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The Evangelist John's Conception of the Church as delineated in his Gospel

Mr. Giesbrecht, who is Librarian and Assistant Professor of English at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, takes up the suggestion that, despite the absence of the word ekklesia, the Gospel of John has important things to say about the doctrine of the church.

Introduction

Robert H. Strachan has asserted that the profound peace and joy, even exultation, which Jesus felt and manifested during his farewell moments with his chosen disciples, despite the dark prospect of death upon a cross, were rooted in the assurance of victory in his redemptive mission and in a strong 'sense of having brought his church into being.'¹ Strachan's comment finds firm support in the tone and thrust of specific utterances in the farewell discourse and high priestly prayer of Jesus as these are recorded for us in chapters 14 through 17 of John's Gospel. A sensitive reading of these chapters leaves little doubt that Jesus' farewell words conveyed to his disciples a note of unquenchable joy and bursting confidence about the future of his earthly ministry. And this note of compelling joy and confident hope was clearly linked to Jesus' inner assurance that he had in fact completed the 'work' (the primary mission) which the Father had assigned to him (Jn. 17:4), and that his revelation of the Father to a small group of disciples had been accepted by them in the obedience of faith (17:6-8). In an important sense, then, Jesus' high priestly prayer for these first disciples (the apostolic church in embryo, as it were) and for other disciples yet to come (the church of the future)—that they might come to possess and manifest the joy and sense of unity which he already possessed in present experience, and might come to perceive the divine glory which the Father had granted him even before the creation of the

¹ Robert H. Strachan, *The Fourth Gospel: Its Significance and Environment*. Third Edition. (London, 1958 [reprint]), 303.

world—constituted the grand climax of his message to the disciples as it is reported in the Gospel of John.²

That the church—conceived as a believing community founded by Jesus as the primary means whereby his own mission to and in the world was to be continued after his departure—was clearly present to the mind of the evangelist John³ as he shaped his Gospel, seems undeniable. Indeed Oscar Cullmann goes so far as to say that ‘no writing of the New Testament emphasizes so much as the Fourth Gospel the continuation of the work of Christ incarnate in the church.’⁴ And yet it is equally apparent that this Gospel rarely speaks of the church in *explicit terms*,⁵ a phenomenon which has variously impressed and often puzzled biblical scholars in their endeavours to make theological sense of this ‘maverick Gospel’. Across the centuries, as Raymond E. Brown reminds us, John’s Gospel ‘has provided the seedbed for . . . exotic forms of individualistic pietism and quietism’⁶ and for strangely divergent conceptions of both Jesus and the church. Very few recent commentators, however, have been so radical or so dogmatic as to assert, as did Rudolf Bultmann, that ‘no specifically ecclesiological interest can be detected’ in the Fourth Gospel.⁷

Rudolf Schnackenburg’s view of the matter is a thoroughly positive one that, I believe, points us in the right direction. He remarks, in *The Church in the New Testament*, as follows:

The idea of the church is . . . deeply rooted in Johannine thought and indeed is indispensable to this independent, magnificently devised theology, with its concentration on the essential.⁸

² See particularly John 17:13–24.

³ I put aside the question of the actual authorship of the Fourth Gospel, and simply posit the apostle John as its original author, *for purposes of this study*. The entire question of Johannine authorship may be usefully pursued in Raymond E. Brown’s book, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York, 1979) as well as in Robert Kysar’s *The Fourth Evangelist: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis, 1975).

⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church: Studies in Early Christian History and Theology* (London, 1956), 79.

⁵ The Greek word ‘ecclesia’, which is usually translated as ‘church’ in modern versions of the New Testament, does not appear in John’s Gospel or in the Letters of John. Ernest F. Scott remarks in his *The Fourth Gospel: Its Purpose and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1908), that John ‘never once mentions the church by name, but his whole mind is penetrated with the thought of it’ (p. 105).

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York, 1979), 163.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*. Volume II (New York, 1955), 91.

⁸ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament* (Freiburg and New York, 1965), 104. See also p. 15 of Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle* (Philadelphia, 1976).

Schnackenburg properly calls our attention to both the *pervasiveness*, at a deeper level of interpretation, and the *essentiality* to the theology of this Gospel as a whole, of John's particular understanding and delineation of the church. While it must be allowed that the overarching theme of the Fourth Gospel, the sheet anchor of its theology, is the progressive revelation of the inherent glory and unique authority of Jesus, as Son of Man and Son of God,⁹ and that its author was very much intent upon showing how *individuals* responded to this remarkable revelation, a careful reading of this Gospel also reveals that its author has interpreted the words and deeds of Jesus, and structured his overall account of them, in ways which suggest integral connections between Jesus' ministry and the new *community* (church) that was to constitute a continuing and vital witness to his message of grace and truth. Donald Guthrie states much the same view in his recent book, *New Testament Theology*. 'Lack of specific reference to an "ekklesia" [in John's Gospel]' he asserts, 'is counterbalanced by many allusions which become significant in the light of the early Christian experience.'¹⁰ And it is only against the background of this kind of overall perspective that such comments as Alf Corell's, 'that we shall find John's idea of the church in his conception of the life of Jesus'¹¹ or Oscar Cullmann's, that 'this interest [in the notion of the church] is stronger in the writer of the Fourth Gospel than in any other evangelist,'¹² become pertinent and meaningful.

