

The GOSPEL of JOHN

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY



DAVID F. FORD

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Preface

Earlier in its life, this book was signed up as a contribution to the Westminster John Knox Belief series of commentaries on the Bible by theologians. As will be clear to those who know any of the volumes in that excellent series, it is aimed at a broad readership, especially those within churches of many traditions and in many regions, but also anyone in our varied cultures who is open to an intelligent faith that engages as deeply as possible both with the Bible and with the contemporary world. As the original editors, William Placher and Amy Plantinga Pauw, wrote, “These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.”¹

That manifesto excited me, and I have tried to fulfill its many demands. My aim has been to seek Christian wisdom for today through the Gospel of John. The Belief series sets the two core questions around which my introduction and epilogue are shaped: “Why John?” and “Why Now?”² Guided by them, I have experienced both a responsibility and a liberation.

The responsibility has been to be as well grounded as possible in the areas of scholarship and theology that are most relevant to interpreting the Gospel of John today. The two main ones are biblical studies and the field that is variously called doctrinal, systematic, dogmatic, or constructive theology. There are (rightly) very specialist, technical aspects of each of those areas—one thinks,

1. See the “Series Introduction” in each volume of the series, beginning with William Placher’s posthumously published *Mark*.

2. The Belief series also encourages authors to reflect in the epilogue on the process of writing the commentary, and that, too, is part of this one.

for example, of the vast scholarly literature on the dating, authorship, original audience, historical reliability, language, literary craft, intertextuality, and similar issues relating to the Gospel of John, and also of the theological and philosophical concepts and debates surrounding the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology in which this Gospel has played a central role. I have written on some of these topics elsewhere (as the epilogue describes), but in this commentary the aim is to be sure-footed in relation to the specialist literature and discussions, without entering into them at any length.

The liberation has been to be able to pursue the deep, life-shaping questions raised by the Gospel of John, not only with reference to biblical studies and a range of theologies, but also through poetry, history, Christian living, interfaith engagement, involvements in largely secular settings and thought-worlds, and more. The first words of Jesus in John's Gospel are "What are you looking for?" (1:38), and I have found that repeated rereadings of this Gospel have inspired passionate searching, and in the process have offered an education of desire. So the result is as much a spirituality as a theology, both of them centered on the first question of the Gospel, "Who are you?" (1:19). Even further, there has been a glimpse of how promising, and how relevant to our time, is the prospect of a Johannine renaissance.

When this commentary grew to a size that was around double the norm for the Belief series, there was a friendly agreement that it did not (literally) fit there, being far longer than any of the others. I remain very grateful to Westminster John Knox Press, and especially to Amy Plantinga Pauw, for many years of encouragement, patience, and support.

Baker Academic's welcome of the commentary has been warm and generous. Not only has their first-class team gone to work on the many tasks involved in publication, offering valuable advice, and then making sure that all necessary support is in place. There has also been the experience that every author longs for: an editor, Dave Nelson, who has read the book closely, appreciated it, commented perceptively, and given clear guidance for what more needs to be done. It has been a delight to work with someone who has such broad and rich experience of the field, and such reliable judgment. In addition, James Korsmo has been an extraordinarily helpful project editor, whose alertness and expertise have proved most valuable.

A final word is about a striking feature of the Gospel of John: it combines being accessible to those who are new to it with the capacity to go on challenging and feeding those who have reread it many times. This commentary is written in the hope that both groups will find in it something of worth, and that those in the first group will, over time, migrate into the second.

Introduction

Why John? Why Now?

Gospel of Abundance

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). John is a Gospel of abundance. The prologue first sounds this note; the first sign that Jesus does turns a huge amount of water into good wine; the Spirit is a wind that blows where it will and is given “without measure” (3:34); the “living water” that Jesus gives is “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (4:14); when Jesus feeds five thousand with five loaves, there are twelve baskets of fragments left over; through Jesus there is abundance of glory, healing, light, life, truth, fruitfulness, joy, and love; the last sign that Jesus does brings about a large catch of big fish; and John’s closing sentence responds to the impossible task of writing all that could be said about what Jesus did: “If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25).

This abundance stretches the thought and imagination of readers, and it is intensified by John’s¹ way of writing. Common words are used both in their everyday, ordinary sense and also with deeper meanings—try following through this Gospel terms such as *word, in, all, life, light, darkness, come, world, receive, believe, as, father, son, see* (that is just a selection of some from the prologue), and you will find yourself led into the depths of John’s meaning. This is what I call the “deep plain sense,” which invites the reader to search for deeper meaning in plain words. It is enriched by John’s use of ambiguity and double meanings, as in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 (where one

1. On the authorship of this Gospel, see comments on 21:24–25, which is where the authorship is raised by the Gospel itself. I refer to the author simply as John.

Greek word can mean both “from above” and “again,” another can mean both “wind” and “spirit”), by his use of repetition with variation, by inexhaustibly rich imagery, by complex portrayal of characters, and in other ways.

But by far the most important way is through relating to other texts, above all that of his own Bible. John may well have known Hebrew, but the main text that he uses is the Septuagint (LXX), the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek done by Jews in Alexandria a couple of centuries before he wrote his Gospel. This is the great connecting text between the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures, and John was steeped in it. His opening words are its opening words: “In the beginning . . .” (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1). He often quotes it and, even more frequently, echoes² it. Every chapter is, as it were, marinated in it. Without it, his meaning is shallowly understood, or misunderstood, or key points missed. With it, the reader is drawn into a constant to and fro, reading and rereading both John and the Septuagint, and finding that one text usually leads into a network of texts. This is what I call John’s use of “intertexts,” which invite the reader to interrelate what John writes with another text. I will frequently draw attention to John’s intertexts, and sometimes quote them, but only occasionally will I have the space to explore their interaction at length—the reader is encouraged to take time to do so.

While the Septuagint is plainly an intertext, John also had some relationship with the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—or with the sources that fed into them. Many scholars now are of the opinion that John knew the actual Synoptic Gospels, or at least Mark and Luke, and I think that he knew all three (see comments on John 6). It can be very illuminating to ask why or how John includes, interprets, alters, or omits a particular Synoptic passage, and I will do so frequently.

One fascinating fruit of following how John reads his own Bible (and the Synoptics) is that *we learn how he wants us to read his own text*. Many scholars agree that John understood himself to be writing Scripture. If that is so, then in interpreting his Bible he is modeling how we are to read what he himself writes. In this commentary I try to learn from John how to read John and to share that with readers.

