

The Gospel of John: Outlined by Purpose

R. Larry Overstreet

Professor of Communication Arts, Clearwater Christian College
Clearwater, Florida

The gospel of John is one of the most beloved books of the Bible. It is read, studied, analyzed, dissected, and commented upon as much as any other New Testament book. Yet, the student of the book is confronted and often confused by the great diversity of outlines which are proposed to set forth its argument. This is all the more disconcerting considering that John himself gives a declaration of the purpose of his gospel: "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31). Scholars often agree that these verses are John's declarative statement concerning the purpose of his gospel.¹ These same scholars, however, disagree concerning what this declarative statement actually means when it comes to understanding the overall direction of the gospel itself.

¹However, as Carson recognizes, "In recent years discussions of the purpose of John's gospel have largely ignored John 20:30-31. The purpose of the fourth gospel has been delineated largely on premises other and broader than this explicit contribution to the theme within the canonical text." D.A. Carson, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (Winter 1987): 639. These discussions are generally by those within the critical community, and one goal of Carson's article is to bring scholars back to a serious consideration of John 20:31.

Exactly what John means by these words, which on the surface seem to be self-evident, and how they should direct understanding of his gospel is a matter of some difficulty. Nevertheless, to comprehend John's stated purpose and to apply that purpose to an understanding of the argument of the gospel results in an outline of the gospel which is both cogent and enlightening. Several significant points must be examined in 20:30-31 before they can be applied to an outline of the gospel.

The Textual Problem

One of the significant difficulties with 20:31 is the textual problem which exists in the verse. This has important ramifications in that scholars often use one reading or the other to support their view concerning the overall purpose of the book.

The difficulty concerns the ὅτι clause in 20:31. Is it followed by the aorist subjunctive πιστεύσητε or by the present subjunctive πιστεύητε ? The aorist has the support of K^c , A, C, D, K, L, W, 0100 et al., while the present has the support of $\text{p}^{66\text{vid}}$, K^* , B, G , 0250 et al. Metzger correctly observes that both readings "have notable early support."² The United Bible Societies text is not definitive concerning the reading; and therefore, "considered it preferable to represent both readings by enclosing σ within square brackets."³

Some scholars, however, express more confidence identifying the correct reading. Hendriksen, for example, claims the "best attested reading has 'that you may continue to believe' (πιστεύητε)."⁴ Lenski, in contrast, affirms that "the accredited

²Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 256.

³Ibid.

⁴William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 34.

reading is ἵνα πιστεύσητε the aorist subjunctive"⁵

A reason why some writers regard this textual problem as significant relates to the overall purpose of the gospel. Many would argue that the aorist subjunctive would imply that John's purpose is evangelistic--to win the lost to saving faith in Christ. The present subjunctive, on the other hand, would indicate that John's purpose is instructive--to deepen faith among believers.⁶

In contrast to this either-or approach, other authors argue that the tense of the verb is not the crucial element. Kümmel, for instance, states that the certainty of one variant over the other cannot be definitely decided. "Nevertheless it can be shown that in John and 1 John such ἵνα-clauses, independent of the tense, have as their aim instruction of members of the community (cf. John 5:34; 13:19; 1 John 1:4; 5:13). On this basis it is extremely unlikely that the author of John is thinking primarily of non-Christians for whom he will illumine faith in Christ."⁷ He argues, therefore, that John's gospel is written for Christians to build them up in the faith.

Silva has an extended footnote in his article which deals with this complex situation.

Discussions of this textual problem have failed to do what would appear to be the first order of business, namely, isolate

⁵R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 7.

⁶Several scholars draw this distinction between the aorist and the present as related to the purpose of John's gospel. See, for example, Merrill C. Tenney, *The Gospel of John in The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, General Editor, Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 197; Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 256. Lenski, on the other hand, argues for the aorist as being the correct reading and still advocates that the gospel is written for believers. Comparing John 19:35 and 20:31, he writes, "We must thus translate these punctiliar aorists, 'in order that you may definitely believe.' The present subjunctive would be simpler . . . , but the assured aorist is, after all, more positive and effective." Lenski, *St. John's Gospel*, 7.