A. Jesus as the True Founder and Head of the New Community of Faith (Church):

I wish to argue, in this first major section of my paper, that the evangelist John seeks, as part of a more comprehensive purpose in his Gospel, to present Jesus as the one eminently qualified and deserving Founder and Leader of that community of faith which

⁹ This overarching theme of the Gospel of John is aptly summarized by Alf Corell, in his book *Consummatum Est: Eschatology and Church in the Gospel of St. John* (London, 1958), in these words: 'Thus we find the author's conception of Jesus' work on earth portrayed as a consistent whole. Everything is seen, estimated, and explained in relation to his death and resurrection. These events are inseparable acts in the drama of redemption. Together they form that drama: and it is the central theme of the Gospel—the "lifting-up" or "exaltation" of Jesus, towards which all his words and actions tend' (p. 12).

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, 1981), 721.

¹¹ Alf Corell, *op. cit.*, 13.

¹² Oscar Cullmann, *The Johannine Circle* (Philadelphia, 1976), 15.

is to become known, in time, as the church of Christ worldwide. The evangelist pursues this subordinate theme in a variety of ways but among them are two principal means: (1). the development of certain implied contrasts between Jesus and other important leaders in Israel's past (founding fathers, if you like), and (2). the skilful presentation of certain symbolic actions and assertions in the public ministry of Jesus.

*1. Implied contrasts between Jesus and
certain significant leaders in Israel's past*

Jesus is clearly contrasted in this Gospel with Moses, to cite a first and major instance of such implied contrasts. The Prologue to this Gospel (1:17 in particular) juxtaposes Moses and Jesus in a manner which intimates not only the important difference between the covenants of law and grace in themselves but also the crucial difference, in function and influence, between Moses and Jesus as 'initiators' of these covenants. Thus set within the Prologue, which is itself concerned with the utter uniqueness and superiority of Jesus, among men generally (1:7-10) and within the narrower context of his own people (Israel) and their history (1:11), this implicit comparison with Moses (so widely acclaimed as, in a very important sense, the founding father of Israel as a 'people of God') carries special import and effect.

This implicit contrast with Moses emerges repeatedly, if sometimes only for a brief moment, in the fervent debates of Jesus with his opponents among the Jews which the evangelist John has recounted in his Gospel (cf. especially chapters 6 and 7, 8:1-11, and chapter 9). John's accounts suggest only too clearly that Jesus made it a point to contrast his own person and mission with the teachings and achievements of Moses since the Jews 'set their hopes' so much on him (cf. 5:45). Jesus did not hesitate to suggest to these religious leaders that he had come to replace Moses, the great leader (ruler) who had so fully, and uncritically, captured their imagination and allegiance. He did not hesitate to suggest that he had come to perfectly fulfil, through his own mission and vision for Israel (and the world) all that Moses had ever achieved, taught, promised, and hoped for in his long and often thankless ministry to Israel (5:45-47). The obedient respect and honour which were so loyally accorded to Moses by the Jews generally (cf. 9:28-29), could not begin to match the obedience, love, and honour which he (Jesus) deserved in virtue of (a). his utterly unique relationship to God, their Father, (b). his unexcelled teaching of divine truth (cf. 7:14-19), and (c). his saving ministry among, and to them (cf. 7:14-52).

This was the truth which Jesus sought to convey to the Jewish leaders, and to the Jewish people generally, time and time again. And Jesus' knowing transgression of certain regulations (as, for example, his breaking of the Sabbath law and his refusal to condemn a woman 'caught in adultery') which were so assiduously ascribed to Moses and so stoutly esteemed by the religious leaders, may also be more readily understood, I suggest, within the above perspective. Jesus was himself, John's Gospel intimates, a Ruler who was in every way superior to Moses and could take unusual liberties with laws traditionally prescribed for Israel by Moses and the 'fathers' (cf. 7:18-24; 18:1-11; also 9:13-29) and do so without any compunction or blame since he truly comprehended the deeper spiritual intention of these laws and perfectly fulfilled that intention in his own person and ministry.¹³

In this Gospel Jesus is also contrasted, in some important sense, with the patriarchal father Abraham (cf. 8:33-59). It is clear that with respect to this implied contrast also, a unique role for Jesus, as Leader of a new people of faith, is being outlined by the evangelist John. If Abraham is the other heroic leader who, alongside Moses, figured so prominently in the religious thought and life of Israel, then he too must be reduced to size, as it were, and correctly stationed (theologically) in respect to the person and mission of Jesus. It may not be necessary to define the precise sort of misunderstanding which accounts for the Jews' inadequate conception of Abraham's role in, and contribution to their own religious history. What, however, is necessary and entirely pertinent for our purpose here, is to emphasize that the evangelist has endeavoured, by means of a skilful management of these implicit contrasts, to define more accurately (cf. 8:53-58) the true role of Jesus in, and for the spiritual history of Israel as 'God's own people'. And this role implies (among other things) his unique character, and his eminent fitness to serve as Founder and Ruler of a renewed 'people of God'.

