

Chapter Five

Part Two

As we reach the end of our study, I want to reiterate our working theory. The synoptic gospels were written, composed, and ordered so to bring the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth back down to earth. In the first century of the church, the death and resurrection of Jesus became a very cosmic gospel that lost connection to his teachings and his life of action and humble ministry.

This gospel of Mark was written by a protégé of Peter in Rome. He wrote down a very powerful account that came like a lion and departed in silence. Mark's gospel was based upon a geography of Galilee and Judea. The first was described in detail over the course of three years; the second was the careful description of the last week of Jesus' life. In Mark the disciples do not understand, they are deserters, and far from heroes.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke took this basic structure and added to it. There were infancy stories and many, many parables. Also, each offered a unique feature (Matthew offered the Sermon on the Mount; Luke offered the Samaritan pilgrimage). Yet, for the most part, they kept to the same structure and geography of Mark.

Each of these Gospels can be seen apart, but their great value is when they are seen together (syn-optic/to see together). The synoptics represent a second generation of the church as they were written after the deaths of Peter and Paul. Our working theory is that the synoptics were born of preaching. A story from the life of Jesus was given (a pericope) and then a sermon was delivered. Again, this second generation of the church was not only carrying on the life and teachings of Jesus, they were also grounding his life and teachings in ways that the first generation was losing in their cosmic focus.

And then came John.

In our last part, we explored the way John took stories and recast them with irony. His gospel can be read as a third generation of believers who were seeking to overcome the challenge of orthodoxy—the need for one version, one view, one claim. John's gospel seems to upend this need. He retells the stories of Jesus in a way that demands room for mutual forbearance for those with whom we do not agree. It is as if he wants heterodoxy.

We can see this in the timing of the temple clearing; we can see this in the eucharist; and we can see this especially in the way he introduced characters to upend the right order—the woman at the well. Again, these are just a brief sampling of what would take a vast sea of ink to document. But, ours is not an exhaustive effort; ours is an attempt to gain a better grasp of why the gospels were written and rationale for their structure.

Now we must turn our attention away from the synoptics and toward the particular experience of John. John is unique not only in how he recasts the story and teachings of Jesus, he also unique in that he has a series of letters connected to his gospel and a very specific theory as to the circumstances of his writings. Both of these allow us to understand John's gospel in a way that will shape our devotion. I may not find John to be a proper place for preaching, but I do find his gospel to be the greatest place of devotion.

Below we will look at the first letter of John and then we will explore his personal gift to the gospels, the farewell discourse (chapters John 13-17).

The First Eviction

In the book of Acts, there is a pattern. The apostles preached, people believed, synagogue leaders got mad, the apostles were run out of town. Listen to this "same thing" or pattern as described in Acts.

The same thing occurred in Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them. But the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, the apostles learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country; and there they continued proclaiming the good news.

The "same thing" is the expelling of Christians from a synagogue. Acts records many instances where believers in Jesus were expelled, evicted. The apostles preached; people believed; Jews were upset; the apostles were evicted. This formula played out again and again, for quite some time.

Scholars believe this expulsion is the key not only to reading Acts, but also to understanding John. His letters and his gospel were written in response to believers being evicted, first from the synagogue and then from the church itself.

There is a debate as to what eviction the letters emerged from and what eviction the gospel reflects. In our study we will choose the letters as reflecting the eviction of believers from a

synagogue and the gospel as born of believers being cast out of a congregation of fellow believers.

The rationale for this distinction is this:

- the letters are a question of principle- abiding love;
- the gospel was a unique vision of Jesus.
- the letters were appealing to a shared ethic, one with Jesus and one without Jesus;
- the gospel was a matter of competing versions of Jesus.
- leaving the synagogue was a matter of Jesus as significant or not;
- leaving the church was a matter of how one group looked at Jesus as opposed to another.

Good arguments can be made for the opposite, but suffice it to say, for our purposes here, this is enough to work with.

The history of the church is a long series of schisms. We are not able to stay together, or what John will call, “abide.” There comes a point where believers can no longer abide the beliefs of others. Indeed, you see this tendency in Paul’s letters from the very beginning. Notice the factions Paul lists:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

In one church there were four factions. It would be one thing if Paul mentioned different churches or different regions, but this is one congregation, the church at Corinth. Four different and competing groups. And this is not a harmonious situation; there are quarrels. This is a question of how Christians share a belief in Jesus, how they live it out. In the Acts passage it was an eviction regarding preaching about Jesus at all. It was not a question of quarrel, but expulsion.

Perhaps the most important argument for reading the letters of John as proceeding the gospel is this: the letters are arguing over the atoning power of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the ethical life demanded of a believer. If we were to look over all the letters of Paul, these are the

two governing themes: does Jesus forgive us of our sins; and what sort of life does such forgiveness require?

For the most part, the type of life lived is a reiteration of the moral code of the Torah. While we are freed from the kosher laws and the dietary restrictions, and there is freedom in the Spirit as opposed to the law bringing death, there is an assumption that the believer is now able to fulfill the law of Moses.

