

SOTERIOLOGY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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There is surprisingly little written on the Johannine doctrine of salvation. Probably this is due to the fact that the idea permeates the entire Gospel of John and is expressed in analogies rather than in theological language. There are many factors that make the study of the doctrine of salvation in the Fourth Gospel of exceptional interest and challenge. All agree that the theme of salvation is expressed in analogies—light, life, knowledge, bread, water, truth—rather than in forensic terms as in Paul. Among the problems that emerge in such a study are the questions of (1) why repentance is not urged as a condition of saving faith; (2) whether the incarnation is more important than the cross and resurrection; (3) whether man's salvation is predetermined by the Father; (4) whether the doctrine of salvation in the hypothetical "signs document" (John 2-12) is different from the rest of the Gospel; and (5) what reason is given for the necessity of the Shepherd's dying for the sheep—that is, does this Gospel teach a vicarious atonement?

I. RECENT STUDIES ON THE SUBJECT

R. Bultmann argues that John's Gospel, unlike 1 John, focuses belief on the incarnation, not (as with Paul) on the resurrection (*Theology of the New Testament*). W. G. Kümmel (*The Theology of the New Testament*) points out that in John the theme of the "removal of guilt by Jesus' death does not play a central role," and that the death can be pushed into the background without endangering the concept of Jesus' coming to save men from sin. Robert Fortna sets forth the hypothesis that the Evangelist used a "signs source" (John 2-12): Salvation comes to those who simply believe that Jesus is the Messiah, while for the Evangelist (1, 13-21) salvation involves, in addition, a personal commitment to Jesus as Lord.¹ George Ladd finds that for John salvation consists in eternal life that comes by knowing God and accepting the Truth.² More than seventy years ago, G. B. Stevens taught that in John Jesus' death is not necessarily vicarious but simply the ultimate expression of love for sinners.³

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¹R. Fortna, "From Christology to Soteriology," in *Interpretation* (January, 1973), pp. 31-47.

²G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 254-269.

³G. B. Stevens, *The Theology of The New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1899), pp. 224-233.

II. PROCEDURE

1. *Belief*

First to command attention is the *motif of belief* in John and the absence of mention of repentance in connection with it. This is the more remarkable in view of the emphasis on repentance in the prophets, in Judaism, and in the NT elsewhere. Not only did John the Baptist insist on repentance; he was equally insistent on restitution, on giving evidence of the sincerity of one's repentance, rather than relying on descent from Abraham (Mt. 3:8 f.; cf. John 8:39-47). The words "repent, repentance" occur 55 times in the NT (the noun 33 times and the verb 22 times.) Not once do the terms appear in John's Gospel.

Belief, however, is very prominent in this Gospel: The verb "believe" (*pisteuo*) is found 98 times (compared with a total of 34 occurrences in the Synoptics) and points to the chief concern of the Evangelist (20:31). What is involved in "believe"? How can "belief" in the Johannine sense be distinguished from mere credulity or mere acceptance of a doctrine? "Believing" for John has been identified as involving facts, people, participation "in Christ."⁴

The distinctive Johannine formula is "believe in" (*pisteuein eis*) as in 1:12; 2:23; 3:18; 4:39,41—to mention a few instances. It means to believe "into" Jesus or "into" his name, reminiscent of the Pauline phrase "in Christ." This formula often alternates with "believe that" (*pisteuein hoti*) as in 11:25-27,40,42; 16:30. To believe "into" implies a personal commitment lacking in the more formal "believe that." It "takes the believer out of himself and makes him one with Christ," says Leon Morris. Like James, the Evangelist urges a more vital relationship than mere acceptance of a doctrine *about* someone or something (James 2:18-26).

