

The Gospel of John

Part 5

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UUCF

November 13, 2024

Source

- My source material for this series is John Shelby Spong's The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic (2013)
- Last time we covered the story of Nicodemus which *contrasts those with a literal mindset to people who are open to a new consciousness*; Nicodemus, a purely fictitious character, symbolizes the former; Jesus calls us to be the latter
- Nicodemus is described as a Pharisee who is inquisitive about Jesus; he symbolizes all the Jews who were impressed by Jesus, but were ultimately unwilling to let go of Judaism enough to be transformed by Jesus into a higher human consciousness
- Like other religious leaders, Nicodemus is afraid of an uncontrolled God who acts outside the channels that people like to assume God works through; *the birth of a new consciousness is outside the realm of how Nicodemus can see God acting*
- But Nicodemus, who enjoys the security of his own religious night, cannot make sense of this; he is unwilling to let go of Judaism
- Jesus reveals God to be the source of love that comes not to judge human inadequacy, but to open people's eyes to see that they are a part of who and what God is, so that they can enter the eternity of God; Judgment is not a divine act, but a human choice; judgment means to prefer darkness to light, security over freedom, and be blind to what can be

Nicodemus (John 3)

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. **2** This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

5 Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. **6** That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **7** Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

10 Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? **11** Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. **12** If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Nicodemus (John 3)

13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. **14** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. **16** 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. **17** For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. **18** “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. **19** And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. **20** For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. **21** But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

Nicodemus

- John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whosoever shall believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
- The doctrine of “substitutionary atonement” is based on John 3:16 and commonly interpreted as: if you believe Jesus died as a sacrifice for your sins, God will send you to heaven; thus “washed in His blood”, etc. in hymns
- This idea is loved by many Christians because it provides an *easy* way out: Believe Jesus died for your sins and presto! You are forgiven by God and you go straight to heaven! What could be easier? What could be better? And to top it off, all these people you hate are going to hell because they do not believe it! This is reassuring to people fearful of a wrathful God! But is this what Jesus taught? No!
- Jesus did *not* preach about a wrathful God. To believe in substitutionary atonement, one must *ignore everything Jesus taught in his parables*, which is that God is good, loving and forgiving, not wrathful
- Believers in Substitutionary Atonement cling to this one verse at the expense of all else! The focus on this one verse is shown, for example, in the poster held up at NFL games that simply says “John 3:16”
- They assume that those who do not believe Jesus died for their sins are going to hell; but from what Jesus taught, a loving God would never send anyone to hell!

Substitutionary Atonement

- Their faulty interpretation assumes the following:
 - “God gave his Son” means God sent him to die as a sacrifice, not sent him as a messenger of good news
 - “believe in Him” means believe he died for your sins, not believe in what he preached and taught
 - “shall have eternal life” means go to heaven instead of hell (which they also assume is eternal), instead of understanding the phrase “eternal life” as living a fuller, deeper, more enriched life than previously
 - I believe a “normal” interpretation is quite different and better
- A *false* analogy is to see Jesus as a brave firefighter risking his life by running into a burning building to save a child. That is noble!! But ***it is not the least bit applicable here***; it is not applicable because God is not forced to condemn anyone
- In fearing a wrathful God, people are afraid God will punish them and thus welcome salvation from sin; but this is based on the idea that God demands a sacrifice for human sin, and that Jesus is that sacrifice, which is a denigration of God; substitutionary atonement says forgiveness belongs only to those who believe; it requires nothing from a person in terms of becoming more like Jesus
- Notice the words key to the *wrong* interpretation of John 3:16 that ***do not appear*** in it: die, crucifixion, sin, sacrifice, forgiveness, heaven, hell

Substitutionary Atonement

- The doctrine of substitutionary atonement rests on a false (and literal) understanding of the two Genesis creation stories and on one NT verse, namely John 3:16; yet to believe this one verse, one has to ignore the plain meaning of many of Jesus' parables
- I believe John 3:16 can and should be interpreted very differently: God sent Jesus to preach the good news that God loves everyone, and that people who believe in this message will love everyone and in doing so, will gain a greater human consciousness, as Jesus did, that enhances life and motivates one to seek justice and to make the world a better place for all people (not sure what Spong will say, but I know he rejected substitutionary atonement)
- Believers in substitutionary atonement focus so much on John 3:16, and assume the judgment is hell, that they overlook what is written just three verses later
- John 3:19 - "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."
 - ***The condemnation is that people love the darkness; people choose their own condemnation; it is not imposed by God; the condemnation is suffering the natural consequences of one's own choice***
 - Jesus' teaching saves people by showing them the light of God's love; notice the mention of darkness and light in John's "signs" stories and others
 - I wish people would pay attention to John 3:19 and tie it to John 3:16
- The gospel writer sees the crucifixion of Jesus as the moment of his glory, a concept I am still trying to understand, but that has nothing to do with making himself a sacrifice to God to seek forgiveness for human sin
- Spong and I soundly reject the substitutionary atonement