⁷Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction of the New Testament*, trans. by Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 229.

those instances of ἵνα plus the subjunctive of πιστεύω *where there is no textual variation*. The relevant passages are 1:7; 6:30; 9:36; 11:15, 42; 14:29. In all of these cases the aorist is used, and so we may infer that the aorist is the characteristic Johannine usage. We can hardly deduce from this fact, however, that the aorist should be preferred in those cases where we do encounter textual variation, for scribes would naturally have tended to assimilate an original present to the characteristic Johannine usage. We should note that there are at least three passages where the original reading is almost certainly the present (17:21 . . . ; 19:35; 6:29; probably 13:19 belongs here too . . .). The aorist perhaps made better sense to the scribes in these passages. In any case, there is no comparable evidence to support the view that an original aorist was changed to a present in spite of many opportunities to do so. With some doubts, I would choose the present at 20:31.⁸

Silva continues by noting that the apparent distinction between John's use of the aorist subjunctive for unbelievers and the present subjunctive for believers does not hold up under closer examination. He observes that,

we should note 6:29 (contrast v. 30) and 17:21, where the present is more clearly attested even though Jesus is speaking to unbelievers. On the other hand, at least one passage where the aorist is uncontested (11:15) makes plain that John's usage is not determined by the question whether faith is or is not present.⁹

⁸Moisés Silva, "Approaching the Fourth Gospel," *Criswell Theological Review* 31 (Fall 1988): 21, n. 12.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 22. Carson agrees that "whatever one concludes the outcome of the text-critical question to be, the meaning of the verse is not determined by the tense of this one verb. Apart from other considerations, the most that can be deduced from the aorist itself is a reference to the simple act of believing; from the present, some kind of durative or iterative belief, and even

What conclusion can be reached concerning the textual problem? The present subjunctive seems to have the greater support, both in its external breadth and in its internal consistency. However, John's general purpose is not solely delineated by that verb.

John's Stated Purpose

A wide array of scholars accept John 20:30-31 as the declared purpose of John's gospel.¹⁰ Since John directly declared

that can be questioned." Carson, "Purpose," 640. Elsewhere, Carson argues further "that, with very high probability, the $\iota\upsilon\alpha$ -clause must on syntactical grounds be rendered 'that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus.' That means that the fundamental question being addressed by the evangelist is not 'Who is Jesus?' which might be asked by either Christians or non-Christians, if with slightly different emphases; but 'Who is the Messiah?' If that is understood as an identity question as it must be, *Christians would not ask it because they already knew the answer*. Those who would ask it would be unconverted Jews, along with proselytes and God-fearers, for the category 'Messiah' was important to them, and the concern to identify him would be of great interest." D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 662.

¹⁰A sampling of comments that this is John's declared purpose include the following scholars of widely different theological views: "The aim proposed by the author of John is expressed by him in the conclusion (20:30f)" Kümmel, *Introduction*, 228; "Of course, the key statement in the gospel is the closing words" Robert A. Spivey and S. Moody Smith, Jr., *Anatomy of the New Testament* (London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1970), 406; Sanders quotes 20:30-31 and then writes, "John states his purpose in writing." J.N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, edited by B.A. Mastin (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 52; "The avowed purpose of the evangelist in composing his gospel is clearly stated in xx. 30, 31." R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 28; "The purpose of John's gospel is clearly stated in 20:31." Lenski, *Interpretation*, 23; "the purpose of the gospel is stated in John 20:30f . . ." F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), 12; "He announces the purpose of his

his reason for writing, interpreters will do well to give it appropriate consideration.¹¹ This applies not only to introductory comments, but understanding the argument of the gospel itself.