There are many synonyms for "believe" in John, and they help clarify what faith involves. To "believe" is the same as to "come" (5:40; 6:35,37,44,65; 7:37), to "follow" (8:12), to "enter" (10:9), to "drink" of the water Jesus provides (4:13; cf. 6:35; 7:37), to "accept" (1:12; 5:43). "Seeing" is often the prelude or condition of "believing," hence the oft-repeated invitation, "come and see" (1:39,46; 4:29; 11:34; cf. 20:8,25). Similarly "light" is equivalent to "life" (1:4; 8:12). Belief is also equal to "knowing" the Father and the truth (8:32; 17:3; cf. 1 John 4:16).

In this Gospel, faith or belief involves the

demand that the world surrender the understanding it has had of itself hitherto—that it let the whole structure of its security, which it has erected in presumptuous independence of the Creator, fall to ruins. It involves turning away from the world,... the surrender of all seeming security and every pretense, the willingness to live by the strength of the invisible and uncontrollable.... It means accepting the life that Jesus gives and is (5:19 ff.; 11:25 ff.)—a life that to the world's point of view cannot even be proved to exist.⁵

⁴L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 335.

⁵R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1965) II, p. 75.

For John, therefore, belief in the Father and the Son is the condition for experiencing spiritual life and salvation. This involves not only acceptance of a dogma but a life commitment to Jesus' person and discipline (3:16; 8:31 f.; 20:31). The language and the metaphors are somewhat different from those of Paul, but the ideas are essentially the same. Spiritual life or salvation is a gift of God mediated through Christ, effective as man the recipient responds affirmatively to the divine initiative.

But why is repentance not stressed? Bultmann suggests that John's omission of the terms "repent" and "repentance" is due to an eagerness to avoid a "moralistic misunderstanding"—apparently meaning that to "repent" might be to try to earn one's salvation. But would not the requirement to "believe" be open to the same objection? Perhaps the answer lies in searching for ideas equivalent to repentance in John. Twice Jesus is quoted as saying, "Sin no more" (5:14; 8:11). The woman at the well in Sychar was told that her sin must be acknowledged before the water of life would be available (4:15-18). For John the basic sin is unbelief; therefore, belief involves the turning that "repentance" involves. The "coming" involves repentance or turning, and thus the idea (if not the terminology) is all-pervasive in the Fourth Gospel.

2. *Incarnation-Resurrection*

Where does the *locus* of the idea of salvation lie in the Fourth Gospel—in the incarnation or the death and the resurrection? Stevens, Bultmann, and Kümmel agree that in John the emphasis lies in the incarnation. Others acknowledge that in this Gospel the emphasis is on Jesus' source or origin rather than the manner and significance of his death.⁶ This is seen in the frequent emphasis on Jesus' coming "from above," an allusion to his pre-existence with the Father (1:9; 3:13,31; 7:27-29; 8:42; 16:28; 17:5). According to Bultmann, with Paul the emphasis in salvation lies in the death and resurrection (Rom. 3:21-26; 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:3-8) while with John the most important fact is the incarnation. In this Gospel, he insists, the incarnation and the death are seen as one event; the former brings salvation to believers, and the latter simply marks the completion of the task. Accordingly, John is said to speak less of Jesus' suffering and death and more of his "glorification" under which suffering, death, resurrection and ascension are subsumed.⁷

But also this Gospel's preoccupation with "the hour" ("hour" occurs 26 times, 14 of which refer to the passion) points to Jesus' death and resurrection. Several times we read about the coming of his "hour" (e.g., 2:4; 7:30; 17:1). All of this focuses attention on Jesus' "end" on the cross as the key factor in redemption. It is doubtful, in view of the evidence, if the Johannine theology neglects the cross and resurrection.

⁶R. Brown, *Commentary on The Gospel by John (Anchor Bible)*; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), Vols. 29, 30, *passim*.

⁷R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 52 f.

