

NOTES

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE GOSPEL OF GRACE IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN

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The Gospel and the Epistles of John use very specialized words to express the interplay of God’s grace and human response. Because John never employs Paul’s terminology of justifying grace through faith, the importance of grace in John’s writings is often overlooked or simply misunderstood. John focuses on the process of movement from grace to grace and activity that leads to eternal life through grace. The purpose of John’s Gospel is to reveal the Only Begotten Son, who is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). John’s message is expressed in terms pregnant with meaning and loaded with theological importance. Cloaked within the layers of meaning of the key terms in the writings attributed to John is the doctrine of grace, which lies at the heart of the Gospel and the Epistles of John. There, at the core of these multiple layers, we find a dynamic gospel of growth from one grace to another, from seeing to believing, from believing to obedient perseverance, from obedience to love, from love to knowledge, from knowledge to unity in Christ, and from union to deification and eternal life.

CHRIST AS THE GIFT

The starting point to understanding John’s use of the term *grace* is the simple statement that “of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace” (John 1:16). Such grace is not an abstract theological principle in the writings of John; rather, it denotes an active and

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dynamic interpersonal relationship between God and his children. John records the Savior's doctrine that "no man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). The Greek verb used here and translated as "to draw," *elko*, could also be translated to mean that the Father "pursues us," "woos us," "seeks to win us over" or "influences us" to come to accept his gift.¹ The Father's gift is the very life and light of Christ, given to us unmerited and frankly undeserved: "In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Like the light of the sun, which radiates its warmth on all persons regardless of their station in life or how good they are, Christ has given life and light to all persons. His life is actually in us. Just as the light of the sun is the ultimate source of all biological life on earth, so the light of Christ is the source of our lives both physically and spiritually. As Christ revealed to the Samaritan woman, "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water" (John 4:10). Christ's life is the gift offered to us by God in unconditional love.

John teaches that Christ's life enters into us when we enter into a loving relationship with Christ. Moreover, this loving relationship is offered to us without any prior conditions. He has already given his life for us regardless of our merit. He has accepted us without any conditions to his love and before any act or decision on our part. As John wrote, "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The life of Christ is a grace, a gift given to us by the Father out of his love for us: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his Only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The focal point to understanding John's view of grace is the recognition that not only has the Father given his Son but also Christ has offered himself, his very life, as a gift to us. There is nothing we must do, indeed nothing we could ever do, that would merit this gift. Indeed, if we tried to earn this gift by our good works, we would forever fall short of meriting the value of Christ's life given for us. In the end we would show only that we have misunderstood that Christ offered himself to us and for us out of love that knows no bounds and imposes no prior conditions.

For John, Christ's gift is not merely a past event that occurred while Christ was on earth as a mortal but is also a gift that continues

to give life and light in the here and now. The fact that Christ himself is the gift given to us is expressed in many ways in the Gospel of John. Christ declared to those who followed him that just as God had given manna to the Hebrews during the Exodus, so the Father had given his Only Begotten Son (see John 6:31–33). Then Christ revealed: "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger" (John 6:35). The same metaphor is expanded and intensified later in the same discourse: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). In this passage, Christ uses a very significant term: *life*. The Greek word translated "life," *zoe*, occurs 36 times in the Gospel of John and another 13 times in the Epistles. John 20:31 tells us that the chief purpose for which the Gospel was written is "that believing ye might have life through his name." *Zoe* always means spiritual life as opposed to biological life in John's writings. Just as food is the source of our biological life (the Greek word for biological life is *psyche*), so Christ has given himself, his very life, or *zoe*, to become the vital principle of our lives. He is to become a part of us—the spiritual power that moves us in the here and now—just as the food we eat is made a part of us and gives us energy to carry on life's activities.²

The Greek verb *didonai*, "to give," is used throughout the Gospel of John to refer to the gracious gifts of the gospel, such as living water "given" by Christ to the Samaritan woman (John 4:10), the bread of life that Jesus "gave" to the multitude (John 6:31), God's word and commandments "given" by Jesus to his disciples (see John 13:34). And again I emphasize, Christ himself is the unmerited gift offered out of sheer love without any prior conditions. Christ *is* the living water, he *is* the bread of life, he *is* the Word of God given as a sheer grace and unmerited gift to save us.³