Moses and Abraham may be properly esteemed, the evangelist suggests in his Gospel, as prophetic leaders (pioneers) whom God has used in order to introduce important 'revelations' and significant traditions within the religious pilgrimage of Israel—

¹³ Severino Pancaro, in a very extensive study, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity* (Leiden, 1975), deals with the superiority of Jesus to Moses but only very briefly *so along my particular line of thought*. His study illumines much more fully, however, the question of the growing hostility of official Judaism to the Johannine church in view of its decisive loyalty to Jesus rather than to Moses.

Moses, the transmission of God's revealed Law (the Torah), and Abraham, the transmission of God's promises of redemption—but they are at best only forerunners, and their 'revelations' are only foreshadowings of that promised Ruler who is Jesus and of that promised redemption which is uniquely centred in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Implicit contrasts between Jesus and other great prophets in Israel's past are not as immediately apparent in John's Gospel as contrasts between him and Moses or Abraham, but one or two suggestions of the former may also be noted here. In chapter 12, the evangelist interrupts his narrative account in order to quote two passages from the prophet Isaiah (53:1; 6:10) as a personal and interpretive commentary upon the wide-spread unbelief of the Jews with respect to Jesus' own message. Before returning to his narrative John remarks upon Isaiah's anticipatory vision of 'Jesus' glory' (12:41). His remark is an intriguing one and while its primary intent is to associate Old Testament prophecy and comment with present fulfilment, at a very specific level of meaning, a second implication of it may very well be that, while the superiority of Jesus to all prophetic leaders (in Israel's history) was clearly *demonstrated*, it was not *recognized*, even by the most knowledgeable among Israel's religious teachers! In chapter 7 the response to, and interpretation of Jesus' public ministry gradually focuses upon the central question whether 'this man Jesus' is indeed the promised Prophet (7:40–52). Here also, the obvious thrust of the entire passage has to do with the issue of Messianic prediction and fulfilment but beneath this surface thrust lies the further suggestion of Jesus' utter uniqueness among the prophets of Israel, a uniqueness which, in its own way, qualifies him for the spiritual Headship of a new 'people of God', namely, the church of Christ.

The ministry and testimony of John the Baptist, of course, bear very directly upon the question of Jesus' identity. The Baptist's testimony serves primarily to proclaim the full deity and divine Saviourhood of Jesus as unmistakable realities (cf. 1:29–34) but here also, the utter and unique fitness of 'this man Jesus' to become the Founder and Head of a new community of faith is clearly hinted at. John the Baptist is represented by the evangelist as a contemporary prophet who emphasizes his own inferiority and subordination to Jesus at every turn (cf. 1:21–27), as a prophet who is overjoyed to see many disciples responding to Jesus in preference to himself (3:25–30), and as a prophet who has profoundly understood the truth that this Jesus has literally 'come from heaven' and therefore stands quite 'above all' others

(3:31). Here among them stands a Man who, of all men, alone is qualified to be the Founder and Lord of a renewed 'people of God'—this is the thrust of John the Baptist's testimony to Jesus, at a secondary level of meaning at any rate.

2. *Certain symbolic actions and assertions
in the public ministry of Jesus*

The evangelist John seeks to assert the singular fitness of this Jesus to be the Founder and Head of a new 'faith community' by way also of certain public actions and assertions, on Jesus' part, which, as he manages them, bear symbolic significance. I do not have reference here to those miraculous deeds only in terms of which this Gospel is largely structured and developed (especially in its first half). About these (latter) actions—framed as they are by discourses and narrative or interpretive comments which point up their symbolic meaning (as signs) more precisely—one can only reiterate what Randolph V. Tasker has said (in his comments upon John 10:22–42):

God's creative and redemptive power is present in all he says and does—not in what he says apart from what he does, nor in what he does apart from what he says, but in his words which interpret his deeds and in his deeds which corroborate his words.¹⁴

These public actions (miracles) and their accompanying discourses (where these appear), especially when viewed together, clearly assert Jesus' suitability in every respect and his perfect right to be designated true Ruler of this new community of 'God's people'. To offer only one illustration, in the discourse following Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (6:5–58), He associates his own miraculous deed with the miracle wrought by Moses, whereby the people of Israel were fed 'manna in the desert' (6:32–33), and interprets it against the background of that miracle in a way that clearly conveys the assurance of his own moral superiority to Moses. In his account of the entire episode, John means to tell his readers, I suggest, that if the miracles wrought by the hand of Moses were sufficient to authenticate his (Moses') divinely approved leadership in his own time, then the miracles wrought by Jesus more than adequately confirmed His singular fitness, and full right, to be the divine Leader of a 'renewed people of God' for his miracles were not only demonstrations of divine power at work among people but were deeds also which sugges-

¹⁴ Randolph V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries] (Grand Rapids, MI, 1960), 135.

ted, at a deeper level of significance, the very embodiment of God's power and grace within his person and ministry (6:32-40).