Substitutionary Atonement

- The reality taught by Jesus is that each of us has a choice: we can take the “high road”, which is challenging, but leads to heavenly bliss; this “high road” requires us to discard our prejudices, to see all people as children of God, to seek justice, to be loving, caring people, to work to make the world a better place; God always loves us and wants us to love each other; this is what Jesus taught in his parables, such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan
- The alternative given in the story of Nicodemus, and as described in John 3:18-19, is to ignore these teachings of Jesus; it is to take the “low road” by choosing darkness over light; this allows one to maintain one’s prejudices; for example, this darkness allows the Jewish Synagogue leaders to adhere to the Jewish Holiness Laws which separate Jews from Samaritans and other people
- The condemnation in the story of Nicodemus is for people to choose darkness over light, to ignore the teachings of Jesus, to fail to take the high road, and thus suffer the natural consequences of taking the low road; condemnation is not meted out by God
- The three bullets above summarize the meaning of the story of Nicodemus; Augustine wrongly interjected the doctrine of substitutionary atonement into this; it is the flawed interpretation of John 3:16, and ignores John 3:19; it is analogous to this: instead of taking the challenging, character building high road of transforming oneself into a compassionate, loving, forgiving person, one can simply believe Jesus is a sacrifice for your sins, and one achieves eternal bliss (i.e. goes to heaven) for believing this; this allows one to skip the required transformation; it is like a track coach who tells his runners that if they simply believe in his ability as a coach, they can skip all the training, take it easy, and magically win all their races

The Transition to Greek Interpretation

- While it is false to say that Greek thought had *no* influence, it was not until after the gospels had been completed that *the transition to Greek oriented interpretations, by Gentiles, began to change the meaning of the gospels*
- By the 4th century, Greek thought dominated Christianity just when the creeds were being written and imposed
- “The transition to Greek interpretations reached a new and dominant height by the fourth century, when creeds were being written and the theological images that would dominate classical Christianity were being formed.” (p. 33)
- A century or so ago scholars *mistakenly* thought Hellenistic (Greek) philosophy and Gnostic thought played a key role in the writing of John’s gospel; but more modern scholarship disagrees
- Only in the last few decades (more than 1500 years too late) has the process of recovering the original Jewishness of the NT begun
 - This reassessment began with the 1945 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave at Nag Hammadi, Egypt
- The Synoptic Gospels followed a one year liturgy, but the Gospel of John follows a different Jewish liturgy, namely one that has a three-year schedule (p. 37)
 - The one year liturgy of the Synoptics was for reading the Torah; I think the three year cycle applies to other OT books

Jewish Mysticism

- “The gospel of John was .. tragically distorted,..., by the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers, who used it to formulate their creeds”; they had no understanding of Jewish mysticism
- Greek “dualism” saw God and human life, spiritual things and material things, souls and bodies, as two separate and divided realms
- Jewish mystics saw Jesus “not as an invader from another realm, but as the defining human life, bringing together into oneness the human with the divine”; a role model
- The later religious leaders (of the Nicene Creed era) could not understand the divine as a permeating presence that opened its recipients to a new dimension of consciousness
- This *permeating presence*, as described by John 3:8, is mysterious: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
- Jewish mysticism was an option to the Johannine community when it was expelled from the Jewish Synagogue; *Spong believes this expulsion prompted them to redefine their understanding of Jesus in a mystical way, resulting in an editing of their gospel*
- A doorway into mysticism is the “wisdom literature”; this involves the idea that at any period of time, the people’s understanding of God centered on their *current needs* (God was *comfort* during Egyptian slavery; God was a *guide* during the Exodus; God was *warrior* in the conquest of Canaan, etc.); after the Babylonian Exile, the prophets fell silent and the Torah gained prominence; in defeat, God was harder to discern, and the empty feeling they had led to wisdom literature