The commentator on John is faced not only with the superabundance of meaning generated by his rich text and its intertexts but also with nearly two thousand years of other people responding to this Gospel and to one another’s readings. The responses are by no means only in the form of commentary,

2. A superb study of this aspect of all four Gospels is Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, whose sections on John are the best condensed study of his ways of relating to his Bible. For a response to Hays, which also gives a fuller account of the approach to John taken in this commentary, see Ford, “Reading Backwards, Reading Forwards.”

but also include hymns, songs, music, and poetry; prayer and spirituality; liturgy and ritual; art and architecture; drama and film; theology and philosophy; accounts of reception history; ethics and politics; and (perhaps most fitting of all) the lives of people and their communities. The present work (which has the form of a commentary in that it moves through the text chapter by chapter, but also tries to do justice to other genres—the index is intended to be a help in making connections between leading themes) has been profoundly shaped by many elements of that history of reception, but they can only rarely be explicitly pursued. There has been a repeated and often painful process of selection and rejection, but I hope that the result is helpful to the reader by offering one way through an immense mass of material. A similar challenge was faced by the author of John's Gospel, as he says at the end of both John 20 and 21: there were "many other signs" (20:30) and "many other things" (21:25) that Jesus did. Just as John's selection is immensely significant (see comments on 20:31 and below in the "Why John Now?" sections), so, in lesser ways, are each respondent's decisions about where to focus.

Yet on John there is one text that might be considered the response that deserves pride of place. The First Letter of John may have been written by the author of the Gospel of John, or else by someone in the same tradition and steeped in the Gospel—the language is Johannine. It is written to a Christian community with problems, and it calls them back to the essentials of the Gospel. And it is clear that the essentials all have love at their heart, reaching a crescendo in the repeated statement "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Jesus is the embodiment of this love and is the Savior of the world, and the most important thing for those who believe in him is to receive his Spirit and to love one another (1 John 4:7–21).

This work tries to do justice to those as the essentials of John's Gospel, where they are most fully expressed in the Farewell Discourses (John 13–17). The resulting three main emphases are given under three headings below; but before coming to them, we must note a further striking feature of John's Gospel. This Gospel is a text that has proved to be both accessible to those meeting it for the first time and increasingly challenging the more it is reread. Its Greek is fairly straightforward, and it was my first text when I began to learn New Testament Greek, at the age of twelve. Yet now, over half a century later, as I look back at the twenty years during which I have been working on John, it stands out as the most challenging project I have ever undertaken.

More will be said about this in the epilogue, which tells something of the personal story behind this commentary, but I am by no means alone in this experience with John. Beginners can find something comprehensible and attractive, but the more they take this to heart—and, in particular, the more they take Jesus to heart—the more dimensions of the abundance of this Gospel

open up. Places in the text where before they could paddle now stretch their swimming ability, like the water flowing from the temple and becoming deeper and deeper in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 47:1–12), which is one of John's intertexts.

The three interrelated answers to the question Why John? that follow are given as three "waves" of meaning, a form of presentation common in John—his very first sentence (1:1) is a concise example.

Why John? (1): Who Jesus Is

The abundance of John's Gospel is given above all through Jesus. Who is Jesus? is the leading question running through the whole Gospel. This is, of course, a core concern of the other Gospels and of the rest of the New Testament, but John concentrates on it in a distinctive way and develops it further. John's is an understanding of Jesus that has had the benefit of long reflection on eyewitness testimony, on the Synoptic Gospels, and probably also on the teaching of Paul,³ and also of many years living and teaching in a Christian community.⁴ *It is the culmination of New Testament testimony to Jesus.* The commentary will trace in detail how this is done, but it is worth summarizing now how this is the primary concern in each section of the Gospel.⁵

The Prologue's Horizon and Focus on Jesus

The prologue (1:1–18) gives John's "manifesto," setting the Word (*logos*), later identified with Jesus, within the ultimate horizon of God and all reality. The headline description of Jesus as the Word of God, who became flesh, and through whom "all things came into being" (v. 3), not only identifies Jesus simultaneously as one with both God and humanity but also relates him to the whole of the Jewish Scriptures, to the Hellenistic civilization of the Roman Empire, and to all creation.

3. On the relationship between John and Paul scholars differ, as on so much else about John. I am persuaded by those who think that John knew teachings of Paul and his "school," and in particular see John combining the Synoptic narrative approach with some of the main pillars of Pauline theology, such as the glory of God, love, faith, "in Christ," the Holy Spirit, and abundance.

4. Where? I am persuaded by those scholars who argue, on a variety of grounds, for Ephesus, in Asia Minor (on the Aegean coast of modern Turkey). This would give a connection with Paul's churches, and especially with the Letter to the Ephesians, which is one of the most fruitful intertexts to read with John.

5. I assume that the way many readers engage with a commentary such as this is not to read it through from first page to last but to consult it on particular passages or topics. It can therefore be helpful to get some sense of the whole from an introduction. Besides attempting to do that here, in the commentary itself I take into account its piecemeal use by employing some "repetition with variation" of key points. John too, as will become clear, frequently uses repetition with variation.

As the prologue continues, the reader is invited to begin to think about Jesus imaginatively in relation to light and darkness; to attend to testimony (beginning with John the Baptist); to be open to the possibility of being part of a family, the children of God, who believe and trust in his name (who he is); and to recognize that an event has happened, a human person has come, in whom there is the full meaning and reality of God in relation to us—God’s abundance incarnate, “the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (v. 14). This “fullness” has been shared; it is the “grace and truth” of the “law . . . given through Moses,” now come in person through Jesus Christ (vv. 16–17).

Then comes the climax (v. 18). It combines the mystery of the invisible God, the relationship of love at the heart of God and all reality—“God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart”—and the mission of Jesus, to make God “known.”

The “Who” Question Headlined (1:19–51)

The first and leading question of the Gospel is then posed: “Who are you?” (v. 19). It comes as the brief prologue leads into the primary form in which the message of this Gospel is given: dramatic narrative in which Jesus is central. The question is addressed to John the Baptist, but he makes clear that it should be asked not about himself but about the one whose way he is preparing. He then gives a series of pointers to who this is, the first being the most daring of all: “the Lord” (v. 23). Almost as surprising is the next: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (v. 29). More answers to the “who” question follow: the one on whom the “Spirit” descends and remains; “the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit”; and “the Son of God” (vv. 33–34).

The rest of John 1 has an avalanche of identifications of Jesus, with one title after another, each resonating through the rest of the Gospel, to be filled with further meaning through the events, teachings, and controversies: “Rabbi” or “Teacher” (v. 38); “Messiah” or “Christ” (v. 41); “him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth” (v. 45); “Son of God” (v. 49); “King of Israel” (v. 49); and the only one from the lips of Jesus, “Son of Man” (v. 51).

So, overall, the first chapter could hardly make it clearer where the primary focus of this Gospel is concentrated: who Jesus is.

Jesus Doing Signs, Having Encounters, Giving Teaching (Chaps. 2–17)

This concentration continues during the following sixteen chapters.