It is upon certain other (generally non-miraculous) actions of Jesus, however, that I wish to dwell particularly at this juncture. There are certain public actions of Jesus which, while themselves non-miraculous in nature, also suggest—by virtue of John's distinctive manner of positioning and interpreting them within the larger context of his Gospel—that he (John) was eager to assert the entire appropriateness and fitness of Jesus to function as the divine Initiator and Head of a new community of faith. These were very deliberate actions, on Jesus' part, which thrust him upon centre stage in the public life of the nation and which evoked questions—unavoidably so—about his identity and role as a religious leader among his people.

One of these public actions—the evangelist has placed it very near the beginning of his Gospel—involves Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (2:13-22). Jesus' action, just prior to the onset of the Jewish Passover, was bound to attract much attention to himself, of which fact he was undoubtedly very much aware. That Jesus was motivated in this action by burning 'zeal' for his 'Father's house'—zeal for the rekindling of a true spirit of worship in his 'Father's house'—and needed to give expression to his justified anger and zeal, seems obvious enough (cf. 2:17). But that Jesus was also endeavouring to suggest something of the deeper truth that the Jewish Temple was only a foreshadowing of the temple of his own body and of the coming church which he would establish through his death and resurrection, is clearly intimated by the wider context.¹⁵ Jesus' enigmatic response to the brusque questioning of the Jews concerning his authority to commit such an outrageous act, when it is studied in the light of other pertinent passages in this Gospel (as, for instance, Jesus' authoritative and unparalleled teaching in the precincts of the Temple Court—7:14-32; 10:22-39; and 18:20-21—and his remarks to the Samaritan woman in Sychar about a time 'when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth'—4:21-24), gradually evokes a deeper level of significance: here is a teacher of Israel who, more truly than any other, possesses both the authority and the qualifications to become Israel's true Leader and Ruler in respect to all aspects of their spiritual life, both now and in the future.

Arthur G. Hebert, drawing upon pertinent data from all four

¹⁵ See R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple: The Church in the New Testament* (London, 1969), especially pp. 76-84, for some further elaboration of this thought.

Gospels and reflecting upon the Old Testament passages (Je. 7 and Is. 56:7) which Jesus actually cited as he went about cleansing the Temple, states this position even more strongly:

It is not hard to put these . . . texts together, and see in the cleansing of the Temple a symbolic action which sums up His mission to Israel, following His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the previous day. He has come to do what Malachi said: to cleanse the people of God from the evil that prevents it from being a people fit for Him; to cast out those who profane the religion of Israel and make the sanctuary itself a brigand's den; and to gather Israel together round its Messiah.¹⁶

Similarly, Anthony T. Hanson, in his discussion of this same action of Jesus, asserts that 'once one has admitted a conscious reference to Christ as the place where God is to be found and worshipped, it is difficult not to take the next step of contending that John is thinking of the church as that place.'¹⁷ That one can go so far as to suggest, as does Aileen Guilding, that 'the dominant theme of the *entire section* (chapters 1-4) is that this Temple and its worship, that of the Jewish church, is to be superseded by a new and universal worship, that of the Christian church,'¹⁸ seems doubtful, however, in my view.

Another such public action of Jesus to which one may refer is his own selection of the appropriate moment, in the course of a major Jewish Feast, to present himself to his people as a divine Teacher with a message which is highly significant, even crucial, for their spiritual well-being and future destiny. The one dramatic instance of this kind of action in John's Gospel is Jesus' very deliberate appearance in the Temple court halfway through the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles and his emphatic declaration to all that he has come directly from the Father:

I am not here on my own, but He who has sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and He sent me (Jn. 7:28-29).

This public declaration of Jesus is surrounded, in the evangelist's account of the episode as such, by questions on every hand about Jesus' true identity and role as a teacher in Israel. Furthermore, in this same account John has Jesus stand forth on the '*last and*

¹⁶ Arthur G. Hebert, *The Throne of David: A Study of the Fulfilment of the Old Testament in Jesus Christ and His Church* (London, 1941), 218.

¹⁷ Anthony T. Hanson, *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London, 1980), 117.

¹⁸ Aileen Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship: a Study of the Relation of St. John's Gospel to the Ancient Jewish Lectionary System* (London, 1960), 171.

greatest day of the Feast' and offer himself, with great earnestness and fervency, as the source of 'living water' for all who will believe in him (cf. 7:37-44). The precise moment in time of this offer is a most propitious one since it brings the 'drink offering' ritual prescribed for the climax of this particular Feast into close and meaningful juxtaposition with the offer (offering) of himself. Once again it becomes evidence that the evangelist John wishes to set Jesus forth, by means of lingering symbolism incorporated into this account, as the true Leader (Head) who *alone* is qualified and able to renew his people spiritually and to guide them into the glorious future promised to them by the ancient prophets of Israel.

B. Certain distinguishing features and experiences of the New Community (Church) of Jesus:

The evangelist also touches, both directly and indirectly, in his Gospel on certain identifying features and experiences of this new community of Jesus in order that he might give more distinct form and shape to his conception of it. The second major section of my paper will be devoted to a consideration of these distinguishing features and experiences.

