mentions “living water” to a woman He encounters at a well in Samaria. The Samaritan woman misinterprets the “living water” to be a reference to the physical water inside the well. But Christ, of course, was referring to something spiritual. In verses 13–14, Jesus answers her: “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.” Note here that in order to address the woman’s misunderstanding Christ repeats the reference to the physical water currently in the well that was before them (“whoever drinks of this water will thirst again”), and He does this *before proceeding to explain* the spiritual water (“the water that I shall give”). Jesus’ response in

¹² D. A. Carson, “Understanding Misunderstanding in the Fourth Gospel,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 33 (1982): 59-91.

3:5 to Nicodemus's misunderstanding from verse 4 follows this same pattern. In saying, "born of water and Spirit," Christ simply restates the physical ("born of water") before the spiritual ("born of water *and Spirit*"). This pattern of reiteration and restatement for the purposes of clarification and expansion consistently characterizes the Gospel of John (4:20–24, 32–34; 6:31–35; 7:27–28; 8:12–14, 32–36, 39–40, 41–42, 48–49; 9:2–3, 40–41; 13:8–10, 36–38; 14:5–6, 8–9; 16:17–22; 18:36–37; 19:10–11).

PUT NO CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH

If "water" in John 3:5 is an expression for physical, "womb" birth, then this further explains the difficulty Nicodemus would have had in his spiritual blindness in seeing his need to be "born *again*" (v. 3). Religious Jews of the first century notoriously trusted in their physical lineage as descendants of Abraham to gain them favor with God. In John 3:3 and 5, Christ spoke to Nicodemus about seeing or entering "the kingdom of God," which was the hope of salvation for every Jew. Like Paul (Phil. 3:3–5) and John the Baptist (Matt. 3:9), the Lord Jesus Christ also warned the Jews that they should not trust in their Abrahamic pedigree as a guarantee of entrance into the kingdom (Matt. 8:10–12).

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF "WATER" AS BIRTH

Many commentators bypass the context of John 3:3–7 in search of an Old Testament or extra-biblical alternative meaning for "water" in 3:5, other than a physical "womb" birth. But the Lord Himself provides the referent and meaning in the immediate context of verses 4–6. Thus, no special meaning for "water" needs to be sought from outside of the passage. While many scholars and commentators deny, even vehemently, that there were any cultural or Old Testament examples among first-century Jews of water referring to physical birth, their denials simply "don't hold water." There is sufficient evidence from Middle Eastern culture around the time of Christ to show that "water" was used metaphorically to describe various concepts associated with the "womb," such as conception, embryonic development, or the birth process. This shows that "water" was a suitable metaphor for one's human nature or physical birth.¹³

Job 38:8–11

8 Or who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth and issued from the womb;
9 When I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band;
10 When I fixed My limit for it, and set bars and doors;
11 When I said, "This far you may come, but no farther, and here your proud waves must stop!"

Job 38:28–30

28 Has the rain a father? Or who has begotten the drops of dew?
29 From whose womb comes the ice? And the frost of heaven, who gives it birth?
30 The waters harden like stone, and the surface of the deep is frozen.

¹³ Pamment, "Short Note on John 3:5," 189-90; Witherington, "The Waters of Birth: John 3.5 and 1 John 5.6–8," 155-60.

Proverbs 5:15–18

15 Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well.

16 Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets?

17 Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you.

18 Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth.

Song of Solomon 4:12–15

12 A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.

13 Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits, fragrant henna with spikenard,

14 spikenard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices—

15 a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.

Hymns Scroll, IQH, Hymn 3 (formerly 25)

[But what is] the spirit of flesh
that it should understand all this,
and that it should comprehend
the great [design of Thy wisdom]?

What is he that is born of woman
in the midst of all Thy terrible [works]?

He is but an edifice of dust,
and a thing kneaded with water,
whose beginning [is sinful iniquity],
and shameful nakedness,
[and a fount of uncleanness],

and over whom a spirit of straying rules.
If he is wicked he shall become [a sign for] ever,
and a wonder to (every) generation,
[and an object of horror to all] flesh.¹⁴

Hymns Scroll, IQH, Hymn 6 (formerly 1)

And yet I, a shape of clay
kneaded in water,
a ground of shame
and a source of pollution,
a melting-pot of wickedness
and an edifice of sin,
a straying and perverted spirit
of no understanding,
fearful of righteous judgments,
what can I say that is not foreknown,
and what can I utter that is not foretold?