John’s favorite term for key actions of Jesus is “signs,” emphasizing their wider meaning. As this meaning unfolds, in conversations around the signs,

in discourses before or after them, and in authorial comments, the key issue again and again is who Jesus is. The headline statement by the author, after telling of the initial sign, is focused on the revelation of who he is and the primary response to that—believing in, having faith in, trusting him: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11). The man healed at the Beth-zatha pool is asked, “Who is the man who . . . ?” (5:12), and this leads into a long discourse (vv. 19–47) by Jesus about himself in relation to his Father. The longest discourse of all follows the feeding of the five thousand, and it spirals around John’s most distinctive characterization of who Jesus is, the “I am” statements—here, “I am the bread of life. . . . I am the bread that came down from heaven. . . . I am the bread of life” (6:35, 41, 48). The controversy in John 9 around the man born blind likewise turns on who Jesus is, as does the raising of Lazarus in John 11.

The encounters and conversations of Jesus, both friendly and hostile, also have who he is as their leading theme. The headline for these is the clearing of the temple in John 2, during which he identifies his body with the temple. This also makes explicit a key factor in John’s characterization of Jesus: his combination of preresurrection and postresurrection standpoints (see more below). Then, the conversation with Nicodemus merges into a discourse on believing “in the name of the only Son of God” (3:18). Next, the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well leads into identifying Jesus as “prophet,” “Messiah,” “I am,” “Rabbi,” and “Savior of the world” (3:19, 25, 26, 29, 31, 42). The controversies in John 7–10 likewise return again and again to who Jesus is. By the time the public ministry of Jesus ends in John 12, the question of who he is has become utterly central.

The Farewell Discourses (chaps. 13–17) then go deeper into who he is. This theme is opened up through the footwashing, fundamental statements such as “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6), Jesus as the friend who lays down his life, Jesus as the vine (or vineyard), the inseparability of love in action from prayer in the name of Jesus, and, deepest of all, the revelation of who Jesus is in his definitive relationship to his Father in his prayer in John 17.

Arrest, Trial, Crucifixion, and Resurrection (Chaps. 18–21)

There could hardly be a more graphic indication of the importance to John of who Jesus is than his distinctive way of telling of the arrest of Jesus. This has two “who” questions and three “I am” statements (18:4–8). Later, the trial before Pilate pivots around the identity of Jesus, summed up in Pilate’s question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (18:33). The commentary will bring out

the subtle ways in which John's narrative of the trial and crucifixion handles this identity issue.

Then, in his first resurrection appearance Jesus asks the weeping Mary Magdalene, "Whom are you looking for?" and he addresses her by name, "Mary!" "Rabbouni!" she replies (20:15–16). This dramatic "who to who" meeting is then complemented by the climactic and unsurpassed affirmation of who Jesus is by Thomas: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). Finally, the epilogue suggests the ongoing, permanent presence of Jesus by a threefold repetition that usually is lost in translation: "It is the Lord!"—literally, "The Lord is!" (*ho kyrios estin* occurs twice in 21:7 and once in 21:12). The third repetition of this third-person variation on the "I am" of Jesus is fittingly paired with a final repetition of the "who" question that first appeared in 1:19: "Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord" (21:12).

All those points will be expanded upon in the course of this book, and the overall conclusion is very clear. The first answer to the question Why John? is because this is the culminating New Testament testimony, abundantly rich and profound, to who Jesus is.

Why John? (2): The Spirit Given without Measure for the Ongoing Drama of Loving

The second answer is dependent on and inseparable from the first, and brings together further distinctive elements in John's Gospel.

The Holy Spirit

First, John says far more about the Holy Spirit than do the other Gospels. Readers are reminded of the Spirit right through John's Gospel.

This begins in the opening chapter when John the Baptist testifies to the Holy Spirit remaining/abiding on Jesus (1:32–33). This means that every word and action of Jesus, and his whole person, are to be understood as at one with the Spirit, inspired through the Spirit, and indicators of the character of the Spirit. So the Spirit is always to be understood as involved even when not mentioned (as, e.g., in the prayer of Jesus in John 17). In Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus, the Spirit is seen as generative for life in the kingdom of God (for which John's preferred term is "eternal life," or "life in all its abundance," on both sides of death), and as pervasive and surprising as the wind (3:1–16). Jesus is sent to baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:33), and "he whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit

without measure” (3:34). The Samaritan woman is told that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (4:23). The longest of Jesus’s discourses comes to a dramatic climax when he says, “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (6:63). And at the climax of the Festival of Booths Jesus cries out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” And John adds, “Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (7:37–39).

The most intensive focus on the Spirit comes in the Farewell Discourses as Jesus prepares his disciples for his death and for their part in the ongoing drama afterward. Just as the Spirit was seen by John the Baptist to abide on Jesus, so the Spirit is promised to the disciples, “to be with you forever. . . . You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (14:16–17). The Spirit is the *paraklētos*, the Encourager, Helper, Comforter, Advocate, the one who “cries out alongside” us. Given “without measure” (3:34), distributing the abundance of Jesus, the Spirit “will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you” (14:26). Jesus is even able to say, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you” (16:7). This is “the Spirit of truth” who “will guide you into all the truth” (16:13), a further astonishing promise (especially given the horizon of God and all reality opened up in the prologue). The fascinating, mysterious interrelation of Jesus, the Spirit, and the Father in the Farewell Discourses was later to be at the heart of the development of Christian thought in its early centuries, as it slowly arrived at the momentous affirmation of God as Trinity.

This commentary agrees with those interpreters who find the first giving of the Spirit by Jesus in his final act of dying: “Then he bowed his head and gave up [literally, “handed over” or “passed on”] his [literally, “the”] spirit [or “Spirit”]” (19:30). The Greek can simply mean that he stopped breathing and died; but its deep plain sense can be that this is simultaneously the moment of his death and the beginning of new life given through his death—also symbolized by the blood and water that flow from the side of the dead Jesus when a soldier pierces him to ascertain that he really is dead (19:31–37).

The final mention of the Spirit is when the crucified and resurrected Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). This connects the giving of the Spirit as closely and intimately as possible with Jesus himself. But what Jesus has just said also connects this gift as closely as possible with the ongoing drama.

The Ongoing Drama

Just before the breathing of the Spirit, Jesus has commissioned his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:21). John is far more explicitly concerned than other Gospels with what I call the ongoing drama of following Jesus after his crucifixion and resurrection—much of the Farewell Discourses is about this, and so is much of his last two chapters. What are the implications of Jesus sending his disciples as he himself was sent?

First, it requires *continual learning from how Jesus was sent*, as seen in the drama of his ministry (especially gathering a new family of disciples/learners, doing life-giving signs, entering into deep and challenging conversations, and setting an example of witnessing to the truth, loving service, friendship, and intimate prayer) and in his passion, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and giving of the Holy Spirit.