Specific Purpose Identified

Specifically, "John's intention is stated with perfect clarity . . . (20:31). The total thesis of the gospel is belief in the Son who came from the Father."¹² John's determination to write with this purpose in view is seen in his use of the perfect tense verb, γέγραπται, "a tense which perhaps indicates that what he has written stands. There is an air of permanence about it as in

book (v. 31) as he directly addresses the reader . . ." Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. by G.R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 698; referring specifically to 20:30-31, Westcott says John had "a specific purpose . . ." B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: John Murray, 1908), xl; "In any case due consideration ought to be given to the fact that John tells us in so many words why he wrote . . . (20:31)." Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. F.F. Bruce, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 39.

¹¹Morgan takes a self-contradictory position. He writes that "Everyone will agree that when a writer interprets his own book, we must give attention to his interpretation if we are to hope to understand his book." He then specifically refers to 20:30-31. Having said that, he goes on to argue that the thesis of the book is not to be found in 20:30-31 after all, but in 1:1, 14, 18. See G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to John* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), 10, 13, 17-25.

¹²Tenney, *Gospel of John*, p. 11. Guthrie correctly notes that "the author himself furnishes his readers with so specific a statement of his purpose that this must form the starting place for any discussion. Yet it has not always done so. Many scholars are more intrigued with John's beginning than with his conclusion, as a result of which John xx. 30 is passed by with less attention, and theories of purpose are proposed which are entirely out of harmony with this statement." Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction: The Gospel and Acts* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1965), 246.

Pilate's 'What I have written I have written' (19:22).¹³ The perfect tense also exhibits this specific permanence about it in John 19:30 when Jesus said, "τετέλεσται," "It is finished."

When the preceding context of John 20 is considered, the importance of John's purpose statement in 20:30-31 becomes all the more noteworthy. Thomas had missed seeing the resurrected Christ, and in response to the other disciples' testimony concerning him, Thomas responded, "Unless I shall see in his hand the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (20:25). Eight days later Jesus appeared again to the disciples, with Thomas being present. The Lord confronted Thomas, and closed his words with "be not unbelieving, but believing" (20:27). Thomas responded with the words which bring the gospel of John to one of its high crescendos concerning the person of Christ, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). Jesus then spoke the words which John used to lead into his stated purpose section, "Because you have seen me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (20:29).

Now John brings his readers to his stated purpose.

Since the previous incident involved the greatest sign of all, the resurrection, and magnified the necessity for faith, and contained a towering testimony to the person of Christ, the way was prepared for this summary statement. More signs were wrought, but no more are needed for faith. This has been amply demonstrated by the multitudes who have come to the place of faith through reading the gospel according to John.¹⁴

Verse 31 indicates that John has a twofold goal in presenting the life of Christ, and an ultimate purpose for that

¹³Morris, *John*, 855.

¹⁴Everett F. Harrison, *John: The Gospel of Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 121.

twofold goal. John first wants his readers to believe "that Jesus is the Christ." His aim in this statement is to demonstrate "that Jesus, who is declared by that human name to be truly and historically man, is at once *the Christ*, in whom all types and prophecies were fulfilled" ¹⁵ John next desires that his readers believe that Jesus is "also *the Son of God*, who is, in virtue of that divine being, equally near to all *the children of God*" ¹⁶

The ultimate purpose John has in view for believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, is that his readers "may experience eternal life through faith in the one portrayed. Faith in him is the essential condition. Throughout his gospel John shows the development of faith and unbelief in relation to him." ¹⁷

Specific Purpose Supported

The stress on "belief" being the major theme of the gospel is supported by the use of the verb πιστεύω in the gospel. Blum correctly observes that the "key word in the gospel of John is 'believe' (πιστεύω), which occurs 98 times. The Greek noun "faith" (πίστις) does not occur The Greek verb πιστεύω is frequently used in the present tense and in participial forms. Apparently John wanted to stress an active, continuous, and vital trust in Jesus." ¹⁸

Tenney agrees that πιστεύω is used 98 times in John's gospel, and he traces that use through the entire gospel in a

¹⁵Westcott, *St. John*, xl.

¹⁶Ibid. Filson adds that the gospel of John "tells who Jesus is. He is 'the Christ, the Son of God,' the central figure of all history and the effective agent of God's work for men. . . ." Floyd V. Filson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Layman's Bible Commentary (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 9.