The evangelist John identifies this new community as one, *first of all, which consists of believers who are able to worship God, the Father, truly and deeply*. It is a community of believers that can worship God as he wishes and deserves to be worshipped—'in spirit and in truth' (cf. 4:23-24). Only his own coming in the flesh, as Jesus implies in his personal conversation with the Samaritan woman at Sychar, has made this kind of profounder worship possible among believers, and this anywhere and everywhere (4:21-24). Arthur G. Hebert has summarized the incisive thrust of Jesus' wider teaching on this matter (here and elsewhere in this Gospel) in the following words:

'Spirit' is 'heavenly substance,' as contrasted with 'flesh,' human nature or substance, which in comparison profits nothing: God is Spirit, and Spirit is heavenly, real, eternal, true. If man is thus to worship 'in Spirit,' clearly either Heaven must come down to Earth, or that which is human and earthly must ascend to Heaven; or both these things must happen . . .

If man is to worship the Father 'in truth,' it must be through Jesus the Messiah, who is the truth (14:6).¹⁹

It is this kind of deeply inward and fervent worship of God,

¹⁹ Arthur G. Hebert, *op. cit.*, 226.

necessarily and intimately linked to genuine faith in, and to constant communion with Jesus, which marks the new community which Jesus is creating and which sets it apart from Jewish synagogue and Temple, in which the worship of God had largely degenerated into a ritualistic and rigidly moralistic affair. The religious leaders among the Jews, whatever their ostensible claims to sincere religious piety and to a true knowledge of God might have been, were very much concerned, the Fourth Gospel tells us, about receiving 'praise from one another' (5:44; cf. 12:43). They made very little 'effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God' (5:44), and were far too anxious lest 'the Romans come and take away both their place and their nation' (11:48). In sharp contrast to the kind of religious community represented by such religious leaders stands Jesus' own community (the church), a community of believers who are not concerned about religious 'place' or religious 'nation' or about a punctilious adherence to all sorts of regulations received from the 'fathers,' but who are concerned, first and foremost, about loving and glorifying God in all truth and by his Spirit.

We may add that Jesus' teaching concerning the future activity of the promised Holy Spirit is intended, among other things, to assure the disciples that this Spirit of truth (14:17), by dwelling within them, will render a truer experience with and profounder worship of God (and Jesus) continually possible (cf. 14:16-21 and 16:12-15).

This community instituted by Jesus is, *secondly*, one which is characterized by a dynamic spirit of love, love to God and love to man. The evangelist allows this feature of the new community of Jesus to stand forth in sharp relief in several passages of his Gospel. It emerges very simply and directly in Jesus' explicit command to the disciples: 'As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another' (13:34-35). This exhortation to love is reiterated by Jesus on a number of occasions but is given more precise and significant links with the issues of obedience to God, service to man, and a deepening friendship with him, in Jesus' discourse on the 'vine and the branches' (15:1-17). Here the quality of love, as a distinguishing trait of this new community of faith, is granted very sharp focus: love among members of this community is more than pious sentiment or pious aspiration and desire, and certainly more than the sort of human affection which can bind people of the 'world' together in a variety of natural relationships (cf. 15:19). It is a love which sets aside personal ambitions and advantages if these hamper the spiritual progress of another,

indeed which (if need be) even 'lays down life for friends' (15:13). It is a love which brings one into a profounder friendship (acquaintanceship) with Jesus; and it is a love which, in virtue of that special friendship, brings forth 'much fruit' (15:4-8) in the workaday world of humankind.

Something of the higher reaches of this kind of love, of its quiet but unmistakable power and potential glory, is conveyed in John's account of Mary's anointing of Jesus in the home of Lazarus (12:1-8). Mary's kind of love, as here portrayed, clearly arises from a growing appreciation for the person and true mission of Jesus and casts all objections and obstacles aside in its single-minded devotion to the One who alone deserves such love. This account affords a fleeting glimpse of the kind of love which Jesus called for, and which he anticipated among his disciples when he spoke of love as a characteristic mark of his new community. Of course, Jesus' kindly conversation with Peter beside the Sea of Tiberius (21:15-23), and gracious reinstatement of him as a disciple who is to have a significant (pastoral) role in the new community initiated by himself, constitutes another vivid illustration of the wondrous possibilities and promise of this kind of love.

In John's Gospel a *third characteristic feature of this new community is plainly identified: the possession of a profound inner joy*. It is a feature which is closely associated with love, peace, and prayer (in certain contexts) but it is always clearly distinguished from these other aspects with respect to its own distinctive quality. Perhaps the most impressive instance of it appears in Jesus' promise to his disciples of the 'full measure of his joy within them,' in the very middle of his high priestly prayer (cf. 17:13)—a prayer which was uttered, as we know, in the full hearing and for the strong encouragement of his chosen disciples. But Jesus had extended the same promise to his disciples earlier (during the farewell discourse), particularly in conjunction with their anticipated experience of praying to the Father in Jesus' name (16:23-24).

A profound sense of peace, such as the ordinary world of people (whether they be religious or not) cannot itself offer nor experience, constitutes a fourth identifying feature of this new community of faith (cf. 14:27 and 16:33). It is the very possession and display of such deeply-anchored peace and joy which, we are told by Jesus, shall enable his new community to stand against the hostility of the 'world' with great boldness (14:27b) and to overcome the evil which constantly issues from it (16:1-11).