THE GIFT OF SIGHT

God's wooing of us begins by giving us eyes to see the power of God shown in the mighty miracles or "signs" performed by Christ. As Christ stated to the nobleman whose son was near death, "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe" (John 4:48); however, signs and wonders influence only those who have eyes "to see." John

uses five verbs that are all translated in English “to see” (Greek, *blepin, theasthai, theorein, idein* or *eidon*, and *horan*). The verb “to see” occurs in one of these forms 147 times in the Gospel of John and another 16 times in the Epistles, almost always with the double meaning not only of seeing with mortal eyes but also of seeing the eternal meaning with eyes of faith.⁴ As Christ told his disciples: “[It] is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life” (John 6:40). Thus, when Christ first met his disciples, his simple invitation was, “Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day” (John 1:39). When the first disciples tried to persuade others to follow Christ, their invitation was the same. When the first two disciples told Nathaniel that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, he gave this skeptical reply, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” The simple response of the two disciples was, “Come and see” (John 1:46). It is only with this inner spiritual sight that true faith can develop. As the Baptist testified, “And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God” (John 1:34). Both those who did not believe and those who would become Christ’s disciples saw the same person when “seeing” Christ, but they did not use the same eyes. The disciples received a gift of spiritual sight: whereas those who were in darkness—rejecting God’s gift of light—saw only a man, those who were illuminated by spiritual light “to see” had eyes of faith to recognize Christ as the Son of God.⁵

FAITHFUL BELIEF

Although there are no conditions to God’s love for us, we must accept the gift he has so graciously offered if we hope to have eternal life. “A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven” (John 3:27). We can’t receive unless God gives; however, we must receive the gift of God through believing. Believing is much more than just an intellectual acknowledgment that Jesus is the Christ. The Greek verb “to believe” (*pisteuein*) occurs in one form or another in the Gospel of John 98 times and in the Epistles another 9 times. This verb always means faithfulness as a dynamic act of acceptance that is manifested in behavior. The verb form of “to believe” is the same root in Greek as the word for “faith” (*pisitis*); however, the noun for “faith,” *pistis*, never occurs in either the Gospel or the

Epistles of John. John’s preference for verbs shows his emphasis upon the active and dynamic nature of faithful belief. Such believing means faithfulness to God in the same way that a husband is faithful to his wife. The meaning is one of interpersonal commitment manifested in one’s entire life and activity rather than merely an acceptance of cognitive content. “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life [Greek, *zoe aionios*]: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” (John 3:36). Those who do not believe in this sense are condemned because “light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). John’s record uses a verb form “to do the truth,” which is awkward in English, but it expresses well the meaning of the active and interpersonal sense of “faithful believing”: “He that doeth truth cometh to the light” (John 3:21). One does the truth by being faithful to the loving relationship which saves us. As Raymond Brown commented:

“Thus, *pisteuein* [‘belief in’] 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 of one’s life to him. The commitment is not emotional but involves a willingness to respond to God’s demands as they are presented in and by Jesus (see 1 John 3:23). 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 (see John 6:29), for to have faith implies that one will abide in the word and commands of Jesus (John 8:31; 1 John 5:10).”⁶

ABIDING IN GRACE

By coming “to see” that Christ is the gift from the Father and accepting him through our faithful belief, we enter into a relationship with God the Father and his Only Begotten Son. John taught, however, that once in this relationship we must be careful not to compromise it by acts that are unfaithful or harmful to the relationship. We “abide” in this relationship of love by keeping the commandments: “As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and

abide in his love" (John 15:9–10). The verb "to abide" (Greek, *menein*) is used in one form or another 40 times in the Gospel of John and another 27 times in the Epistles; however, the English translation "to abide" used in the King James Version (although the best English translation) is not adequate to express the intensity of the verb *menein*, which means to endure and actually live an entire life devoted to Christ. This word can be translated variously as "to stay, to remain, to continue, to dwell, to lodge, to sojourn, to last, to endure, to be permanent, to persevere, to be constant, to be steadfast, to abide, to be in close and settled union, or to indwell."⁷ The verb *menein* has the double meaning of physically dwelling with Christ and also of complete unity with or "dwelling in" Christ: "And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us" (1 John 3:24).