¹⁷D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospels and Acts* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 216.

¹⁸Edwin A. Blum, "John," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. New Testament ed. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 270.

superb discussion showing how John develops his book consistently around that theme.¹⁹ John uses the verb in seven of its possible eight constructions found in the New Testament. On the basis of this wide use, Tenney correctly concludes, "Whatever the author selected for incorporation in his presentation of Jesus was designed to evoke faith on the part of the reader."²⁰ Furthermore, "belief, then, is the key to the realization of the truth that John has endeavored to convey."²¹

Not all writers, however, recognize the obvious nature of John's purpose statement or the impact of his use of πιστεύω. Whitelaw, for example, argues that although the general purpose may be seen in 20:30-31, the specific purpose of the gospel hinges on the expression of the "glory" of Christ.²² Yet nothing in the gospel itself serves to show that 'glory' is its main theme and purpose, and the word δόξα is only used 19 times, one-fifth as much as the verb πιστεύω. In spite of such efforts, the clear declaration of John himself must remain the guiding force in understanding the purpose of his book.

Specific Purpose Applied

A controversy arises as to how John intended his book to be applied to his readers. Did he write with an evangelistic appeal or with the goal of edification? This question was introduced in the discussion of the textual problem, but must be dealt with in more detail at this juncture.

Some writers hold that John had an evangelistic purpose in his writing. Morris refers to 20:31 as indicating an evangelistic purpose to John's gospel and says no reason exists for ignoring

¹⁹Merrill C. Tenney, "Topics from the Gospel of John: The Growth of Belief," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (October-December 1975): 343-57.

²⁰Ibid., 345.

²¹Ibid.

²²Thomas Whitelaw. *The Gospel of St. John: An Exposition Exegetical and Homiletical* (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth Book Co., reprint, n.d.), lv-lvii.

that stated reason. "John says plainly that he is out to show Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And he does this not in order to give his readers some interesting new information but in order that he may bring them to a place of faith and accordingly to new life in Christ's name."²³ The main difficulty with arguing that John's gospel has as its primary purpose the evangelism of unbelievers is that the book "looks much too complicated to be viewed as an evangelistic document: unbelievers could not possibly understand the numerous subtle nuances in the text."²⁴

Other writers view John's gospel from the perspective that his intention is to edify believers. Hendriksen states that John "writes in order to confirm believers in the doctrine which they had received."²⁵ Zahn builds a significant argument to support this position from the people addressed in 19:35 and 20:31.

²³Morris, *John*, 39-40. Elsewhere Morris writes that "Faith is fundamental, and John longs to see men believe. He has not tried to write an impartial history. He is avowedly out to secure converts," in *John*, 856. Morris quotes C.H. Dodd favorably concerning this matter that John "is thinking in the first place, not so much of Christians who need a deeper theology, as of non-Christians who are concerned about eternal life and the way to it, and may be ready to follow the Christian way if this is presented to them in terms that are intelligibly related to their previous religious interests and experience." C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 9; quoted by Morris, *John*, 40, n. 100. Other writers who recognize this evangelistic thrust include Robert M. Grant, *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), 152 and Blum, "John," p. 268. Carson also argues specifically for an evangelistic appeal to the gospel and suggests that the most plausible audience which John had in view is that of non-Christian Jews, as well as proselytes and God-fearers. Carson, "Purpose," 645-46, and *The Gospel According to John*, 87-95.

²⁴Silva, "Approaching the Fourth Gospel," 21.

²⁵Hendriksen, *John*, 34. Filson expands on this thought as he argues that it "seems most likely that the gospel was written to help Christians. It had as its purpose the strengthening, deepening, and clarifying of their faith in Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of God' (20:31). It gave a mature statement of the gospel, aimed at helping believers to a fuller and truer faith." Filson, *John*, 18.