A fifth distinguishing feature of the life of this new community

initiated by Jesus is the profound sense and experience of unity. The high priestly prayer of Jesus envisions this developing spirit of unity within his coming 'community of faith' with great excitement and hope; indeed it emerges as something of a climax in all of his high expectations for this coming community. This kind of spiritual unity, Jesus clearly implies in his prayer, is entirely dependent upon and closely intertwined with an abiding relationship between his community and himself: 'I in them and you (Father) in me' (17:23; also 17:21-26). It is obviously this fundamental basis for the new community's experience of unity which lies behind Frederick Godet's pointed remark, set down in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*:

That which separates them, is that which they have of themselves in views and will; that which unites them is that which they have of Christ in them.²⁰

Dan O. Via, Jr. gives concise expression to a very similar understanding of the basis of the church's experience of spiritual unity, in the following words:

But Jesus gives his glory—*what he really is*—to the church (17:22); in fact, it is this which constitutes the unity of the church.²¹

It is the deep reciprocal love and constant intimacy of spirit which obtain between Jesus and his Father, not some idealized notion (fashioned by the mind of man) of absolute equality and uniformity in the external form or function of the church, which are to constitute the pattern and inspiration for unity within this community of Jesus (17:20-26). If one reflects, even briefly, upon the fact that Jesus and his Father, while sharing the same (divine) nature and the same purposes with respect to the historical experience and redemption of man, are nevertheless not identical with regard to their respective roles in the actual realization of these purposes (a truth clearly indicated in the Prologue of this Gospel), one realizes that organizational unity and rigid theological unity in the church of Christ at large are hardly the central focus and thrust of Jesus' prayer for unity among the (future) members of his new community. And those commentators, or church spokesmen, who insist upon firm organizational unity or utter uniformity in church polity and worship as the one and central

²⁰ Frederick Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, as quoted in Jean Cadier, 'The Unity of the Church: An Exposition of John 17', *Interpretation* 11, 1957, 171.

²¹ Dan O. Via, Jr., 'Darkness, Christ and the Church in the Fourth Gospel', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 14, 1961, 191.

meaning intended by Jesus' prayer for unity, and who, moreover, insist that such uniformity is a necessary prerequisite for all effective evangelism in the world have, I think, missed the essential point and purpose of Jesus' reference (in his prayer) to the kind of unity obtaining between himself and his Father: 'that all of them may be one, Father, *just as you are in me and I am in you*' (17:21). Viewed in the light of this kind of understanding of the prayer of Jesus for unity in his coming church, T. Evan Pollard's statement, though perhaps worded rather too severely, seems entirely relevant:

To argue for uniformity or for union of churches in one church with one form of government, worship, etc., is to take a Sabellian view of the unity of the church which is just as unbiblical as the Sabellian view of the unity of the God-head.²²

If one accepts this interpretation of Jesus' vision and prayer for unity among his disciples as a further instance of the evangelist's characteristic (almost relentless) emphasis upon the *inward and experiential aspects* of Jesus' new community, one is almost tempted to agree with Robert H. Strachan's contention that this Gospel represents an implied 'polemic against the growth of "officialism" in the Church.'²³ To do so without any reservations or qualification, however, would be to assert more than the evidence within John's Gospel can fully substantiate. That the author of this Gospel is much more interested in the ways in which the very life of Jesus, as the Son of God, is conveyed to and constantly nourished and enlarged within the community of his disciples, than he is in matters pertaining to the external structure (polity) or specific ordinances of such a community, seems indisputable.²⁴ And to say that John's pervasive interest in the inward character and activity of the church, as I have asserted earlier, derives very directly from his dominating conviction (assumption) that the truth about Jesus, as Son of Man and Son of God, must govern and shape all other truth about God and his

²² T. Evan Pollard, "That They All May Be One" (John xvii, 21)—and the Unity of the Church', *Expository Times* 70, 1958-59, 150.

²³ Robert H. Strachan, *op. cit.*, 46.

²⁴ Paul-Marie de la Croix asserts this position very concisely and emphatically in these words: 'If the Church does not live totally from Christ, if she is not the living Christ who continues His Work, she is nothing.' See *The Biblical Spirituality of St. John* (Staten Island, NY, 1966), 416. The evangelist John reiterates this central truth throughout his Gospel, bringing it into virtually every major discourse and personal conversation of Jesus which he recounts: cf. especially 3:13-21; 4:13-14; 5:39-40; 6:27-59; 6:63-69; 7:37-39; 8:31-36; 10:9-16, 27-30; 11:25-26; 12:44-50; 14:6-7; 14:20-23; 15:1-17; 17:2-3; 18:37; 20:21-22.

purposes for and with humankind,²⁵ is almost as obvious. But to suggest that the evangelist John intends to speak out, by implication at least, against the emergence of all organization and ordinance within the church of Jesus, seems an extreme and unwarranted conclusion.