3. *Determinism in John*

About 21 passages in the Fourth Gospel can be cited as supporting the doctrine of predestination or determinism, passages in which it is implied that salvation is not effected by man's response. These passages include John 5:21 ("the Son gives life to whom he will"); 6:37 ("all that the Father gives me will come to me"); and 6:44 ("no one comes to me unless the Father who has sent me draws him"). It is the Father who gives "the sheep" to Jesus (10:29; cf. 10:26). Likewise the disciples are said to be those who belong to the Father and who are given to the Son by the Father (17:2,6,9,12,24). Unbelief is explained by an appeal to Isaiah 6:10: "They could not believe, for 'he has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart'" (John 12:39 f.).

To what extent, if any, is the lack of emphasis on repentance related to this phenomenon? If determinism is the prevailing thought, then repentance, or meeting other conditions for salvation, would be irrelevant.

Other texts, however (about 25 in number), stress the opposite—that salvation depends also on man's response to the divine initiative. For example, salvation does not come to those who refuse to accept the incarnate Word (1:11). Those who do not receive the revelation forfeit life, while those who do "receive" or "believe" live (3:11-16). It is man's belief as well as God's choice that determines whether one has life or death (3:18, 36). Only those who "drink" find the water of life (4:14). A refusal to "come" or to "believe" means deprivation of "life" (5:40); but those who "hear" and "do good" will have eternal life (5:24,29). Inquirers are urged to "labor for the food that endures to eternal life" (6:27). In John 6:37-45 there are not two predetermined categories of men.⁸

John makes no effort to resolve the apparent contradiction between passages that imply predestination and others that place the responsibility for salvation on man's response. It may be that

the "blind" and the "seeing" ... are not two groups that were already present and demonstrable before the light's coming. Now, and not before, the separation between them takes place in that each one is asked whether he chooses to belong to the one group or the other—whether he is willing to acknowledge his blindness and be freed from it or whether he wants to deny it and persist in it.⁹

God loves the world; he sent his Son to save it. But the proffered salvation is given on the condition that men choose light rather than darkness, that they abandon sins instead of defending them, that they elect life rather than death (John 3:19; 1 John 1:8 f.; John 5:30 f.; 6:35-40).

4. *Christology or Soteriology?*

⁸J. H. Charlesworth, "Dualism," in *New Testament Studies* (July, 1969), pp. 402 ff.

⁹R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, II, p. 24.

It has been argued that in the “signs source” (John 2-12) Christology is more important than soteriology, while in the Johannine redaction of this source it is seen that Christology alone is not enough, that to it must be added soteriology.¹⁰ In other words, to belief in Jesus as the Messiah (2-12) must be added the conviction that the Messiah brings personal salvation from sin as well as eternal life to those who believe. Salvation is life—not so much a quality or a state as it is Jesus himself (11:25; 14:6). Jesus is life incarnate, life personified. But chapters 2-12 (the “signs source”) include as much emphasis on salvation as do the rest of the Gospel. Chapters 3 through 12 all feature some aspect of life and of its availability only through the Son of the Father. Jesus’ person and his work are inseparable. Fortna’s hypothesis is unconvincing.

5. *The Significance of the Cross*

Bultmann is compelled to take passages that speak of a vicarious death as the interpolations of an editor, as “redactional glosses.” Since the cross means glorification, the resurrection “cannot be an event of special significance.”¹¹ He does, however, acknowledge that in 1 John the death of Jesus is seen as a sacrifice (1 John 1:7; 2:2; 3:5; 4:10) and that the Gospel and Epistle came from the same source.

But in the Gospel also there are clear indications that the Evangelist had in mind Jesus’ death as a vicarious sacrifice, consistent with the First Epistle and the NT generally. The designation of Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29; cf. 1:36) is a clear indication of this fact. The “Lamb” is the sacrificial victim whose offering makes possible the removal of the world’s sin. Whether this alludes to the passover lamb or the “lamb” of Isaiah 53:7 is not made specific, but evidence points to the latter. The idea of substitution is made clear also in the Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:15). Even Caiaphas was constrained to say that “Jesus was to die for (*hyper*) the nation” (11:51). Some commentators see in Jesus’ role of a servant in the foot-washing ceremony a pageant of humiliation and substitution as pointing in this direction (Brown). The link between Jesus’ death and the serpent on a pole (3:14) also points to the death rather than the incarnation as the means by which the believer finds salvation and eternal life. The other references to being “lifted up” (8:28; 12:32) clearly point to the death of Jesus as the determining factor in man’s salvation. This focus on Jesus’ death is in marked contrast to those who say that in the Fourth Gospel the crucifixion has no special significance.