The occurrence of a "you" addressed to the readers in the midst of a narrative in which there is nothing else to indicate that it is of the nature of a communication, and to which no dedication is prefixed giving it a certain resemblance to a letter, is something unheard of in literature It is *the language of the preacher addressing his congregation*. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that in both passages the purpose of the written narrative is declared to be the upbuilding of the religious life of the readers From this it follows at once that the readers . . . were Christians, with whom he was acquainted and who knew him.²⁶

In spite of the forceful arguments of those who hold the view that the gospel is written for believers, the fact remains that 20:31 does indeed imply an evangelistic emphasis. How, then, can the problem be resolved?

In contrast to this "either-or" approach stands the "both-and" approach. This means that John's purpose was inclusive enough that both believers and unbelievers are encompassed in his aim. Bruce, for example, states that "we are not shut up to two mutually exclusive alternatives, regardless of the [textual] reading opted: John's record has the power to awaken new faith and to revive faith already awakened."²⁷ He says further,

The purpose of the gospel is stated in John 20:30f: it is to bring the readers to faith, or to confirm them in faith. Faith involves both believing *in* and believing *that*: believing in Jesus is emphasized as the way of life throughout the gospel,

²⁶Theodore Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregels Publications, 1953; reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1977), 207.

²⁷Bruce, *John*, 395.

but believing in him implies certain things about him--that he is "the Christ, the Son of God."²⁸

The testimony of church history verifies this dual approach. Multitudes of unbelievers have been led to a saving knowledge of Christ through the gospel of John. Tract societies have distributed it across the world in successful evangelistic endeavors. Its presentations of the salvation of such diverse individuals as Nicodemus in chapter 3 to the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, along with its obvious interactions with the Jews throughout its development, and its openness to the Greeks in chapter 12 all add together to the evangelistic emphasis.

On the other hand, the high level of theology found in the gospel, the direct instruction of the Lord to his disciples (especially John 13-16), and our Lord's high priestly prayer for his own (John 17) all combine to have an obvious goal of edification in the book.

John's purpose, then, is for his readers to believe. He writes to constrain the non-Christian to believe in Christ and receive salvation. He also writes to deepen faith among those who are already Christians. In both cases, John's purpose is to have his readers believe. John 20:31 is the key verse of the book.

Whatever the author selected for incorporation in his presentation of Jesus was designed to evoke faith on the part of the reader. From this declaration alone one might deduce

²⁸Ibid., 12. This dual aspect of faith is also observed by Silva, "most writers appear to assume (consciously or not) a polarization between initial and continuing faith, but such a conception can hardly find support in the text of the gospel itself." Silva, "Approaching the Fourth Gospel," 22. Even Bultmann stated that "So far as the Evangelist is concerned, it is irrelevant whether the possible readers are already 'Christians' or are not yet such; for to him the faith of 'Christians' is not a conviction that is present once for all, but it must perpetually make sure of itself anew, and therefore must continually hear the word anew." Bultmann, *John*, 698-699.

that the gospel was intended to be an evangelistic appeal and a constant encouragement to faith.²⁹

Secondary Purposes Recognized

Various secondary purposes for the gospel of John are discussed by scholars. Some of these include the ideas that John wrote supplemental information to the Synoptics, that he wrote to supersede the Synoptics, that he wrote as a polemic against unbelieving Jews, or against Gnosticism, or against Docetism, that he wrote to present a Hellenized Christianity, or to correct a cult of John the Baptist, or to correct the Church's eschatology, or to oppose Christian teachers who gave too little emphasis to the Sacraments or too much emphasis to the Sacraments, or that he wrote to preserve a tradition suitable for liturgical use.³⁰

Quite possibly John had some of these laments in his mind as he wrote. Nothing is inherently impossible with using subordinate themes. John may have thought to supplement the Synoptics, or may have wanted to refute efforts of doctrine which were extant in his time. These subordinate purposes, however, remain only that, subordinate. The book's argument and flow of thought does not depend on them. Rather, the stress of the book reflects John's stated purpose in 20:30-31, to have his readers *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and to experience eternal life as a result of believing in his name.