It also encourages *continual improvisation in the Spirit of Jesus*, in line with what I call the capacious “as . . . so . . .” of that commissioning, of his footwashing command (13:12–20), and of his love commandments (13:34; 15:12–17). As Jesus loved, so disciples are to love. Followers are to be inspired to act daringly in love and service, to spring surprises as Jesus did, even to do “greater works” than Jesus did (14:12). *This is to be an ongoing drama of inspired loving.*

Inseparably, there is to be *continual prayer in the name of Jesus* (14:13; 15:16; 16:23–24), above all inspired by his own prayer in John 17, which is where this Gospel sounds its greatest depths, reaches its greatest heights, opens up its innermost secret of intimate mutual indwelling, and orients the desires of readers toward union with the ultimate desire of Jesus.

And *all this is aimed above all at you*, the readers of his text, as directly addressed: “But these are written so that you [plural] may come to believe [or “may continue to believe”] that Jesus is the Messiah [or “the Christ”], the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). That is John’s core motive in writing his Gospel, and it is wise to keep it in mind when reading each chapter. His passionate desire is for us, his readers, to encounter the living Jesus to whom he is testifying. This is the main reason he combines preresurrection and postresurrection perspectives: he wants us to understand who Jesus is, and that even as we read about what he did and said, we are in the presence of this crucified and risen one who says “I am,” who loves us incomparably, and who longs above all for us to trust, love, and follow him now. This good shepherd calls each reader by name into the ongoing drama. But, strikingly, the model disciple, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:20), to whom the writing of this Gospel is attributed, is not named—perhaps to allow every follower to self-identify as loved by Jesus.

So the second answer to the question Why John? is because it gives profound and practical inspiration and guidance to disciples committed to the ongoing drama of living in the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Why John? (3): God and All People, All Creation

The third answer reaches far beyond the circle of the committed followers of Jesus in order to take seriously the vision of the God of love, light, and all reality that this Gospel opens up.

The prologue, as already noted, first opens up this horizon that embraces all things, all life, and all people. Intertexts here include Genesis on creation, and Wisdom of Solomon, which brought Jewish Scriptures into rich engagement with the culture, learning, and wisdom of Greek-speaking Hellenistic civilization. This openness across the boundaries of any single community, type of person, or other distinction continues through the rest of the Gospel.

The first question that Jesus asks his first disciples is, “What are you looking for?” (1:38), probing their core desire. The whole Gospel is an examination and education of human desire, as later chapters will show. The desire of Jesus is expressed most fully in his prayer in John 17, but, before that, through the signs that he does, he shows his desire that people (whether they are following him or not) may “have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). He begins by providing a huge quantity of wine for a wedding, an archetypal celebration of life, love, and commitment. His feeding and healings are about sustaining, restoring, and enhancing life for anyone in need, without regard for their religion, race, gender, power, wealth, or status. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well engages across divisions of religion, ethnicity, and gender. “I am the light of the world” (8:12) sees no limit to his relevance.

Yet there is no triumphalist “global solution”; rather, the deepest secret of Jesus’s relationship to all people and things lies in his death. In John 12, in response to an approach to him by some foreigners, Greeks, Jesus begins to speak of his death, its fruitfulness, and its capacity to draw people of all sorts together: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people [or “all things”] to myself” (12:32). The Farewell Discourses prepare his disciples for this event, and for receiving the Holy Spirit flowing from it, culminating in the final prayer of Jesus in John 17. That gives the vision of what he is laying down his life for, his ultimate desire: the fullest conceivable unity in love and peace.

The process of actually giving his life is one in which betrayal by one of his closest followers and the combination of religious, political, economic, and

military power represented by the Roman Empire and the temple hierarchy work together against him. The ongoing drama likewise will involve his followers in such things, as warned in the Farewell Discourses and predicted in the martyrdom of Peter (21:18–19). Some interpreters see John’s own Christian community as “sectarian,” turned inward by such pressures, concerned with love for one another rather than love of enemies, and with hard boundaries over against “the world.” This commentary sides with those who see the thrust of this Gospel (however it was actually lived by John’s community, about which there are contradictory speculations but little evidence) being toward doing life-giving signs for all who are in need, daringly crossing deep divisions, seeking more and more truth, engaging critically and constructively with the civilization of which it is a part, prophetically challenging the pathologies of power, modeling servant leadership, and building communities of prayer, love, and friendship that serve God’s love for all people and all creation, seeking to be part of the fulfillment of the desire of Jesus in his final prayer.

So the third answer to the question Why John? is because it nurtures in readers a global horizon that can unite them with the desire of Jesus for an ultimate unity of all people and all creation in love and peace.

Why John Now? (1): Jesus Now

Each of those three dimensions of John proves to be deeply and practically relevant today.

The “I am” of Jesus is the most direct and profound pointer to his ongoing relevance. John relates Jesus to all time. As regards the past, in the prologue John the Baptist says, “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me” (1:15, repeated in 1:30); Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (8:58); and he prays, “So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed” (17:5; cf. 17:24). As regards the future, he looks beyond his death to preparing “a place” for his disciples (14:1–7); and his last words assume a future to which his desire and his coming are central: “If it is my will [*thelō*, “I desire”] that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” (21:23). *Yet the primary concentration is on the present—any and every present time. But this is not a momentary or fleeting present; it is defined by the presence of Jesus, who is present as God is present.* A key word for this ongoing presence is “abide/remain/dwell,” which is used of Jesus, his Father, the Holy Spirit, and those who trust and love them. Their mutual indwelling culminates in the prayer of Jesus in 17:20–26, expressed through the rich use of “in,” and explicitly embracing those who come after

the first disciples. No Gospel insists more strongly on the relevance of Jesus to every “now.”

The ways in which this ongoing presence of Jesus is brought home to readers are multiple. Among the most important are the following three, all thoroughly interrelated.

Most obvious and emphasized is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit by no means replaces the presence of Jesus or the presence of his Father—all three are always together, while also differentiated and interrelated. They signify the rich presence of the God of love, as later understood and expressed in trinitarian thinking, prayer, and worship down through the centuries. The promise for every “now” is that the Spirit “abides with you, and he will be in you” (14:17). The interrelationship with Jesus and the Father is clear: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. . . . He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you” (14:26; 16:14–15).

