



# Spirituality and the Gospel of John



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## Introduction

The Bible and spirituality are closely related, each dependent on the other. The Bible springs from the spiritual experiences of the people of God, while a concern for spiritual connection with God is intrinsic to the biblical writings, an essential part of their message. Spirituality, therefore, is an aspect of biblical theology. It is not simply what the reader draws from the text for his or her life, but lies within the scope of the text as part of its value system. Spirituality thus describes the objectivity of the biblical text, as well as the subjective response of the reader.

A Christian theological definition of spirituality needs to include both the vivifying work of the Holy Spirit and the faith experience of believers. However we describe it, 'spirituality' is concerned with the interaction between the divine Spirit and the human spirit. Such a definition need not be individualistic: the human person, from a theological perspective, always belongs within community – the community of the Church, the human family as a whole, and the kinship of creation. One helpful definition is that Christian spirituality, in a personal and corporate sense, 'is about the sense of the presence of God and living in the light of that presence'.<sup>1</sup> The Bible confirms that godly presence and enables readers to live within its sphere. Spirituality, once again, is two-sided, encapsulating both the divine activity and the believer's receptivity.

The focus on recovering a sense of biblical spirituality is particularly pertinent for today. Meditation groups, courses and workshops are well-populated, often from a quasi-Buddhist perspective, using relaxation, meditation techniques, and mindfulness to enable people to develop

a sense of spirituality in their lives. It is of concern that people do not turn more often to Christian faith with such a need. Of equal concern is the number of Christians who do not find the resources for their spiritual lives within the Church. It is timely to advocate a return to the deep sources of spirituality within the Bible.

Like other biblical themes, spirituality shares a richness of diversity across the canon of Scripture. Here we take the example of the Gospel of John. The purpose is to draw out the uniqueness of John's perspective on how God's presence manifests itself and what that presence means for believers to enable them to experience that divine depth and fullness. A comprehensive account of John's spirituality is not possible here.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the emphasis is on three aspects of the Fourth Gospel that capture something, though not everything, of its spirituality – a perspective grounded in John's theological understanding.<sup>3</sup> The Gospel makes connections to its readers largely through the narrative itself, which invites identification with the characters so that they enter its dynamic. The core question is: what kind of spirituality is the reader invited, through the narrative, to experience?

## John's spirituality as embodied

In the first place, Johannine spirituality is embodied and sacramental. The theological heart of the Gospel is the declaration, made in the prologue, that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us ... and we beheld his glory' (1.14). That glory is revealed, above all, in the incarnation and shines through the signs and works of Jesus' ministry, leading to faith (2.11). The glory seen in the 'flesh' reaches

its climax on the cross where, following his death, blood and water flow from the side of the incarnate Christ (19.34), symbols of the divine gift of salvation.<sup>4</sup>

John sees the incarnation as a new stage in God's self-revelation. Though 'Moses and the prophets' spoke of God (1.45), only Jesus is the Word of God, the appearing of God in mortal flesh. God chooses to be revealed, therefore, through the very stuff of created reality – a creation that came into being through the same Word (1.3). Not only does this confirm the giftedness and goodness of creation, it also recognises that spirituality is not divorced from fleshly existence, but rather that God speaks 'as bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh' (Gen 2.23). In Jesus, God meets us face-to-face, wearing our mortal form, subject to frailty and death, clothed in human flesh.

There are significant implications for this central theological stance in the Fourth Gospel. On the one hand, it confirms our human and created reality as the sphere in which, and by which, God communicates. It is true that John's Gospel assumes a level of alienation between Creator and creation, so that people tragically fail to recognise their Maker (1.10). But the incarnation (including the cross) is the repairer of the breach, the saving event which makes possible the restoration of creation and the restoration of human identity as God's children through faith (1.12–13). God speaks in our language and through our realities. This is a 'sacramental' mode of revelation because it uses the fabric of our lives to effect salvation.