Yet the choice to translate this verb *menein* as "to abide" is a good one in English because it shows the connection with another English word, *abode* (Greek, *monen*), or a place of dwelling. For example, Jesus told his disciples, "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23). Similarly, when the disciples were invited to come and "see" Jesus, they "came and saw where [Jesus] dwelt, and abode with him that day" (John 1:39). The Greek word for *abode* is the noun form of the verb *menein*. John teaches that in heaven there are many abodes or mansions (Greek, *monai*), and Jesus has prepared one for us to come and dwell with him (see John 14:2).⁸ If we keep God's commandments, then Christ dwells in us and makes his abode with us.⁹

John's concept of commandments is rooted deeply in the Old Testament covenant.¹⁰ By keeping the commandments, we show our active faithfulness to the New Covenant, or our "covenant love."¹¹ This covenant is also a grace, a gift from God (see John 1:16–17). There are no conditions to entering the covenant relationship graciously offered by God the Father through his Only Begotten Son. One is prepared for this relationship by repentance and baptism as signs of the covenant to keep his commandments (see John 3:3–7). But there are conditions to remaining or abiding in the covenant

relationship. Once in the relationship, we abide in the covenant by keeping the commandments.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the commandments we must keep really boil down to just two: to believe in Christ and to love one another. "And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment" (1 John 3:23; see also John 15:12). Thus, we should not think of the commandments of God as a long laundry list of things we must do to merit eternal life. All of the commandments, such as refraining from stealing, refraining from lying, and so forth, are all contained implicitly in the command to love one another (see Matthew 22:36–40). The commandments illustrate ways that we are to act that demonstrate love for God and for each other. If we believe in Christ truly, then we have this love. If we have this love, then we keep his commandments because they are written on our hearts.

The love demanded by Christ in the writings of John is distinctive. The writings of John use three words that are all translated as "to love" or "beloved": Greek, *agapan*, *agape*, *philein*. The word *love* occurs in one of these forms 56 times in the Gospel of John and another 52 times in the Epistles. Moreover, John prefers the active verb form of love, *agapan* (67 times), to the passive noun, *agape* (28 times). This preference indicates that love is a dynamic activity manifested in one's entire life rather than merely a verbal assent or passing commitment. This form of love is the spontaneous, unmerited, creative love given by the Father to Christ and by Christ to his disciples. It is a divine form of love that transforms both its source and its recipient into divine beings. It is unconditional. It is gracious. It is a gift. It involves the entire heart, might, mind, and strength. It is an intimate sharing of life so meaningful and deep that one's life is actually "in" that of the beloved and the beloved "in" the life of the lover.¹²

The purpose of the three Epistles of John, in particular, is to encourage the Saints to abide in Christ by loving faithfulness. John pleads with the Saints: "Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father" (1 John 2:24). The Saints had received an anointing,

which strengthened their endurance in Christ: “But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you . . . and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him” (1 John 2:27). By this anointing (Greek, *chrism*) the Saints became anointed ones, or messiahs. The Greek root for “anoint” is *christos*, translated from the Hebrew *messiah* or “anointed one.” If we keep the commandments by loving one another, God dwells “in” us and we are made over in God’s very image. His life becomes our life. As he is anointed, so are we. We become one in a very real sense with the Father and his Only Begotten Son.

KNOWING GOD

By abiding in God’s grace by keeping his commandments, we also come “to know” God. The verb “to know” (either in its form *eidenai* or *ginoskein*) appears 141 times in the Gospel of John and another 42 times in the Epistles of John. This form of knowledge, however, is not the impersonal “knowledge about” facts; rather, it always expresses a profound interpersonal relationship. The record attributed to John invariably speaks of personal knowledge of God: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him” (1 John 2:3–5). This passage is hard to translate into English because the Greek language distinguishes types of “knowing” that English does not. English does not have separate words for “knowledge” which distinguish between “interpersonally knowing a person,” and “knowing about facts.” However, this distinction exists in most languages, including Greek (*ginosko* and *episteme*) and Latin (*conoscere* and *sapere*). It is important to keep this distinction in mind in John, because knowing God personally rather than merely knowing about God as an academic exercise is crucial to salvation and exaltation. To know (*ginoskein*) the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, is life eternal (see John 17:3). By knowing God, we begin to live the very kind of divine life that the Father and the Son live—that is, eternal life. To know God means to understand God in a profoundly personal sense because we begin to live the very kind of life that God enjoys, or eternal life.¹³

