

***The Gospel of John***  
***Session Nine – Jesus' Farewell to His Disciples***  
***(John 14,15 & 16)***



*Christ the Vine – Angelos Akrotantos – 15<sup>th</sup> Century – Wikimedia Commons*

***Farewell Discourses***  
***Not Atonement, But Glory! John Clarifies Jesus' Death***  
***Lively, Life-giving Friendship (John 15)***  
***The Words of Jesus***

***Farewell Discourses***

Ancient Jewish and other literature provides close parallels to John's farewell discourses in the testament of farewell of a dying hero. Fernando F. Segovia (*The Farewell of the Word: The Johannine Call to Abide*. Minneapolis, Fortress 1991) provides a helpful summary of analyses of farewell scenes that fall into a recognizable pattern. In Greco-Roman literature the archetypal farewell scene is Socrates' farewell to his disciples as recounted by Plato in the dialogue entitled *Phaedo*. As Segovia points out, this scene contains elements that become common to most such scenes:

*First, there is a conversation between the dying man and his confidants in his last hours. Second, within such a conversation are a number of fixed and recurring elements: forebodings or prophecies of death, final instructions regarding the care of those left behind, the appointment of a successor, a prayer of thanksgiving to the gods, words of farewell and consolation for the intimate circle, an account of past activities, teachings and exhortations for the wider gathering, and political and philosophical testaments.*

Particularly if one includes John 13 and 17, which belong to the total farewell scene, virtually every item mentioned by Segovia is included.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*,  
Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

## ***Not Atonement, But Glory! John Clarifies Jesus' Death***

These discourses represent an interpretation of the meaning of the death of Jesus from a vantage point in history years after the time of the crucifixion. They are the product of a community that had undergone two deep and transformative divisions: the separation from the synagogue to which I have previously referred and the fracture within the Johannine community itself over how to understand the relationship between God and Jesus.

The second split caused some of Jesus' followers to feel so threatened that they began to find their way back to the synagogue. They could not journey to the new place to which this community was now walking. When this second separation was complete, the remaining members were free to move without impediment toward a new understanding of Jesus. This was, I believe, when the Christological debate began to take on universal and mystical connotations and the author of this gospel began to turn his writing in a very different direction.

There is in John no hint of what later came to be called the "doctrine of atonement." That doctrine was the emphasis marking the writings of Paul, especially the early Paul, and it found expression in the synoptic tradition, but is absent from the Fourth Gospel.

Paul portrays Jesus as the one who has the power to deliver human life from the depths of the sin by which it has been captured. When Paul relates the story of the crucifixion, he does so with the following words: "He died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures." (I Cor. 15:3). It is from this text that "Jesus died for my sins" was born. That expression was destined to become a mantra in Protestant and evangelical circles. . . . Primarily under the influence of a late-fourth-century theologian and bishop named Augustine, but continuing in history through Anselm in the twelfth century, to both Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century, atonement theology has dominated Christian thought.

The Passover lamb was identified with Jesus by Paul himself when he wrote, "For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed" (I Cor. 5:7). In the Jewish tradition it was the sacrifice of the paschal lamb that was said to have had the power to banish death from among the Jewish people on the night of their escape from Egypt and slavery. The death of Jesus was said to have lifted human life beyond the boundary that death had previously imposed. . . .

There is (also) the story of "the servant" from II Isaiah. He too is likened to a lamb led to the slaughter (Isa. 53:7). (Following their return from exile, the Jewish people) were to accept their status as the despised, the rejected: a people of sorrow. . . . The servant was to be the symbol, the dramatic presentation of this newly understood messianic vocation for the Jewish people. In their suffering, they were to

remain silent. . . When the synoptic gospels were written, following the destruction of Jerusalem and in the experience of Roman oppression of all things connected with Judaism, the Jewish disciples of Jesus also were forced to live under persecution. They had embraced at first the promise that this persecution would be short-lived and that soon Jesus would come again. On the occasion of this second coming, Jesus would establish the kingdom of God.

By the time the Fourth Gospel was written, however, that hope had wavered and even perished. Sixty-five to seventy years had now passed and Jesus had not yet reappeared. The persecution had not ended. The reign of evil had not been broken. So John changed the message and transformed the story of Jesus. He had not died to pay the price of sin. He had not promised to come again shortly to establish the kingdom of God. This kind of atonement was not in John's vocabulary. Instead, John said he had died to open human life to a new meaning, a new definition. His death was to be the moment of his glorification, the moment when God was fully revealed in him.

So John has Jesus lead his disciple to this new insight in the Farewell Discourses. In chapter 14 he does it by casting three of the disciples in the role of questioners, whose inquiries will allow Jesus to open their minds to this new meaning, this new understanding of his death. . . . Thomas says, "We do not know the way," . . . Phillip demands, "Lord, show us the Father and then we will be satisfied." . . . Judas (not Judas Iscariot) asks, "Lord, how can you manifest yourself to us and not to the world?"

Jesus says: You must understand that this manifestation is an internal one, not an external one. The revelation of God comes with the ability to love beyond your limits. If you love me, you will keep my word to love one another and the Father will love you as the Father had loved me. Then the Father and the son will come to you and dwell in you. We will make our home in you – this is Jesus' summation.