III. SUMMARY

Soteriology involves, negatively, what one is saved from, and positively, what he is saved to—what salvation includes.

First, it means deliverance from the “world,” here seen as an alien influence in defiance of God. Of the eight shades of meaning of the term

¹⁰R. Fortna, *art. cit.*, p. 41.

¹¹R. Bultmann, *op. cit.*, II, p. 56.

kosmos, this is the meaning most characteristic of John. Jesus' coming means that shortly "the ruler of this world" will be "cast out" (John 12:31). This "ruler" is to be judged (16:11; cf. 14:30). Salvation means deliverance from this hostile environment in a spiritual rather than in a physical sense. Disciples are taken "out" of the world and yet sent into the world (17:14,18). Therefore salvation involves deliverance from "the world, the flesh, and the devil" by a spiritual emancipation from the devil's thralldom. Still, they are to love the people

in the world and to witness in it to the truth of the Gospel and to their own salvation. They are not simply to escape from an alien environment, as in Gnosticism, and in Christian asceticism; instead they are to remain as witnesses (15:27).¹²

Second, the salvation Jesus brings results in salvation from sin (8:34-36). Sin has no place in the life of the Christian. Those outside of Christ are children of the devil, who sinned from the beginning (8:44). Those who are of God are free not to commit sin (1 John 3:9 f.). Those whose genealogy is of the devil sin like their demonic parent. Those born of God are like their divine Parent and refrain from sin because of this relationship (John 8:34-47; 1 John 2:1; 3:4-10).

Third, salvation is from death. Death in John is more than physical decease; it is spiritual alienation from God, which brings judgment and separation forever. All unbelievers, however, are removed from condemnation and pass "from death to life" (John 5:24). Such have no fear of the final judgment, because the sentence of death no longer is over them and they instantly pass from condemnation to redemption (John 5:21,24,27; 1 John 4:17f.).

Fourth, salvation positively brings one into immediate filial relationship to the Father (John 14:1-3). Ultimately, salvation also includes sharing fully in the love and the "glory" that the Son and the Father have in common (17:22-26). Thus salvation is all-inclusive; it leaves nothing to be desired. It includes participating in the glory, love and fellowship of the Godhead!

It is distinctive with John that eternal life (salvation) is more than something given as a reward in the future; instead, it is seen as beginning when one believes in Jesus and continues in obedience (John 8:31-36). This is termed "realized eschatology" in the sense that eternal life is more than an extension of the present life; rather, it is a new and different quality of life that is peculiar to God and becomes available to the believer as soon as he believes and immediately passes "from death to life" in the Son. Future life is envisioned also (John 5:28 f.; 1 John 3:2).

Salvation in the Gospel of John is less prominent explicitly than is Christology, but it is an important subject nevertheless. On the other hand, soteriology permeates the entire Gospel to a much greater extent than is true of the Synoptics. This theme is seen in the all-pervasive preoccupation with the equivalents of salvation: new birth, water, bread, shepherd, vine, light and life. Again, the emphasis in John is not so

¹²W. G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), pp. 289 f.

much on something that God gives as life through his Son. Rather, the Son is light and life. This basic truth is summed up in one of the most poignant phrases in the NT: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4; cf. 3:36) and the corresponding declaration: "He who has not the Son of God has not life" (1 John 5:12). Both the incarnation and the crucifixion-resurrection are the bases on which the Son is able to provide life—to make life available (incarnation) and effective (resurrection). This divine life, coming from Father and Son, is available to all who believe in Jesus, as Messiah and Savior. His death and resurrection make divine life available to those who "come, see, believe, and obey."