The narrative that best exemplifies this revelatory dynamic is the Feeding of the 5,000. In John's hands, this story becomes an extended metaphor of the gift of life from Jesus; yet it is finally a tragic narrative because many walk away as a consequence of his scandalous self-revelation (6.1–71). Jesus is revealed as the true 'bread from heaven', the fulfillment of the manna in the wilderness. He is both the giver and gift: the giver of the bread and the bread itself. Through the narrative, this becomes more explicitly Eucharistic, until John is openly speaking of Jesus' death, and of eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6.51–58). Just as the incarnation is the way in which God is fully and radically revealed, so God's salvation is appropriated by believers in bread and wine. Far from being in opposition to one another, matter reveals spirit; spirituality is profoundly material.

Some forms of 'new age' spirituality, as well as some versions of traditional Christianity, seem to discount the body and bodily experience, as if these were things to be transcended or set aside. In John's Gospel, by contrast, material reality is the basis of its spirituality. Believers experience the saving love of God in flesh and blood, in water, wine and bread. Creation, rightly understood – that is, to say, in and through Jesus – conveys the believer into the presence of God and thus the restoration of his or her identity before God, within the scope of creation. According to John, human beings are sensuous, as created by God, and redeemed through that sensuality: through hearing, seeing, tasting, touching, smell. All the senses are engaged in this Gospel in its

spirituality. Matter matters to God and also, therefore to believers, in their spiritual experience.

### Johannine spirituality as relational

In the second place, Johannine spirituality is relational. That means, of course, John's spiritual outlook takes

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seriously human relationships, as well as the relationship between human beings and God. The new community around Jesus is embedded particularly in the love-command: 'love one another as I have loved you' (13.34). Love of others within the community of faith thus becomes the mode of its life together and the sign of divine presence for the unbelieving world. Spirituality is never in isolation in the Johannine worldview; it is a life lived in relationship with others, in community together.

There is, however, a more foundational aspect to John's emphasis on relationship. In the Johannine worldview, the primary relationship is that between the Father and the Son. This is depicted as a relationship of mutuality and intimacy, in which the Son receives all that he is and does from the Father in open-handed love (5.19–23). The rather abstract correlation of 'God' and 'Word' at the beginning of the prologue (1.1–2) opens up into the more colourful symbolism of Father-Son (1.14,18), reflecting the oneness yet distinction, as well as closeness, between God and Jesus.

This loving association within the being of God is made effective through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel. The most important title for the Spirit, especially in the Farewell Discourse, is that of 'Paraclete' which has several meanings: presence, comforter, advocate, teacher, guide. The Spirit-Paraclete makes present the absent Jesus, beyond Easter, comforting believers in their experience of absence, and enabling the Father and Son to make their home within the life and soul of the community (14.16–17,23).<sup>5</sup> Here Johannine spirituality is governed by the immediacy and proximity of the Holy Spirit who makes present the Father-Son relationship in the depths of the human heart.

This proximity means that the Spirit-Paraclete represents the immanence of Father and Son, bringing close that which seems distant and remote. It also means that believers are drawn into that relationship through the unifying work of the Holy Spirit. The Father–Son–Spirit relation is thus an expanding circle, drawing believers into union with God, so that they share in the filiation of Jesus himself. They become sons and daughters of God because Jesus is the unique Son, and he shares his identity with them. In the resurrection story in the Easter garden, the risen Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, who has just come to Easter faith, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God' (20.17). There is difference of nuance between Jesus and believers: they are also children of God, but Jesus'

### NOTES

1. SC Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1992), p. 113.
2. Further on this, see DA Lee, *Hallowed in Truth and Love: Spirituality in the Johannine Literature* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012).
3. A good introduction to John's theology is CR Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
4. DA Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbol, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), pp. 29–64).
5. See AJ Köstenberger & SR Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Apollos: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 61–107.
6. Further on love in John, see FJ Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

relationship with God is definitive and constitutive. They are graciously given a share in that archetypal divine union which stands at the core of the universe. Spirituality, therefore, is not primarily a human task but rather that of God, the Holy Spirit; it is not based on human efforts to re-create the severed bond between earth and heaven but God's; it is not a new relationship into which believers are drawn but an eternal union that exists in and beyond the universe.

