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**Culpepper: The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith**

Throughout Culpepper’s section on “The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith,” Culpepper discusses three major challenges the fourth gospel presents the modern church within regards to the pluralistic American culture.

The first challenge concerns the early theological debate about whether or not the gospel of John should be included in the canon of scriptures. Unlike most of the rest of the Bible, John the Gospel was not unanimously accepted by the early church. Some church leaders, such as Gaius, believed that John should not be treated as the Word of God, due to the many inconsistencies with the synoptic gospels. One of the only reasons why John is included in the canon was because of the persuasion of Irenaeus, whose own evidence is called into question.

Even more unsettling is the historical challenge lead by Friedrich Strauss, which proposes that the difference between John than the synoptic gospels is best explained by its relatively late writing back later history into the gospel of Jesus. Strauss speculates that the peculiar differences between the Jesus of the synoptics and the fourth gospel, such as His style of speaking, are the result of the Johannine Community writing back their own issues and struggles into the story of the gospel.

Lastly, Culpepper points out the ethical challenge of John’s possible anti-Jewish themes, lack of support for those “marginalized and oppressed,” and its “theological exclusivism” and how those aspects challenge the modern day church living in a pluralistic world. The issue of anti-Jewish ideology present in John’s gospel was brought to light by the usual negative portrayal of a group labelled by John, “the Jews”. With respect to John’s lack of content on the “marginalized and oppressed,” Rensberger states that John lacks this theme due to its focus on Christology. Then, Culpepper explains the issue many new Asian Christians face in light of John’s “theological exclusivism.”

According to Culpepper, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the writers of the gospel of John did harbor resentment towards the Jews. For example, unlike the synoptics, where Jesus debated a group labelled the pharisees, John parallels these stories with Jesus debating a group labelled “the Jews.” Some speculate that this could be interpreted as a generic stereotype of Jews that the writers of John held. However, others are quick to note that, if read in context, “the Jews” could refer to specific groups of people within the Jewish community.

Perhaps even more unsettling than what was said about the Jews was what wasn’t mentioned: “the marginalized and the oppressed” (REF PENDING). Culpepper points out that even though for many centuries, white males were the main demographics of Christians, times are changing and the shifting demographics has brought to the light the issue of interpretation of the scriptures. When one culture dominates interpretation of the scriptures, there will be bias. Culpepper suggests the best way to combat this bias is to practice “Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” where one actively questions all interpretations for who is benefitting from this perspective and who is not. According to Rensberger, the theme of “liberation” which would help Christians who are marginalized is not present in John because John focuses on its presentation and elevation of Jesus Christ. While discussing oppression may have not been the main goal of John, however, Rensberger points out that the oppressed can still find John useful for their circumstances in a few ways. Robert J. Karris points out in his book *Jesus and the Marginalized in John’s Gospel* that the gospel of John shows how Jesus accepts and loves even the oppressed of society, including the Samaritans, the lame, and more.

In addition, the gospel of John’s “theological exclusivism” is perhaps one of the most pressing issues in regards to Christianity in a pluralistic world. Culpepper describes the situation of Asian Christians who grow up in a culture that dedicates much more time than Western culture on “honoring the dead.” As a result, many Asian Christians who have dead non-Christian relatives struggle with John’s “theological exclusivism,” or the idea that only through Jesus can people be saved from their sins and enter heaven. According to Yagi, a Japanese Christian, the problem with Christianity is that the gospel has two centers: love for each other and faith in Christ. Doing one or the other is not enough, so even though a dead relative might have loved others and seemed to have a good heart, because of the other center of having faith in Jesus, he or she cannot be saved and granted eternal life. Some rectify the issue by interpreting the opening passage of John as an explanation for how Jesus, like other religious leaders, are all derived from the “logos” or universal wisdom of the universe. With that proposal, those who have died without knowing Christ might have come to God through a different manifestation of logos.

Personally, the issue of “theological exclusivism” has always intrigued me, since even as a kid I wondered how it could be fair for people who lived good lives and yet did not profess Jesus Christ to go to Hell. Such explanations, such as the fact that God orchestrated it so that those who never heard of Jesus would be people who even if they were placed in a situation where Christ was known would not believe in him, did not seem satisfactory. In my honest opinion, those explanations didn’t explain why God would allow some to come to Christ and others to not come to Christ. For a while, I thought those explanations were all there was, but Culpepper proved me wrong.

I think Culpepper’s argument against “theological exclusivism” and for a more inclusive interpretation follows well with Culpepper’s sensible “hermeneutics of suspicion.” For me, growing up, even though I didn’t like it and couldn’t understand why, I just accepted the fact that those who did not hear about Jesus or did hear but didn’t believe could not be saved. Using the “hermeneutics of suspicion” however, I can see that my view is biased and benefits Christians and not those who are either completely ignorant or are aware of Jesus but still live a good life. I also believe that are many more westerners like me who fall into the same bias. Sensing this, I assume, Culpepper prefaced arguments for a more pluralistic interpretation of the gospel of John by showing a different perspective than what I am used to hearing: “yellow theology.” This theology tries to bring Christianity under the perspective of the Asian culture where the dead are given more thought and consideration than Western culture. Yagi explains that the twofold center of the gospel creates issues where it can feel wrong when someone does one of the two, but since they did not do both, are subject to eternal damnation.

With this description of the problem of “theological exclusivism” in Asian Christianity, I was made more open to Culpepper’s presentation of the argument that could be made for interpreting the opening of the gospel of John to be an invitation to a more open and inclusive form of Christianity. Culpepper shares an interesting proposition from his father, who was an experienced missionary and professor, that the criteria for being saved is not so clear cut. Hugo H. Culpepper states, “if we follow the popular understanding of salvation as being something objective which we can ‘have’ or ‘not have,’ i.e. as being objective status, we miss the mark” (303). As evidence to this conjecture, the gospel of John opens with saying that Jesus is the incarnation of logos, which can also mean universal wisdom. This opening opens not only the gospel but also the opportunity for there to be other religions who may have received the logos through a different incarnation than Jesus. Culpepper proposes that there is even evidence in how the salvation of Abraham, Moses, and other Biblical figures from the Old Testament came about through logos that could explain how different religious traditions today might be inspired by the same logos in a different way.

At first, this proposal seems to make sense, but I think it falls short of explaining why John would focus on emphasizing the theological exclusivism of Christianity. If God did intend Christianity to not be the only religion that lead to eternal life, why would John the gospel heavily focus on why only Christ can save us from our sin? The proposal, while it seems to fix the problem that “yellow theology” is dealing with, needs to somehow account for these seemingly paradoxical ideas in the same book of John. In my opinion, I believe that the writers did not intend for this interpretation. It is much more obvious and harder to ignore the repeated theme that only Christ can save in the gospel of John than it is to see how the opening of the gospel promotes pluralism. Apart from that issue though, this does seem like a compelling argument for an explanation on how pluralistic Christianity could be reasoned. Since I have struggled with “theological exclusivism,” I find the argument intriguing and hope that it sees some development.