²⁹Tenney, "Topics from the Gospel of John," 345. See also Sanders, *St. John*, 52-53; and Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 225-226. Carson argues that even such passages as John 14-17 do fit into a strictly evangelistic purpose of the gospel. *The Gospel According to John*, 92. However, his attempts do not seem as satisfactory as the view that recognizes that John's purpose is broader than merely evangelistic.

³⁰For discussion of these various hypothesis, see Morris, *John*, 35-38; and Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 248-257.

The Gospel Outlined

Since the purpose of John is identified in 20:30-31, one may expect that an outline of the book would reflect his theme of belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Such is not the case, however, since the structure of any written document can be examined from various perspectives.

Goal of an Outline

An outline demonstrates the framework by which a communicator develops the ideas of his message. "It makes the relationship between thoughts clear, and it becomes the guide that the speaker [or writer] follows in structuring major and supporting ideas."³¹ In developing an outline of any document, the goal is to show the progression of the author's thought and how that progression explicates the theme idea. "Accordingly, a good outline does not merely describe contents but reveals the progression of the argument."³²

Scholars who have studied the gospel of John are in virtual agreement on certain divisions in the book. Nearly all agree that 1:1-8 is a "prologue," and that chapter 21 is an "epilogue." Once again, general agreement recognizes a major break in the book at the end of chapter 12.

Significant areas where disagreement exists include the section from 1:19-51, and chapters 18-20. The problem with the first section is whether 1:19-51 is also part of the prologue, or whether the main argument of the book begins at 1:19. The problem with chapters 18-20 is whether or not these form a third major section in the book, or whether they should be taken as a unit with chapters 13-17. How these sections are viewed is

³¹Michael S. Hanna and James W. Gibson, *Public Speaking for Personal Success* 3rd ed. (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1992), 161.

³²Silva, "Approaching the Fourth Gospel," 26.

somewhat dictated by the approach to the gospel as a whole. Tenney has a helpful discussion of this subject.

The structure of this gospel may be analyzed from various viewpoints. The author uses at least five different approaches to his subject: (1) a central theme, which cannot be traced through the progress of the narrative from beginning to end; (2) the phases of the ministry of Jesus, which are marked by growing tension between him and his opponents; (3) a chronological sequence, which is not perfectly defined but follows a general scheme, organized loosely around the feasts of the Jewish year; (4) a geographic allocation of activity between Galilee, where the first sign was performed, and Jerusalem, where the final action took place; and (5) the personal interviews that delineate so plainly Jesus' interest in different types of personality and his method of dealing with them.³³

Approach to the Gospel's Outline

While each of the five approaches to outlining John's gospel has certain strengths, John's stated purpose in 20:30-31 continues to dictate that the book is best understood by tracing its central theme through its development. This theme can be

³³Tenney, *The Gospel of John*, 12. Tenney then proceeds to give a description of each of these approaches in pages 12-17 of his commentary. Interestingly, Tenney gives a brief outline of the gospel according to his position that the theme of John is "belief" (p. 13), but then develops his commentary around the "phases of ministry" approach, which he outlines in more detail (pages 24-26). In another volume, printed in the year of Tenney's death, he and his reviser set forth a more detailed outline and discussion of John's gospel following the theme of belief. Their material is very helpful in tracing the argument of John from beginning to end. Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*. Revised by Walter M. Dunnell (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 192-197.

traced easily through the book, and is the most logical approach to take. "In seeking to understand any book it is always wise to consider it in the light of the author's declared purpose The structure and contents of this gospel agree with the author's declared purpose."³⁴

Using the key verse of the book (20:31), and the key word of the book (πιστεύω), enables a clear topic sentence to emerge: John proposes to have his readers believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son.³⁵ Assuming this is John's intended purpose, and that he does indeed organize his book around that purpose, then even the "prologue" and "epilogue" take on added significance. The "prologue" is not intended to introduce the book only, but rather sets forth the character of Jesus Christ, God's Son, in whom the reader is to believe. The "epilogue" is not intended only to be a concluding section which rounds out the design of the book, but rather it sets forth the commission of Jesus Christ, God's Son, in whom the reader is to believe. The following outline reflects the stated purpose of the author, and is presented as a means of furthering each reader's understanding of this beloved New Testament book.