Even to note, for instance, Jesus' and his apostles' early practice of baptizing followers as these joined his movement (cf. 3:22, 26; 4:1-3), is to see that Jesus was not opposed, in principle, to all formal religious rites and ceremonies. It can be argued also that Jesus' fervently expressed concern that the Temple, his Father's house, be faithfully used as a 'house of prayer,' not as a Jewish 'market place,' betokens a wholesome reverence (on Jesus' part) for the Temple as a formal place of worship and that John's account of the episode incorporating this outburst of Jesus implies a similar respect (on John's part) for other places of worship associated with the (coming) church of Christ. Furthermore, the evangelist John recounts the 'footwashing' episode (13:2-17) in a manner that (quite apart from the debated question whether Jesus' action is to be understood by us as the initiation of a formal ordinance or as symbolic action only) clearly suggests that certain public actions enacted within a brotherhood context may and can serve as meaningful practices within the 'community of believers' (13:15-17). And John's detailed account of Peter's reinstatement by Jesus into the new community and into its leadership very specifically (21:15-23)—whatever else it teaches us—also underscores the importance of pastoral leadership (of some kind) within this community of faith. One may also perceive faint hints of the coming church's authority (granted to it by Jesus) to apply more formal measures of pastoral care and discipline among its members in Jesus' words to the disciples: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven' (20:22).

In the face of this kind of evidence on the other side, it would seem to be more just to say that what the evangelist John is in fact suggesting to his readers is that the community of Jesus' followers is concerned primarily with its own rootedness in Jesus, and that its organizational structure, and use of rites or ordinances, are only secondary means at best, whereby that first and central concern might be more truly or fully realized. Paul-Marie de la

²⁵ Charles K. Barrett, in *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London, 1955), asserts that 'what John perceived with far greater clarity than any of his predecessors was that Jesus is the Gospel and that the Gospel is Jesus' (p. 58).

Croix gives incisive expression to this kind of conclusion in the following words:

Neither the government, nor the organization, nor the power, nor the expansion of the church would have any meaning or value if, more deeply and essentially, the testimony and the grace of the incarnate Word and the testimony and the action of the Spirit were not manifest in the church.²⁶

*A sixth and final identifying feature of the new community founded by Jesus, within the purview of John's Gospel pertains to its distinctive mission to the world as this mission was wittingly assigned to it by Jesus.*²⁷ There is a distinct sense in which the disciples of Jesus are said to be 'sent' into the world with a mission to fulfil which bears a direct connection and continuity with the primary mission (the 'work') in which Jesus was himself involved. A very explicit instance of this 'sending' of the disciples (viewed as a group) into the world occurs in the midst of Jesus' high priestly prayer: 'As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world' (17:18). Jesus' association of this 'sending of the disciples' with the Father's 'sending of himself' (cf. 17:21-23; also 20:21) is very deliberate and is intended to suggest significant parallels between these two 'sendings'. As he, the Son, was sent into the world with a divine mission and message for it (3:16-17), so also his disciples, as a unified body (17:22-23), are sent by Jesus to proclaim a true and unambiguous message (17:20)—even the Father's Word (17:14)—to the world in which they live and have their being. And as he, the Son, was sent to do the Father's will and to 'reap' a waiting 'harvest', so they too are sent 'to reap what they (often) have not worked for' (4:34-38). And the fact that this Gospel so frequently sets the new community of Jesus' followers very much apart from the 'world' of wickedness and unbelief (cf. 14:17, 27-31; 15:18-19; 16:8, 20, 33; 17:16, 23, 25) must not obscure this truth of the community's distinctive mission to that 'world', for us.

There are other, somewhat less explicit passages which also suggest that a very specific responsibility and mission have been committed to his disciples by Jesus, the Founder and Head of this new community. When Jesus forewarns his disciples that they will encounter the same kind of hostility which he faced, because

²⁶ Paul-Marie de la Croix, *op. cit.*, 418.

²⁷ Donald Guthrie sees these last two identifying features of the new community as closely and integrally connected. He remarks: 'The whole emphasis on unity in John 17 shows how indispensable a corporate community is for the continuation of the mission of Jesus.' See his *New Testament Theology* (Leicester, 1981), 724.

of his name, and when he also assures them that some (in the world) will obey their 'teaching' as some obeyed his 'teaching' (15:18-21), he implies an identification of their continued ministry to the world with his own and this in a very vital sense. And when he tells his disciples that 'whoever accepts anyone he sends also accepts him' (13:20), he (once again) implies a close identification of himself with his chosen 'community' and of his distinctive mission with their mission to, and in the world.

C. The final destination of the New Community (Church) of Jesus:

One might also, as a brief postscript to this second major section on the character and experience of the new community founded by Jesus, make mention of the final destination of this new community. The evangelist John, it is plain, does not deal with 'last things' (eschatology) in any conventional sense of the term. Indeed, he says relatively little about endtime matters as such. He does have Jesus refer to the final resurrection of the just and the unjust, on one or two occasions (5:38-29; 6:39-40), and he does include Jesus' promise to the disciples that he will come again to take them to be with him in the 'Father's house' (14:1-4). In the main, however, the evangelist John's allusions to elements of eschatology bear a peculiar orientation (commonly designated as 'realized eschatology' by theologians) in which *present* (already 'realized') aspects of these very elements are granted special prominence and emphasis.²⁸ Jesus' comments about his 'Father's house' with its 'many rooms' (14:1-4, in the NIV version), it must be acknowledged, embody a distinctly *futuristic* representation of the final destination of his new community, the church. When these comments about the 'Father's house' are read against the background of the entire chapter (14), and also in conjunction with Jesus' words in 17:24, it becomes clear that John's *primary* interest, once again, focuses upon the spiritual relationship between Jesus and his new community and upon the utter perfection of that relationship, finally, by way of the uninterrupted and abiding vision of the pristine glory of Jesus in the eternal abode.