Second, note the repeated mention of what Jesus has said or declared. Elsewhere, too, this is emphasized alongside the Spirit: “He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure” (3:34); “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit [or “Spirit”] and life” (6:63). Essential to the life of abiding in Jesus is that “my words abide in you” (15:7), and part of his summary, in prayer to his Father, of what he has been able to do is, “The words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you” (17:8). When Jesus finally breathes the Spirit into his disciples, the breath carries his words (20:22). It is hard to overstress how important for the Gospel of John is this interrelationship of the words of Jesus with his Father, the giving of the Spirit, abiding, abundant life, and faith. The Gospel is written to invite readers into this dynamic set of relationships (cf. 20:31). *Reading and hearing this text, and letting its words abide in us, is how to experience the presence of Jesus and his Spirit now.* The words breathe his Spirit as his breath carries the words. It is hard to imagine a more vivid picture of minute-by-minute living presence than that of breathing. The mutual indwelling of Jesus and those who trust and love him means that that first breathing continues now through engagement with his words and the testimony to him.

Yet, third, the text itself points beyond the text. Partly, it does this through intertexts, through connecting Jesus with the creation of all things, life, and people, and through the promise that the Spirit will lead into more and more truth. But central to all that is who Jesus is, present, active, and alive with the

life of God. *Jesus is free to be present and to communicate in many ways, and to spring surprises*—as he did during his ministry, especially after his resurrection. Knowing the text (but who ever knows this text well enough?) does not give an overview of Jesus and his activity. His core commands to wash feet and to love, and his final commissioning that sends his disciples into the ongoing drama, have an open, capacious “as . . . so . . .” that invites into improvisation and innovation, open to risk-taking and surprises. If Jesus now is present as God is present—in all situations, to all people, and to all families, cultures, businesses, religions, nations, and environments—then finding him and meeting him calls for continual openness to new encounters. All the postresurrection encounters were surprises, and they were not obvious or straightforward. There is no reason to think that recognizing the free self-revelations of Jesus now will be any less challenging and surprising, or that either the current followers of Jesus, or anyone else, will be able to anticipate to whom or how they will be granted.

Jesus Then: The Historical Jesus and John

Jesus now assumes Jesus then, the historical Jesus. This has been a matter of special interest in recent centuries, with the rise of historical-critical methods of studying the past. There has been a great variety of approaches and results, too large to survey here.⁶ For my approach, the following three points (which can be pursued further through the literature referred to) are particularly important.

First, testimony is essential to John, and it is appropriate to cross-examine this testimony, as scholars and others do.⁷ As in a court of law, after such cross-examination there is a judgment to be made about whether the testimony is basically trustworthy, by which I mean whether it is a reliable testimony to who the crucified and risen Jesus is. I, along with many others, am convinced that it is.⁸ There are many differences among the Gospel accounts of Jesus,

6. In this commentary I try to be sure-footed in relation to historical criticism. That is, I would be prepared to defend my judgments, both explicit and implicit, but do not go into the detailed discussion of various positions that would be required if this were a work of technical historical scholarship. Plenty of commentaries and other works do this, but my attempt to not take many detours is in the interests of my main goal, which is to relate the Gospel to life now—thinking, imagining, praying, living in community, and loving—which is rightly not the leading concern of historical scholarship. I also try to be sure-footed in relation to historical, doctrinal, and systematic theology (again, I would be prepared to defend my judgments, but do not develop full positions on, for instance, Christology—though here other works mentioned in the epilogue are relevant); and the same applies to literary criticism, hermeneutics, spirituality, ethics, philosophy, and other discourses.

7. One standard account of the scholarly historical examination of the New Testament testimony to Jesus that coheres with the approach of this commentary is Young, “Prelude: Jesus Christ.”

8. For an overall account of my approach, see Ford, “Who Is Jesus Now?”; for more detailed discussion of a theological understanding of Jesus that takes historical and biblical scholarship

but all four testify to who he is by telling about what he said and did, his encounters and conflicts, his passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. There is plenty of convergence on key elements, and the divergences (which are greatest between the Synoptics and John) often offer fruitful ways of reflecting further on him.

Second, the pivotal event for relating Jesus then to Jesus now is his resurrection. All the Gospels, and the other New Testament books, are written in the light of the resurrection, but John is more explicitly concerned to give both pre-resurrection and postresurrection perspectives on him, as will be clear through this commentary. This goes with his greater emphasis on the Spirit and on the ongoing drama of postresurrection discipleship, and also with his horizon of God, all people, and all creation. Doing justice to this combination of perspectives involves taking into account and making judgments about the relevance of a range of matters to a theological interpretation such as this, including how history, biography, and theology could be combined in the literature of the time; how rewriting sacred and other texts was a way of receiving and interpreting them in new situations;⁹ and the importance to John of being continually led into further truth through the Spirit.

Third, the resurrection of Jesus cannot be understood simply as a historical event alongside others, such as his crucifixion. As the interpretation of John 20 below will discuss, in John it is a “God-sized” event in which God acts, Jesus appears, and the disciples are transformed through the Spirit. Testimony that can be cross-examined is important to it, but so is faith that recognizes who God is, who Jesus is, and responds with personal trust and love—the double “my” in “My Lord and my God!” (20:28).¹⁰

Jesus between Then and Now: The History of the Reception of John's Jesus

John's Gospel has perhaps been the most influential single text on Christian thought during the past two millennia. Its effects have been so pervasive that a history of its reception would be a history of a huge amount of Christian

and interpretation into account, see Ford, *Self and Salvation*, chaps. 7, 8; Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, chaps. 2, 5.

9. It is worth remembering that authors who wished to convey fresh insight or emphasis in telling a story would feel free to tell the story differently, while keeping what they considered essentials. This is seen in the Bible not only in the four Gospels but also in the divergences between Exodus and Deuteronomy, or between 1–2 Chronicles and the earlier books 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings. On Jewish and Hellenistic rewriting, see Brodie, *The Quest for the Origin of John's Gospel*.

10. Perhaps the most important single book on Jesus and his resurrection has for me been *The Identity of Jesus Christ* by Hans Frei, who is especially illuminating on the interrelationship of realistic narrative, historical testimony, and resurrection. This is backed up by Frei's other works, such as *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *Types of Christian Theology*.

thought, liturgy, music, art, and so on. Out of all that, I focus now on just four representative elements that are relevant to my interpretation.

One is the formative effect of this Gospel on the development of the mainstream doctrines of Jesus Christ and the Trinity. It was considered the fullest revelation of Jesus, and in the Greek tradition its author was simply known as “The Theologian.” Perhaps the most divisive doctrinal issue in the early centuries of the church was teaching about the person of Christ, Christology, which is also central to the Gospel of John. This convergence on who Jesus is as the key question not only points to what was considered to lie at the heart of Christian faith, but also suggests that Christians need to be very wary of dividing the church over any issue not directly related to that. More will be said about Christology, Trinity, and unity at various points in the coming chapters.¹¹

The second is the fruitfulness of intensive attention to the reception of John in particular periods and authors. To take just one of many in this genre, Paul Cefalu’s work on John in early modern English literature and theology has repeatedly given stimulation and illumination.¹² I am especially attracted by his concept of a “Johannine Renaissance,”¹³ since I think that would be something of great benefit to the twenty-first-century church and world.