One of the most evocative images John uses for that relationship between believers and God, through the person of Christ and the work of the Spirit, is that of abiding. This notion is found throughout the Fourth

narrative context is the coming to faith of the man born blind in his encounter with Jesus, and the cruelty of his exclusion by the authorities (9.24–38). In an image that corresponds to that of the vine, John speaks of the Church as God's flock. As the Good Shepherd of this flock, Jesus knows and loves each of his sheep, and has come to share divine life with them: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (10.10). This gift means that love, joy, peace and union are all given to the community in their present experience, no matter how troubling or difficult. The life that Jesus brings, the life that Jesus is, can radiate present moments of pain and suffering, bringing the light of hope and joy into the darkest corners. Eternal life is found in union with Christ, in an intimate relationship of mutual love and knowledge (17.3). It is given, moreover, in and through the death and resurrection of the Good Shepherd (10.17–18).

This connection between life, love and knowledge is fundamental to John's spirituality.<sup>6</sup> In the story of the Samaritan woman's meeting with Jesus, she receives a dual revelation: Jesus reveals himself to her and reveals her to herself, as well as revealing himself to an entire Samaritan village (4.4–42). As the Giver of living water (which in John refers to the gift of the Spirit, 7.37–39), Jesus presents himself to the woman as the one who can quench her thirst for life (4.16–18). Slowly but surely the woman opens her heart to the revelation, coming to perceive her own need and the gift of the one who bestows life in abundance, proffering that gift to everyone, regardless of race, class or gender (4.42). Spirituality, in this Gospel, is concerned with the gift of life, infusing and transforming the present moment with the knowledge and love of God.

## Conclusion

The spirituality of the Fourth Gospel is concerned centrally with the reader's experience of the presence of God in daily life. John's spirituality is not just of the soul but also the body; not just of activity but also rest; not just of the future but also the present. This kind of spirituality is deeply personal, encouraging practices of meditation, contemplation and reflection on Scripture within the wider context of the community of faith. By entering the Johannine narrative in the context of prayer, believers centre their lives on the God revealed in Jesus and on the gift of life God offers, transfiguring the present with the light of radiant love. Such a spirituality involves, not only a commitment to meditation and prayer, but also a careful study of the biblical text in order to mine its depths. Mindfulness meditation, in Johannine perspective, means abiding in the Spirit who draws believers, body and soul, into the intimacy of Father and Son, enfolding them in the silence of divine love.

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Gospel but comes into its own in the symbolism of the Vine and the Branches (15.1–8). The attachment of the branches to the life-giving vine is dynamic but also profoundly restful – the opposite of activism. It calls believers simply to be in the presence of God, without the need to do or act in any way other than experience that nurturing and life-giving union. John goes on to speak of this deep and abiding association as one of friendship, based on mutual and self-giving love, as well as obedience (15.9–17).

## Johannine spirituality as life-giving

In the third place, Johannine spirituality is life-giving. The life offered is grounded in creation: 'in him was life, and the life was the light of all people' (1.4), but it is also eschatological – concerned with the future life of God manifest in creation for its ultimate redemption. In John's characteristic worldview, that ultimate form of life is realisable in the present. John generally refers to it as 'life eternal', in older translations rendered as 'everlasting life'; yet the evangelist's focus is not so much on its longevity as its proximity. Eternal overlaps with the life of creation, and both have their source in the one, self-giving God.

The Johannine Jesus can thus speak of himself as 'the resurrection and the life,' as he reveals to Martha in the story of the Raising of Lazarus (11.25–26). Martha consigns resurrection life to the future, believing her brother will share in the final the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. However, the Johannine Jesus shows her that that transforming life is available in the here-and-now, capable of transfiguring the present moment, no matter how dark and deathly. In Johannine spirituality, believers do not need to wait till the End-time to experience the fullness of God's life and love. These are available now, if they can with Martha grasp in faith the identity of Jesus as the manifestation of God's life-giving impulse for all creatures (11.27).

In the discourse on the Good Shepherd, Jesus speaks of coming precisely in order to give life (10.1–18). The