Outline of the Gospel

- I. Believe in Who Jesus Christ, God's Son, Is (1:1-18).
 - A. God's Son is revealed (1:1-4).

³⁴Hiebert, *Introduction*, 214.

³⁵Leitch correctly observes concerning 20:31, "If this is his purpose we should expect that he would build his gospel around this 'topic sentence' and this he surely does. He does this not by writing an essay nor by constructing an argument but by setting before us those manifestations of Christ's glory which elicited faith in the first disciples, including himself, and which in turn might well elicit faith in us. All that he writes is toward belief . . ." Addison H. Leitch, *A Reader's Introduction of the New Testament* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1971), 35-36.

- B. God's Son is rejected (1:5-11).
- C. God's Son is received (1:12-18).

II. Believe in What Jesus Christ, God's Son, Publicly Reveals (1:19-12:50).

A. Preparation for the public revealing (1:19-2:11).

- 1. By John the Baptist (1:19-34).
- 2. By the disciples (1:35-51).
- 3. By the first sign (2:1-11).

Transition: From family life to public life (2:12).

B. Declarations during the public revealing (2:13-12:50).

- 1. To whom the declarations are made (2:13-4:54).
 - a. To those in Judea (2:13-3:36).
 - b. To those in Samaria (4:1-42).
 - c. To those in Galilee (4:43-54).
- 2. Controversy because the declarations are made (5:1-6:71).
 - a. Controversy in Jerusalem (5:1-47).
 - b. Controversy in Galilee (6:1-71).
- 3. Conflict because the declarations are made (7:1-12:50).
 - a. Beginning of the conflict (7:1-8:59).
 - 1) Before the feast of tabernacles (7:1-13).
 - 2) During the feast of tabernacles (7:14-36).
 - 3) Concluding the feast of tabernacles (7:37-52).
 - 4) After the feast of tabernacles (8:1-59).

b. Continuation of the conflict (9:1-10:42).

- 1) In the healing of the blind man (9:1-41).
- 2) In the Good Shepherd discourse (10:1-21).
- 3) In the Jews' final rejection (10:22-42).

c. Climax of the conflict (11:1-12:50).

- 1) At Bethany (11:1-12:11).
- 2) At Jerusalem (12:12-50).

III. Believe in What Jesus Christ, God's Son, Privately Reveals (13:1-17:26).

A. Reveals the ministry of his love (13:1-38).

1. The necessity of humility in self-sacrificing love (13:1-20).
2. The necessity of faithfulness in self-sacrificing love (13:21-30).
3. The necessity of obedience in self-sacrificing love (13:31-38).

B. Reveals the message in his words (14:1-16:33).

1. His words of comfort (14:1-31).
2. His words of admonition (15:1-27).
3. His words of prediction (16:1-33).

C. Reveals the intercession of his great prayer (17:1-26).

1. Jesus prays for himself (17:1-5).
2. Jesus prays for his disciples (17:6-19).
3. Jesus prays for all believers (17:20-26).

IV. Believe in what Jesus Christ, God's Son, Redemptively Accomplishes (18:1-20:31).

- A. Redemption's work begins with his arrest (18:1-12).
 - B. Redemption's work continues with his trials (18:13-19:16).
 - 1. The Jewish trials (18:13-27).
 - 2. The Roman trials (18:28-19:16).
 - C. Redemption's work culminates with his crucifixion (19:17-37).
 - D. Redemption's work continues with his burial (19:38-42).
 - E. Redemption's work climaxes with his resurrection (10:1-29).
- Transition: Purpose of the Gospel (20:30-31).

- V. Believe in What Jesus Christ, God's Son, Commissions (21:1-25).
 - A. His commission is for disciples in general (21:1-14).
 - B. His commission is for disciples in particular (21:15-23).
 - C. His commission is authenticated for all (21:24-25).