¹⁴ Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 2004).

Hymns Scroll, IQH, Hymn 10 (formerly 5)

And yet I, a creature of clay,
 what am I?
 Kneaded with water,
 what is my worth and my might?

Hymns Scroll, IQH, Hymn 24 (formerly 25)

And I, a creature [of clay
 kneaded with water,
 a heap of dust]
 and a heart of stone,
 for what am I reckoned to be worthy of this?

4 Ezra 8.8 (c. A.D. 100–120)

And because You give life to the body which is now fashioned in the womb, and furnish it with members, what You have created is preserved in fire and water, and for nine months the womb that You have fashioned bears Your creation which has been created in it.¹⁵

“WATER” AND “SPIRIT” NOT EQUIVALENT

Several commentators note that in the phrase “out of water and Spirit” (ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος), both “water” (ὕδατος) and “Spirit” (πνεύματος) are governed by the same preposition (ἐξ) since they share the same case and are separated by the conjunction καὶ. They say this effectively unifies the two nouns “water” and “Spirit,” so that Jesus was referring to essentially one subject. This results in the meaning: “spiritual water,” “water-spirit,” or “water, even the Spirit.” However, the syntax of this verse does not prove what is often claimed, namely, that “water” and “Spirit” are equivalent since the same syntactical construction occurs in 1 John 5:6, which says that Christ came “by water and blood” (δι’ ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος). In this verse, both ὕδατος and αἵματος are governed by one preposition (διὰ) separated by the conjunction καί, and they have the same case. But they are clearly not equivalent since John goes on to distinguish them in verse 6, saying, “not only by water, but by water and blood.”¹⁶ For similar Johannine examples, see “in Spirit and in truth” (4:24) and “to the chief priests and Pharisees” (7:45), where “Spirit” and “truth” have separate and distinct meanings, as do “chief priests” and “Pharisees” (cf. John 11:47). These examples show that the nouns “water” and “Spirit” in John 3:5 are not necessarily semantically equated as is often assumed.

KAI IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Some also claim that ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος really means “water, even the Spirit,” where “water” is a metaphor of the Holy Spirit since the Greek word for the conjunction

¹⁵ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature & Testaments* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), 1:542.

¹⁶ First John 5:6 was explained previously in greater detail on pages 170-73.

“and” (καί) can sometimes mean “even.” While admittedly καί can have this ascensive or intensive use in the New Testament, it is also quite rare in John’s Gospel, making it unlikely as the intended meaning in 3:5. The word καί occurs 828 times in the Gospel of John,¹⁷ with fewer than a dozen of these occurrences being *possible* ascensive uses (5:21, 26; 8:17; 9:27; 10:15; 11:22; 12:13; 12:42; 14:9, 12; 21:11). John 12:13, “even the king of Israel,” is the *only* clear-cut ascensive use of καί. However, the reading of καί in 12:13 is also a disputed textual variant, being omitted in the Majority Text but included with brackets in the Nestle-Aland text. This demonstrates that John’s pattern of usage for καί makes the interpretation of “water, even the Spirit” highly unlikely. To insist on the meaning of “water, even the Spirit” on the basis of the conjunction καί occasionally having an ascensive meaning of “even” really amounts to special pleading. “Born of water and Spirit” is the best translation, which describes two distinct births.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion that “born of water and Spirit” refers to two different kinds of birth—physical and spiritual (rather than two means of the second birth)—is best supported by all the evidence, whether contextual, syntactical, cultural, semantical, or parallel biblical teaching. All the evidence pertaining to John 3:5 shows that the new, second, spiritual birth from above is an absolute necessity for someone to enter the kingdom of God. In addition, the evidence clearly shows that this birth from the Holy Spirit is spiritual in nature, in distinction to physical birth, and it is not conditioned on water baptism. Though “water” may be the means of initial, physical birth, the passage shows that it is *not* the means of spiritual birth. This interpretation of John 3:5 harmonizes perfectly with biblical teaching from other passages that eternal salvation is not by works of righteousness, such as baptism, but it is solely by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:4–16; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:5–7).

¹⁷ Based on the Nestle-Aland 27th edition.

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