If we look at the John's first letter, both of these themes run throughout. The opening lines of the letter have the great declaration of confession:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Notice it is "the message we heard and a fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." No matter what the order of the letters and the gospel of John, this was the great controversy of the followers of Jesus in the synagogues: they believed the death of Jesus was an atoning sacrifice for them. This is the great leap of faith where you no longer saw Jesus as a prophet or a great teacher and saw him as the Messiah, the one who atones for sins and brings a right relationship with God.

In the next piece of the letter, John discusses not only a one-time atonement (the blood), but an ongoing devotion. "If we confess our sins, he . . . will forgive us our sins." Here is the other side of the atonement that would drive a wedge in the synagogue. Jesus died for us and his blood cleanses us; Jesus is resurrected and if we believe and confess, he will continue to forgive us. It is not Torah, the temple, and the Sabbath that will guide the faithful Jew to perfection, it is the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God.

It is hard to imagine how this shift must have been heard in the first century. Perhaps the only corollary we have in the modern era would be the Mormon teachings of Joseph Smith. To turn to people in his community and say, "Behold, a new way of believing and a new testament." Not surprisingly, Mormons were expelled again and again.

Although the comparison with the Mormon experiment of the 19th century is not a clean example of what was happening in the first century synagogue, the results were similar. Expulsion. What is unique in John, scholars believe, is that it was not as fast as it was recorded

in Acts. Even though Luke says that Paul and Barnabas stayed a long time in Iconium, his long time is not a generation.

Paul's longest stay in any church, Corinth, was roughly a year and half. If we take John's letter as written at the end of the first generation, we are looking at 30-35 years. The letters of John can be read as speaking to an expulsion that came after a long time. There is a heartbreak in letters. People should love one another. There is an intimacy: we are brothers and sisters. The theory of John's letter is that it reflects a long period of time where a synagogue did not immediately expel followers of Christians. But then, something happened. Something gave way. I believe the clue is in the ethics the letter calls for.

The Ethic

The claims of atoning sacrifice and Messianic power of the resurrected lordship was most likely enough to have cast Jews believing in Jesus out of their synagogues. If we remember the account of Luke, it was more than enough. Yet, again, the letters of John reveal a potentially different situation. The different situation requires a good deal of theory without direct evidence. Before the difference just a quick word of sameness.

The letters of John have the same theories of atonement that led to direct expulsion from the synagogue that we see in Acts. People who preached about Jesus were asked to leave, often times with violence. The letters of John has this atonement theory, but they also have an ethic, a call to live a particular life that is missing from Acts. In the first generation of the church, the churches would fall apart over an agreed upon ethic, or common code of conduct. But they did this apart from the synagogue. In 1John we have the possibility that this debate was not only happening between believers but in the synagogue as well.

We can see the nature of the ethic in John's repeated direction. The repeated direction is to love and not hate. It is a question of not hating brothers and sisters of common faith.

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

This call for love demands two things: first, it demands a level of intimacy. But it also demands a deep division. For one to say, "I am in the light" suggests there are others who are not.

Where this becomes really important is when our love of God not only demands that we love each other, but help one another.

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

If we consider this shift as the breaking point, then the expulsion begins to take shape. It would be one thing if the synagogue took on the teachings of the apostles about Jesus and his sacrificial death; it would be quite another if there was a demand for a sacrificial life that imitates Jesus on the part of the believers. It would be quite still more if this was a sacrifice for any and all.

We can imagine a moment where the theology and the ethic were too much. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” This is not a question of helping fellow believers or the poor in the synagogue; this is a much bigger ethical demand: how can anyone who sees suffering and can relieve suffering refuse to help? It is not hard to imagine someone saying, “You are looking beyond the synagogue, so far beyond us, perhaps it is time for you to leave.” We can also imagine this departure didn’t happen without great angst and heartache.

The Second Expulsion

There are different ways of looking at the second expulsion, the demand to leave the church. We could explore the “hidden disciples” of John. Characters like Nicodemus paint a profound picture of someone who should have been despised and distrusted but is welcomed by Jesus. Pilate is another. His great question, “what is truth?” is the great question of faith. That John has Pilate ask the question all disciples must hold dear begs a subversive faith. These “hidden disciples” are hidden because they are not part of the twelve or identified as believers, but they ask and act as people of faith should ask and act.

Perhaps the most exhaustive way to explore the second expulsion would be explore the seven signs of the gospel. There is a new way of living in these seven that could easily be seen as controversial. Not only are they predominately unknown stories of Jesus (Cana and the water to wine) but they point to a different kind of community where “joy is complete.” The completion of joy is a theme which recasts the purity codes of the early church in such a way that advocates could easily be seen as a threat.

Our path though will be to look at the farewell discourse. This is section of John’s gospel has many key characteristics that connect it to the use of irony to recast a story of the synoptics, so

it exemplifies the larger gospel energy. It is also the “gift” of John. This is what might be considered his Sermon on the Mount or Samaritan Pilgrimage. Yet, this passage also has a difference that is key to idea that John’s gospel was written in a moment where people in church were telling other believers that they must leave.