Conclusion

Several broad conclusions may be asserted on the basis of the

²⁸ Eduard Schweizer remarks, concerning this orientation in John's Gospel: 'John's view of the Church is marked by the idea, which is stressed more here than in all the other NT writings, that all the decisive events have already taken place.' *Church Order in the New Testament* (London, 1961), 117.

above consideration of the evangelist John's delineation, in his Gospel, of the new community of Jesus. Firstly, one may assert that, in John's view, the church of Jesus is a community which is necessarily 'born of God,' a community which is infused and ever sustained by the very presence and life of Jesus Christ, its Founder and Head, and a community which is guided by him (through the Holy Spirit) in all of its internal activity and in its broader mission to the world. It is not simply a new organization or cult which happens to be strongly enamoured (for a time) with a given leader—with his appealing personality or with his appealing ideas and programme—whose vitality and fortunes change very much according to the vicissitudes of time and change. On the contrary, this new community of Jesus is firmly anchored in the heavens, as it were, and ever draws its sustenance and inspiration from the 'Lord of heaven and earth,' who has founded it and who himself guarantees its safe passage through a hostile world and its eventual arrival at the eternal destination in the 'Father's house' and homeland. John's conception and delineation of the church of Jesus Christ is one, therefore, which can provide a necessary and sufficient safeguard against possible distortions of it in humanistic, gnostic, millenarian, or narrowly cultic directions, and one which can provide a constant incentive to wholesome self-examination and correction, even in our day.

Secondly, according to John's delineation, the church of Jesus is a community which has direct and essential links with Old Testament anticipations of the Messiah and his Kingdom, this despite widespread misunderstanding of these anticipations among the Jews of Jesus' day. It was part of Jesus' task, as Teacher and Master among his disciples then, to disabuse them of such misunderstandings and to convey to them a true conception of the connection between Old Testament teaching and present fulfilment (in his own life and ministry) with respect to this new community of faith which he had come to establish among the Jews, and in the world at large. Jesus was intent upon showing his disciples, and all others willing to heed his teaching, that the true centre of unity—the true 'gathering-point for Israel,' to use Hebert's apt phrase—was the 'Messiah in his Kingdom'.²⁹

Within this context and perspective it is entirely correct, and very meaningful to assert, as does Anthony T. Hanson, that John is presenting Jesus Christ to his readers (whether they be Jews or Gentiles) 'as the answer to Israel's (most ultimate) questions.'³⁰

²⁹ Arthur G. Hebert, *op. cit.*, especially 218–223.

³⁰ The question whether the Fourth Gospel was intended primarily for Jewish or Gentile readers, or intended for both, is left aside in this paper as one still

Whatever questions and misgivings, perhaps even nostalgic yearnings to return to the 'church' of their past (the Judaism of temple and synagogue) Jewish readers of his Gospel might have had, the one and truly adequate answer to all of them lay in the Gospel of Jesus and in the continuing experience of his new community, the church.

Finally, one can assert the basic conclusion that John's delineation of this new community of Jesus leaves no doubt about the answer to the question whether there are perhaps alternative routes to God and to intimate fellowship with him. His Gospel renders it very plain and very emphatic, that Jesus is the only way to God (cf. 14:6) and that no one can enter the Kingdom of God, here or hereafter, except on Jesus' own terms. To quote Hebert once more, 'Whoever seeks to enter the Kingdom of God but will not accept Jesus' terms, will be putting some self-chosen notion of the Kingdom of God in place of the true.'³¹ It is therefore only within the new and vital community founded by Jesus himself that individuals can properly sustain that deeper fellowship with God, and genuinely experience that profounder joy, peace, and sense of ultimate purpose to which they, during the best moments of their lives, have always aspired.

not unresolved among biblical scholars. The view one takes of this question has some bearing on the interpretation of those passages in *John's Gospel* which pertain to 'other sheep,' the 'children of God scattered abroad,' and the 'one flock' (cf. 10:16 and 11:51-52), and some bearing, therefore, also on the matter of the relationship of the new community of Jesus to Israel, as God's chosen people. See two articles by Severino Pancaro on these questions: "People of God" in St. John's Gospel', *New Testament Studies*, 16, 1969-70, 114-129 and "The Relationship of the Church to Israel in the Gospel of John", *New Testament Studies*, 21, 1974-75, 396-405.

Some writers, as for example Rudolf Schnackenburg, see hidden allusions to Israel, as God's chosen people, in Jesus' discourse on the 'vine and the branches' (Jn. 15) and the suggestion therein that the 'new community' of Jesus incorporates 'old Israel' but this only in so far as true faith in Jesus is exercised by its members.

³¹ Arthur G. Hebert, *op. cit.*, 223.