Jesus concludes this part of the discourse by saying, "I have spoken to you while I am still with you". (John 14:25). He then tries to prepare his disciples for his absence. The Holy Spirit will come when I am gone, he says. The spirit will teach you all things and will bring to remembrance all that I have said. I leave you with peace. It is not the kind of peace the world seeks, but it is the kind of peace that will enable you to grasp the reality you will have to endure. Rejoice, because I go to the Father and only when I depart can the spirit come to you. Please recognize that the world has no power over me. The world cannot kill who I am. I am part of who God is and you will be also. I do what the Father commands because I love the Father. You do what I command because you love me. That is the pathway to understanding.

The first discourse is over and Jesus says the words mentioned previously: "Rise, let us go hence" (John 14:31). Similar words are found in the synoptic tradition when Jesus, after having wrestled with his destiny in prayer in the garden, returns to find

his disciples sleeping. He has accepted his vocation to die. “Rise,” Mark’s gospel has him say, ‘let us be going’ (Mark 14:41 – 42). John also now has him move toward that destiny, but in John’s hands his destiny is also to become his glory. We listen to his words with a new set of ears.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

### ***Lively, Life-giving Friendship (John 15)***

*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”*

There you have it. Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. We abide in him, and he abides in us. The word translated “abide” here, *meno*, is a favorite of John’s. Sixteen of the twenty-one chapters have it; it occurs over forty times. Additionally, the noun form occurs at 14:2: “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places (*monai*).” In some sense it refers back to 1:14 and dwelling, as well as to all of the house/home language flagged throughout. It is a deeply relational word and can be translated as “abide,” “remain,” or “stay.” “And the slave does not remain in the house forever, the son does remain forever” (8:35). Believers and Jesus abide in one another: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (6:56). Abiding is important.

Jesus energizes us to bear fruit. But what does it mean for us to bear fruit? It means we are to love . Yes, to *love*.

As the Father has *loved* me, so I have *loved* you: abide in my *love*. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my *love*, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his *love* . . . . This is my commandment, that you *love* one another as I have *loved* you. No one has greater *love* than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you . . . . I am giving you these commands so that you may *love* one another (vv.9 – 10, 12 – 14, 17)

This final “I am” statement is consumed with love. We are not merely servants of Jesus; we are his friends . The Greek word for “friend,” *philos*, comes from one of the verbs for love (*phileo*). Another word also used for “love” in this Gospel comes from *agape*. The “I am” statements in John show us that God in Christ is intent not only on *life* but also on *love*. They go hand in hand. Notice that Jesus does not ask us to do anything that he himself has not already done, even to the point of laying down one’s life for one’s friends.

We are branches. If we stay connected to the true vine, Jesus, which is nurtured by God, the vinegrower, we will bear the fruits of love. If we don’t, we won’t. We will

hate, just as the world hates (15:9). The choice is ours: Will we be counted among the lovers or the haters? Where are you on the spectrum at present?

This is about Jesus loving his disciples and his disciples loving one another. In other words, this is about how to be and do Christian community. It's about radical friendship. How is your church doing this well? How could it do better? What is your own role in this?

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

### ***The Words of Jesus***

Although it is sometimes said that “evidence for retrojecting words of the exalted Jesus back into the mouth of Jesus as he speaks in the narrative of his ministry is lacking,” in the nature of the case such evidence would be hard to come by. Of course, Paul receives words of the exalted Jesus (2 Cor 12:8 – 9) although he does not put them into a narrative of Jesus’ life, but of his own. In the Gospel of John one would hardly expect the author to say more than he has in the Paraclete (Holy Spirit or Advocate) sayings. On the one hand, the Paraclete speaks for Jesus, effectually making his presence real. On the other, he both reiterates what Jesus has said (14:26) and says more (16:13). The statement “All that the Father has is mine,” must in Johannine terms mean that there is no valid revelation of God that Jesus has not given. The revelation of Jesus given by or through the Paraclete is believed to be entirely consistent with the historical revelation given during Jesus’ ministry, but, of course, such revelation was not itself complete or comprehensible as such until Jesus’ glorification. As John puts it, “He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (v. 14). To do this he must say things Jesus did not say during his ministry, not for the sake of expanding the historical revelation, but to clarify it.

Unless one wishes to argue that John gives the words of Jesus verbatim or, alternatively, that John simply composes words of Jesus *de novo* according to his judgment and assessment of the theological necessities of the moment, it is important to ascertain how and why the peculiarly Johannine conceptuality and speech patterns took shape. One can scarcely be certain, but given what John writes, as well as what we find in 1 John and Revelation, it is reasonable and likely to surmise that Spirit inspiration and prophetic speech have deeply affected his presentation of the words of Jesus. This is not to say that the Spirit, any more than the evangelist, simply makes things up. Such passages as the saying about loving one’s life (12:25), or indeed the love command (13:34), show how traditional words of Jesus can assume Johannine dress, and presumably become more relevant to the Johannine community.

Here we probably encounter one of two important factors that have influenced the composition and character of the Fourth Gospel. We have earlier and all along taken note of the role played by "the Jews," that is, the Pharisaic authorities, in opposing Jesus and his followers. But in their continuing danger and struggle, his followers have not been left alone (14:18). The Spirit-Paraclete, who is their Advocate-Counselor-Helper, is with them because he has been sent by the Father (and by Jesus). He is nothing less than the continuing presence of Jesus, who brings the power and word of Jesus to bear on the changed situation of his followers after his death and departure. These two historical-theological factors, that is, Pharisaic opposition and Spirit inspiration, do not, in and of themselves, account for this Gospel. Only Jesus accounts for this Gospel as he accounts for the gospel that is preached. They do, however, largely account for its distinctive character and composition.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

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### **Primary Sources:**

*John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, by D. Moody Smith, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999

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