The third is the impact of John on Christian thought in the past century. It is striking how leading thinkers and movements have found this Gospel extraordinarily fruitful. Even some of those with deep differences from one another, such as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, have taken John as their leading theological guide among the Gospels. The same has been true of diverse Christian traditions around the world—Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran (John was Luther’s favorite Gospel), Reformed, Methodist, and Quaker (John was George Fox’s favorite Gospel)—and in the ecumenical movement there has been no more influential single text than John 17:20–26.¹⁴ In the years to come it will be of particular interest to see how Pentecostal and Charismatic theologies integrate John on the Holy Spirit with

11. The most influential scholar on my own understanding of Jesus and the Gospel of John in the context of the relation of doctrine and Scripture in the early centuries of Christianity has been Frances M. Young, especially in *Ways of Reading Scripture; Exegesis and Theology in Early Christianity; Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture; From Nicaea to Chalcedon*; and her forthcoming magnum opus, which she has shared as it is being written, “Doctrine as Making Sense of Scripture.”

12. Cefalu, *The Johannine Renaissance*.

13. “Renaissance” means “rebirth” and is one of John’s generative images for seeing and entering the kingdom of God, receiving the Spirit, believing and trusting in Jesus, having eternal life, and living and acting “in God” (3:1–21). Furthering a Johannine renaissance is a theme in my own continuing work, such as Ford, *Meeting God in John*; Ford and Cocksworth, *Glorification*.

14. See Ford, “Mature Ecumenism’s Daring Future.”

their understandings of Luke-Acts and Paul, which so far have usually been dominant.¹⁵

Finally, standing for the many artistic responses to John, is Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. John Passion*.¹⁶ Bach integrates in it the three leading themes that I have identified in this introduction. Right from the start in the opening chorus, and then immediately in the arrest scene, there is the primacy given to who Jesus is, intensified by passionate personal address to him in the first chorale: "O great love, O love beyond measure, that brought You to this path of martyrdom!"¹⁷ There is a parallel concern with the ongoing drama of following Jesus, as in the early aria: "I follow You likewise with happy steps, and do not leave You, my Life, my Light. Pursue your journey, and don't stop, continue to draw me on, to push me, to urge me." This is expressed both in individual solos and corporate chorales. Bach's music and words communicate the stretching of mind, heart, and action in discipleship: "I cannot grasp with my mind, how to imitate Your mercy. How can I then repay Your deeds of love with my actions?" Throughout, there is a shaping of desire and longing: "O beloved Lord! Only give me what You earned, more I do not desire!" And the third theme of God, all people, and all creation is expressed in words, but above all in the integration of the words with the music, as the verbal meaning combines with the physicality of sounds, instruments, and voices, and the abundance of melodies, rhythms, harmonies, tonal and theological symmetries,¹⁸ repetitions with variations, and cadences.¹⁹ This *St. John Passion* has proved through three centuries to be attractive and accessible far beyond the company of the followers of Jesus.²⁰ It

15. For an account of the range of Christian theologies of the past century, see Ford and Muers, *The Modern Theologians*.

16. A major work on this is Chafe, *J. S. Bach's Johannine Theology*. He shows the connections of Bach's scriptural understanding with classic patristic and medieval "senses of Scripture," with intertextuality (especially with the Synoptic Gospels and Psalms), and with the liturgical year, as well as the specific influence of Bach's own Lutheran tradition.

17. Chafe is clear about the centrality of the name of Jesus, and other indicators of his identity, such as "I am," to the *St. John Passion*, and he sees Bach's musical expression of who Jesus is as "perhaps the strongest evidence for the fact that Bach should be ranked with other artistic interpreters of the Gospel," such as Leonardo da Vinci in his painting *The Last Supper* (*J. S. Bach's Johannine Theology*, 30).

18. A favorite theme throughout Chafe, *J. S. Bach's Johannine Theology*.

19. On the interplay of theology and music, see the perceptive writings of Jeremy S. Begbie, including *Resounding Truth* and *Theology, Music and Time*. I am grateful to Jeremy for the time spent listening together to the *St. John Passion* with its score in front of us and Jeremy suggesting connections between the music and theology. Specifically on the cosmic dimension of Bach's *St. John Passion*, see Plantinga, "The Integration of Music and Theology in the Vocal Compositions of J. S. Bach."

20. Michael Marissen, in his original musical and conceptual study *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion*, also shows how Bach resists Luther's anti-Semitism—e.g., by assigning responsibility for the death of Jesus to all of sinful humanity, not just the Jews.

continues to communicate, across many boundaries and differences, a sense of abundant life that is not overcome by evil, sin, suffering, or death.

Why John Now? (2): The Church Now

Each of the three leading themes seems to me to be of vital importance to the twenty-first-century church and therefore to encourage a Johannine renaissance in the church now.

Who Jesus is, now and always, alive and present as God is present, longing to share this life of love with others in the Spirit, is the reality at the heart of the church. The primary response to recognizing this is amazed acknowledgment that leads into commitment and worship: “My Lord and my God!” (20:28). John wants both to enable an initial encounter with Jesus, one by one and one to one, sensitive to each person, each called by name, and to embrace each in a family community of love. It is a community of learners, whose main question is, Who are you, Jesus? The learning is endless, and it involves learning to read John in constant intertextual relationship with other texts, learning to think within the horizon of the prologue and the rest of the Gospel, learning to pray within the horizon of John 17, and above all learning to love and serve as Jesus loved and served.

Such a learning community, besides its positive focus on reading, thinking, praying, and loving in ways that center on who Jesus is, needs to be alert to whatever distracts people from this concentration. John selects from a mass of material (20:30; 21:25) what he considers essential for readers, “that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). Any Christian or church therefore needs to be extremely wary of considering as essential things that John does not emphasize, and to be constantly aware of the many desires, concerns, issues, plans, and conflicts that might distract from attending primarily to who Jesus is.

The Holy Spirit is inseparable from who Jesus is and who his followers are. At the heart of the ongoing drama of following Jesus together is the intimate relationship of Jesus with those into whom he breathes his Spirit bearing his words. In this relationship his followers can constantly learn more and more of what is involved in being loved by Jesus and loving him. One striking feature of the ongoing drama as taught by John is its daring openness to more truth and to innovative loving and serving—all on condition of ringing true with who Jesus is.

And the horizon for this is nothing less than God and all reality. That constantly challenges individuals and whole communities to stretch their thinking, imagining, and praying to do justice to the Word of God, through whom

all things were created, and who continues to relate to them all. The desire of Jesus for the coming together of all people and all creation is the inspiration for a church that is here for the sake of the whole world, as Jesus is. One implication of this is a prophetic questioning of boundaries, dividing walls, and the often opposed, conflictual identities that the walls surround. Jesus is constantly moving, speaking, and acting across boundaries, and the risen Jesus is, whether acknowledged or not, present to those on both sides of all divisions. What that might mean for his followers, both locally and globally, is one of their most profound challenges. Jesus in John's Gospel makes sure that this is first of all faced at home, in one's own face-to-face community. The challenge is in the "if" of his love command, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35), and even more radically in the "completely" of his prayer, "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23).