LOVING UNION

By keeping God’s commandment to love him and each other, and thus coming to know the only true God and his Son, we are invited to become “one” “in” the Father and the Son as they are one in each other. We are invited to share the divine life. Christ prayed that his disciples would “be one, as we are” (John 17:11, 22). Moreover, Christ prayed that the Holy Ghost would come also to dwell “in” the disciples: “Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” (John 14:17). The culmination of John’s view of grace is deification of humans in the sense that we have been invited into a loving reunion to be one in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. By becoming one, Christ “gives” us the same glory that he had with the Father before the world was.¹⁴ By becoming united as one in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, we have “eternal life” and participate in the very kind of existence that God enjoys.¹⁵

This indwelling oneness is not merely the type of unity enjoyed by members of the same football team who have the common purpose of winning a game. The unity spoken of in John’s writings is much more intense and profound. The Father and the Son are said to be “in” each other and are one (John 14:10). The unity is so profound that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost have the same mind in the sense that what one wills, all will as one (see John 6:38). What one knows, all know as one. What one does, all do as one (see John 10:25). The divine persons exist in a unity that includes loving and intimate knowledge of another who is also in one’s self.

It is stunning but true: John teaches that we, mere mortals, can become one in the same sense. Referring to his disciples, Christ prayed to the Father: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. . . . And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:21–23). This incredibly intimate sense of unity leads to perfection of our knowledge of God. We come to know God in the sense that we become just as God is. Thus, just as a son becomes what his father is, so we become sons [and daughters] of God by intimate knowledge. The First Epistle of John expresses

this reality in these words: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:1-3).

The culmination of God's grace received through living faith is thus to be like God. All of the elements of John's view of grace come together here. We come to know God. Such knowledge gives us sight to see God as he truly is. We are recognized as God's children who grow to resemble their parent. We become pure or sanctified, just as our Father is pure and sanctified. We become as God is through grace. Thus, although we forever remain distinct individuals, we become one "in" the Father, Son and Holy Ghost (see John 17:21).

CONCLUSION

In summary, there are no conditions to enter into the saving covenant relationship with God. The gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, is offered freely as a sheer grace. He already loves us without any prior conditions. God bestows the grace of spiritual sight upon us and we are thereby led to believe in Christ. Such belief is an active and loving commitment to keep the commandments. There are thus conditions to abiding in the saving relationship: the condition of keeping the commandments. By keeping the commandments, we come to know the Father and the Son. Such knowledge brings us into union "in" them. Such union glorifies us and makes us pure as they are pure. The culmination of grace in John's writings is deification of Christ's true disciples and complete unity with the Godhead.

NOTES

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3. See P. Borgen, "Bread from Heaven," *SNTS Supp.* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 154-58.

4. See R. T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970); A. Vanhoye, "Notre foi, oeuvre divine, d'apres

le quatrieme evangile," *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* 86 (1964), 337-54; and G. L. Phillips, "Faith and Vision in the Fourth Gospel," in Floyd L. Cross, ed., *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (London: Mowbray, 1957), 83-96.

5. G. R. Osborne, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," in Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989), 245-46.

6. Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 1:513.

7. See Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v., *menein*.

8. See R. Gundry, "In my Father's House are many *Monai* (John 14:2)," *Zeitschrift fur Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 58 (1967), 68-72.

9. See G. Pecorara, "De verbo 'manere' apud Joannem," *Divus Thomas* 40 (1937), 159-71.

10. R. Brown, *John*, 1:505.

11. E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, John Bowden, trans. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1983), 312-21, originally published under the title *Gerechtigheid en liefde: Genade en bevrijding* by Uitgeverij H. Nelissen, Bloemendaal, 1977.

12. C. Spicq, "La charite est amour manifeste," *Revue Biblique* 65 (1958), 358-70.

13. See I. de la Potterie, "Oida et ginoko, les deux modes de la connaissance dans le quatrieme evangile," *Biblica* 40 (1959), 795-825; J. Gaffney, "Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel," *Theological Studies* 26 (1965), 215-41.

14. P. Van Boxtel, "Die praexistente *Doxa* Jesu im Johannesevangelium," *Bijdragen. Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie* 34 (1973), 268-81.

15. See A. Feuillet, "La participation actuelle a la vie divine d'apres le quatrieme evangile," *Studia Evangelica* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1965), 1:295-308.