As we explore the three parts of the farewell discourse I would encourage you keep the theory of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in mind. The Gospel of John has a great hope. His hope is that we would abide in Jesus and we would abide in mutual love for one another. Yet, there will come a time, when such abiding is no longer possible. And for this reason we must be ready and willing to love those who cast us out.

The Foot Washing (Part One of the Farewell Discourse)

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.” After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

The Farewell discourse begins with the foot washing and the exchange of Peter who is at first unwilling and then too willing. Yet, the beginning of the discourse begins with a key difference from the gathering the synoptics describe around the Passover. This is the night before. For now this difference is not important. But in the second part of the Farewell it is the key to the reading.

The foot washing can be read in a number of ways. Some read this as John’s version of the last supper, a sacrament of humility as it were. Some read this as John’s attempt to show the path forward for the church. We are to be ones who seek victory in meekness, we are the ones who

take the place of the cursed to find our blessing. Yet, I want to say, that this moment in John's gospel is the most powerful example of what Jesus was offering to the world: live your faith in humble service.

The Expulsion

The beauty of this moment does not last. The next part of the farewell discourse is harsh and bitter.

I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me." After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Take a deep breath and consider the pendulum that just swung. We were just in the midst of beauty and the most profound vision of humility one moment; and the, we are watching Jesus expel Judas who is now possessed by Satan. What is more, Jesus is directing him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." One minute we are in the clarity of what we should do; the next we are in the angst of what Judas must do.

Although it is possible that the exchange of Jesus and Judas was not their last encounter. As this was the night before the Passover and last supper, it is possible that Judas went out and came back to the table one last time. In the synoptics Judas is at the table. This is key to the theology of love of enemies, forgiveness, and our common sin. But this is not the picture John paints.

In the second part of the Farewell Discourse, it would appear, Judas was expelled from the twelve. Jesus sends him away. For scholars who need to harmonize the four gospels this presents some great challenges. Yes, it could be that Judas returns the next day to dine with Jesus, but that is not the story John tells. Although, his timeline is not easy to discern, John has

this meal and time together as leading straight to the garden and the betrayal. His “last supper” was the not a Passover meal, but a meal shared the night before.

Such a difference or divergence is not important to those who have no need to harmonize the gospels. Yet, such a difference and divergence should cause us to pause and ask, why? Why did John change the last supper so radically and exclude Judas?

I believe the answer to this lies in the third part of the discourse. Suffice it here to say: some people cannot abide. Not everyone can stay together. Sometimes the darkness overtakes us. “It was night.”

Abide in Me

The remainder of the Farewell discourse (13.31-26) is a long, winding, rambling speech. In some ways it is the epitome of John’s gospel. Gone are the short, obtuse parable (“The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed”) and in its place is

”I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

This is one portion of one pericope. There are arguably ten long pericopes in the farewell discourse. The ten pericopes are:

- Of the new commandment
- Foretelling the denial of Peter
- Of heaven the Way
- Promise of the Holy Spirit
- The True Vine
- The World’s Hatred
- The Work of the Spirit
- Sorrow will turn to Joy
- Peace for the Disciples
- The Prayer for the Disciples

Although each pericope could and should be explored for its unique meaning, below are series of pieces taken from the ten pericopes where they share a common theme. Each points to a theme of separation and union. This is I believe is the reason for Judas being sent away, and the message to the audience of John. We must stay together, abide; we must not seek to stop the forces of departure once set into motion.

Of the new commandment Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Foretelling the denial of Peter Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now?"

Of heaven the Way "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Promise of the Holy Spirit "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.'

The True Vine I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

The World's Hatred "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.

The Work of the Spirit Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Sorrow will turn to Joy "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." Then some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying to us, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They said, "What does he mean by this 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about."

Peace for the Disciples I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father."

The Prayer for the Disciples All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

It is fair to say that in a "farewell discourse" the theme of separation should not come as a surprise. But this is more than a theme. This is the crux of the experience. Those who abide are blessed, but separation is real. Separation even has a blessing. Even more, abiding is subject to change. Abiding in Jesus does not mean he is always there; abiding with each other involves confusion and not knowing the way or how to follow as one.

Reading the whole of the farewell discourse is a wild ride. Jesus speaks simply but his words are so cryptic and obtuse that a sure interpretation begs a deep misunderstanding. Again and again the disciples say, "We don't get it."

A Preliminary Conclusion

The disciples are confused. This is the persistent image in the Gospel of Mark. It is as if John has brought this full circle. Where Mark was looking to ground the cosmic Jesus of Paul, it is as if John is trying to cut loose the very secure definitions of orthodoxy. He upends apple carts

and retells stories with great contradiction to their sources. It is as if he is begging for a heterodoxy, a multitude of meanings without demand for any one in particular. With a heterodoxy differences can abide.

Mostly though he is describing Jesus as someone who is moving, coming and going, arriving and departing and returning. This is not an image of a house built on a deep foundation of stone; this is the image of a tent cast for the night and taken up the next day. And so it is in the most famous line in the Farewell Discourse "In my Father's house are many dwelling places (abodes). He is going ahead of the disciples to pitch a tent for a night. An abode is a place to abide for a time.

Sometimes in our traditions, we fail to see what is built on the sand.