Yet there are two very serious qualifications, one negative, the other positive, regarding this picture of the followers of Jesus today and their community, the church now.

The negative reality is that, to use a favorite image of John, the darkness continues—not least in the church. There is, as this commentary seeks to show, a tragic dimension to this Gospel. It is not only starkly realistic about the ways the world goes tragically wrong; it shows the same grim realism about the community of those who follow Jesus. Disciples are shown to be mistaken, misled, inadequate, wrongly confident, lacking in faith and love, fearful, disloyal, thieving, and traitorous. These are the ones Jesus has chosen and taught in person! The Gospel picture of the fallible followers of Jesus is not just preresurrection: the final incident in the Gospel is provoked by false rumors in the church, and the First Letter of John reinforces the picture of a church of sinners, divided in doctrine and urgently needing encouragement to love.

This fallible community has continued through history in its tragic vulnerability to all sorts of sin, including those most emphasized by John: lack of trust in and commitment to Jesus, blindness and deafness to the truth, and lack of love. Perhaps most disgraceful of all has been a lack of unity in love, trust, peace, and joy, contrary to the desire of Jesus in his final prayer. The reception history of the Gospel of John has been problematic in many ways. One that has deservedly received much recent attention has been its polemical use against Jews and Judaism, and its share in the appalling history of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, both of which still continue. Interpretations of John down through the centuries, including those by leading figures such as Augustine and Martin Luther, have repeatedly fed the teaching of contempt for Jews, and of supersessionism in relation to Judaism.

This commentary faces these and other painful issues at several points.²¹ The overall approach is to try to identify how John has been drawn on in problematic ways, and yet to seek how John, his intertexts, and other strands in the tradition can be drawn on now to help in repairing damage, healing wounds, and generating a better reception history for the future. Any Johannine renaissance in the church that fails to follow such an approach is in danger of reenacting some of the worst in Christian history.

The positive qualification to the positive vision of the church is that there is no suggestion in John that the presence and activity of Jesus are restricted to the community of his followers. We who follow Jesus are loved, illuminated, sent as he was sent, given the Spirit without measure, and invited to trust, serve, pray, and love in response. But, however we respond, the ongoing drama is far greater than that of the church. The world is also loved, and Jesus freely relates to it. That is the further dimension of the question, *Why John Now?*

Why John Now? (3): The World Now

The prologue's horizon of God and all reality opens up an abundance of meaning, of life, and of love, none of which can be imagined as confined to those who follow Jesus.

Meaning

Meaning is signaled in the prologue by the lead concept of "the Word," *logos*, identified with God, connected with the creation of all things and with light, the source of fullness, and also identified with Jesus Christ. The present work tries to think through the unlimited significance of Jesus, but in ways that do not imply that I have an overview of it. Only the Word, one with God, has that. The rest of us see glimpses. The desire for meaning, understanding, knowledge, and truth is unlimited, and leads now along paths similar to those followed by John: reading Scriptures and other texts; attending to testimony and personal experience; engaging with the surrounding culture and civilization; thinking and praying in community with others; trying to distinguish truth from falsehood; experimenting with forms of communication; and stretching minds, hearts, and imaginations to do justice to questions, doubts, and discoveries. In all this the Spirit of truth blows freely across the boundaries of historical

21. Issues include predestination; power and authority; gender; Eucharist; ethical and political implications and orientations; relations between faiths; evil, sin, and death; and personal and social identity.

periods, genders, cultures, arts, media, religions, disciplines, political allegiances, classes, abilities, and other sources of meaning and identity. *Openness to Jesus and the Spirit he breathes involves openness to meaning and truth wherever they are found, and therefore values sustained openness to fresh understanding, to new ways of seeing things, to changing our minds, and to rethinking and reimagining both ourselves and reality.*

Yet falsehood, fake news, misunderstanding, lies and deception, unreliable testimony, ignorance, distortions and manipulations of knowledge and desire, energetic promotion of shallow or prejudiced or hate-filled opinions, character assassination, incitements to violence, ideologies in the service of money or racism or gender inequality or dominating power, and worldviews with habits of thought and imagination that find no life-giving meaning and lead to despair—these, and more such things, also are real. The prologue says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5). That both recognizes the continuation of darkness and gives confidence in the ongoing drama of seeking and witnessing to the truth. “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (18:37). Jesus said this at his trial, leading to his death, and witnesses to the truth are now, daily, being humiliated, tortured, and killed. One of the greatest challenges for followers of Jesus, who are sent as he was sent, is to learn the truth, belong to it, witness to it, and be in solidarity with others (often surprising others) who also witness to the truth.

Life

Life is one of John’s core categories, essential to the presentation of who Jesus is and to following him, and also to reaching out to embrace all humanity and all living creatures. The prologue headlines it: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (1:3–4). *As with truth, the vocation and mission of Jesus are explicitly connected with life, and so commitment to full, multifaceted life is vital for those who are sent as he was sent: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10).*

Yet disease, mental illness, disability, hunger and thirst, poverty, bitter division, violent conflict, forced migration, pollution of water and air and land, extinction of species, injustice, cruelty and torture, exploitation and slavery, humiliation and misery of many sorts, mistrust and despair, and death—these, and much else like them, are also the reality of our world now. To follow Jesus is to be part of a drama in which we trust, for ourselves and others, that none of those have the last word, and that Jesus, crucified and risen, is the first, present, and last word. This commits us to enduring our own share in such evils,

and, when possible, doing life-giving signs, sometimes in collaboration with unlikely people and organizations, and often in long-term, costly, and largely hidden service.

Love

Love is subtly headlined in the prologue's culminating picture of the Son being "close to the Father's heart" (1:18). Then it is first mentioned in the programmatic statement, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3:16). *This love for the world, springing from the heart of God and embodied in Jesus, is the single most important reality to which John testifies, inseparable from Jesus, his Father, and the continuing, Spirit-inspired drama into which all are invited.* The Farewell Discourses open up its mutuality and its breadth, length, depth, and height; the crucifixion of Jesus enacts it, and initiates a new family, with the disciple Jesus loved and the mother of Jesus at its heart; and, after the resurrection, Jesus breathes his own Spirit of love into his followers, sending them as he was sent—in love for the world.

Yet lack of love, distorted love, wounded love, disappointed love, tragic love, failure in love, exploited or exploiting love, deceitful love, betrayal of love, one-sided and rejected love, illusions of love, misunderstood love, inability to love, hardheartedness and refusal to love, and humiliated love—these, and other pathologies of love, are the experience of multitudes of people right now. *The greatest challenge of the Gospel of John is to trust the love of Jesus and to respond in love.* Time and again the reader is invited (sometimes in ways that seem more like shock therapy) to face the decision to trust or not to trust, and to love or not to love. Both the enemies of Jesus and those closest to him demonstrate the pathologies of love. The way of love's abundance is through the crucifixion, and being willing to put one's life on the line, or even to give one's life for love of others: if the "single grain . . . dies, it bears much fruit" (12:24).

Here in love the three leading elements in this Gospel come together: who Jesus is, and the abundance of meaning, life, and love in him; the Spirit given without measure for the ongoing drama of loving, centered in the intimate mutuality of being loved by Jesus and abiding in him; and the world that is loved by God and is the subject of the astonishing promise, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people [or "all things"] to myself" (12:32). We can have no overview of the mysteries of this love, or of the forms it can take, both among and beyond the followers of Jesus. But this Gospel (together with its intertexts) encourages desiring it, receiving it, trusting it, inhabiting it, being radically open to its surprises, and responding to it imaginatively and with daring.

Now

The world now, as I write, is coping with an unprecedented surprise: the global COVID-19 pandemic. Inseparable from that are other unprecedented global developments, especially two: the intensifying ecological crisis and the impact of electronic communication in shaping an “information civilization” with computers, smartphones, internet, virtual interactions and communities, remote working and education, online business and gambling and worship, social media, new addictions, expanding surveillance, electronic warfare and crime, and accompanying massive inequalities of wealth, power, and knowledge.

What happens when such surprises are met by the surprises and the abundance that come through reading and rereading John? There is, of course, no answer in advance of it happening. And it happens differently for different people, groups, nations, regions, and religions. The Spirit is given to draw us readers of John closer to Jesus and his Father in ever-deepening understanding and love, at the same time as drawing us deeper into community with one another, and drawing us deeper and further into the world in love. Global challenges, such as the pandemic, the ecological crisis, and a pervasive information culture, are joined with very particular, personal, and local challenges each person faces in the areas of meaning, life, and love. There is no overview of all this, even within our own group or family—“If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” (21:22). A Johannine renaissance, like the European Renaissance so perceptively described by Stephen Toulmin,²² is about an abundance of signs of creativity and life, thousands of flowers blossoming, each with a name, yet many hidden.

For me, in my small sphere of living and loving, as I continue to reread John by myself and with others during this time,²³ amidst the continuing abundance

22. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*.

23. During the pandemic, beside conversation with my wife, Deborah, and with the staff team at St. Andrew’s Cherry Hinton, Zoom meetings with Ashley Cocksworth and Robbie Leigh, Zoom Scriptural Reasoning sessions, and Zoom discussion on John’s Gospel with members of the research community of the Queen’s Ecumenical Theological Foundation in Birmingham, there have been two especially fruitful engagements in connecting John with the three global developments mentioned. Margaret Daly-Denton, whose Earth Bible commentary on John will figure later in this commentary, has shared the initial results of rereading John in relation to the pandemic. And Micheal O’Siadhail and I together have been both rereading John and reading alongside it a number of works relating to our information civilization and the ecological crisis, while also reflecting on the pandemic. Of these contemporary intertexts with John, three of the most fruitful (all recommended by my children) have been Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*; Krznaric, *The Good Ancestor*; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Tsing’s book is a social-anthropological study of the culture, economics, and multispecies ecology related to “the most valuable mushroom in the world,” the matsutake mushroom (see the quotation from Tsing in the sidebar). It is premature

Searching has a rhythm, both impassioned and still. Pickers describe their eagerness to get into the forest as a “fever.” Sometimes, they say, they didn’t plan to go, but the fever catches you. In the heat of the fever, one picks in the rain or snow, even at night with lights. One gets up before dawn to be there first, lest others find the mushrooms. Yet no one can find a mushroom by hurrying through the forest: “slow down,” I was constantly advised. Inexperienced pickers miss most of the mushrooms by moving too fast, for only careful observation reveals those gentle heaves. Calm but fevered, impassioned but still: the picker’s rhythm condenses this tension in a poised alertness.

Pickers also study the forest. . . . Some pickers mention that they pay attention to the dirt. . . . But when I press for specifications, they always demur. One picker was probably tired of my asking, and so he explained: the right kind of soil is the soil where matsutake grows. So much for classification. Discourse has its limits here.

Rather than a class of soils, the picker scans for lines of life. . . . Life lines are entangled: candy cane and matsutake; matsutake and its host trees; host trees and herbs, mosses, insects, soil bacteria, and forest animals; heaving bumps and mushroom pickers. Matsutake pickers are alert to life lines in the forest; searching with all the senses creates this alertness. It is a form of forest knowledge and appreciation without the completeness of classification. Instead, searching brings us to the liveliness of beings experienced as subjects rather than objects.

—Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 242–43

one thing has become very clear: *now John is as relevant as ever, and in fresh, generative ways*. The main way to discover this is simply to read and reread this text, with appropriate intertexts, by oneself and with others. Discovery happens as the reading, thinking, and conversations are motivated by a passionate desire for meaning, life, and love. The aim is the sort of searching Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes among the pickers of matsutake mushrooms (see the quotation from Tsing in the sidebar).

I hope that you readers of this commentary, as you try to discern how to read, think, and live in the world now, will find yourselves drawn into such searching—impassioned, slow, alert to entangled lines of life, and above all alert to the Subject who is to be encountered through reading and trusting what is written in this Gospel.

to come to conclusions now, but we hope that these engagements will in time result in published poetry and theology.

Conclusion: To the Single, Beloved Reader

This introduction ends where it began, with reading John. Up to now, the readers have been plural; here I concentrate on the single reader of John and of this commentary's reading of John. The first words of Jesus in this Gospel are "What are you [plural] looking for?" (1:38). Near the end, the crucified and risen Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Whom are you [singular] looking for?" (20:15). My own individual account of reading John over many years is given in the epilogue. Here I address you singular, whoever you are.

Of all the Gospels, John is most concerned with the individual, both in encounters with Jesus and in his teaching. The good shepherd calls each by name. *Because Jesus is risen and present as God is present, the event of reading about Jesus can also be the event of meeting him, one to one.* What this means is that you yourself are in his presence, loved by him as was the author of the Gospel, and invited deeper, broader, higher, and forever into an abundance of meaning, life, and love. My chief desire is to help you accept that invitation. By far the best way for that to happen is by reading, thinking, trusting, praying, and living John; and you are promised the Spirit "without measure" (3:34) as you seek to do so. This book is just one intertext that may be helpful. John's text is given in bold print. Please concentrate mainly on that. And be open to surprises.