



Into The Heart of God

John's Gospel &
Spiritual Development

Robert T. Sears, S.J.

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Preface

Some years ago (1964), while studying theology in Germany, I first became interested in John's Gospel. I had had some background in developmental psychology, particularly Piaget and Erikson, and since our course in John was more "trench warfare" (a close study of John 1-3 while hastily skipping over the rest), I set out to see if I could put together a more comprehensive picture. I studied Schnakenburg's early work on John, and later that of Barrett and Hoskyns. But most of all, I read through the Epistles and Gospel myself. It was then that I was struck by the small passage in 1 John 2:12-14 about the children, young men and fathers. I was not sure what those categories meant, nor were the exegetes as I later discovered, yet it seemed clear that they were not chronological. Rather, they must be the author's view of Christian development. Would such an early author be aware of developmental stages? Wasn't that something that emerged only after some experience in the early church? I was captivated by the question.

As I pondered, it dawned on me that all the Gospels showed an awareness of "stages," at least in the ministry of Jesus. His initial ministry was open to many people, yet opposition increased and as he predicted his passion and death (Mk 8, Mt 16, Lk 9) his followers thinned. There were at least two stages present -- the initial enthusiasm and the later pruning in face of the disapproval of the leaders. And again, after his resurrection there was a creative outpouring of the Spirit and spread of the church, an abundant creativity after such a devastating tragedy. This also could be looked at as a "stage." Further, the Gospels were written only after an extended period of experience with community development in the early church. It was not out of the question that such a catechetical awareness lay behind 1 John's passage. They had elders, they had neophytes, and the writer was aware of the struggle to stay committed in face of suffering and persecution and attractive alternative doctrines. The societal ingredients for development were clearly present in the early followers as well as in Jesus' own ministry.

Not knowing the exact relationship of the Johannine letters to the Gospel, I decided to read the Gospel with this perspective of stages of development in mind. They seemed to fit (as I explain more fully later). The early ministry is met with opposition and a decrease of followers, and although there is only a short "post-resurrection" narrative, there is a good deal about appropriate attitudes in Christians after the resurrection in the last supper narratives, and a good deal about the cost of witnessing in the healing of the blind man (ch 9) and the raising of Lazarus (ch. 11). I worked out a preliminary draft of my perspective, especially for the first 12 books of the Gospel, and was satisfied with that. I put the work aside. I briefly resurrected it in 1975 when asked to give a workshop on John 17 to the Sisters of St. Joseph, but it was not till 1979 that I decided to examine my schema in light of Raymond Brown's two volume Anchor Bible Commentary. Although Brown wasn't working from a developmental point of view, I

found nothing that needed to negate my perspective. But questions still remained and another 15 years passed without my further pursuing the issue.

Finally, in the beginning of 1995, I had a half year sabbatical in the Holy Land, and while doing a three month renewal course in the Scriptures, I made a special study of John's Gospel. I pursued my reading -- especially the new book by Barnhardt, *Good Wine*, Peter Ellis' *The Genius of John*, and John Robinson's *The Priority of John*, and I made it a point to visit as many places the Gospel refers to as I could. I walked in Jericho, not far from where John baptized in the Jordan, and I could see across to where Jesus might have stayed in "Bethany across the Jordan." I visited Jacob's well and the valley on the way to Nazareth where Jesus might have walked on the way to meeting the Samaritan woman. I visited the hill beside the Sea of Galilee and up in the region of Caesarea Philippi where Jesus ministered before deciding to come to Jerusalem. And I visited Lazarus' house and tomb (now a church) where Jesus stayed when he came to Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives where he likely taught his disciples. Nothing can replace personal experience, it seemed.

Against this background, Robinson's intriguing argument that the Fourth Gospel was more reliable historically than the Synoptics, which has recently gained some support, finally motivated me to write down my thesis when I returned from Israel. Robinson showed how John the Baptist's influence on Jesus' early ministry likely motivated his cleansing of the temple in Jn 2:13-25. He argued that there was a real historical conflict that led Jesus to avoid Jerusalem during the Passover of the Multiplication of the Loaves (Jn 6), and it took a clear decision to face death that led Jesus to take his case to Jerusalem on the Feast of Tabernacles that followed (Jn 7). And he showed the importance of the raising of Lazarus in bringing about Jesus' condemnation a month before the actual crucifixion (a stipulation of the law for the Sanhedrin for most capital punishment cases). The Gospel became very real, as well as the challenge to believers to remain faithful despite the threat to their lives.

This was no mere interior faith development, but a courageous commitment of love and faith at the risk of one's life. John was more than a theoretician about spiritual growth. He was a person of wisdom and experience who had gone through the trials of remaining with Jesus himself and was situating spiritual growth in the midst of dangerous political realities. I became more than ever convinced that this realistic perspective of the Gospel was very relevant to our situation today. So much contemporary writing is about spirituality as self discovery and self development. Realistic interpersonal commitment in community is absent from all but the South American Liberation spirituality. The writer of the Fourth Gospel has a very realistic perspective. True faith is shown by commitment to God-given community, first by Jesus' commitment to Israel despite its putting him to death, and then by the permanent commitment of believers to the Johannine community (by committed love), when many had left. Spirituality was a matter of committed love, not just self-development, even in the face of political opposition.

Also, today, in light of growing awareness of world spiritualities, there is a tendency to see Jesus more as norm for spiritual growth than as a personally involved

covenant partner. Carl Jung, for one, explicitly negates any reference to the person of Jesus, or any other person, in his emphasis on individuation and finding one's own God relationship within. He was fond of citing Jn 10:34: "I said, you are gods", to give a traditional warrant for his affirmation of our inner union with the divine, but he neglected its meaning in the text which emphasizes receiving God's word, that is, relationship to a personal God. The Fourth Gospel, on the other hand, is unambiguous about the necessity of a personal commitment to Jesus as the source of eternal life (Jn 6:68). It seemed important that his perspective be brought to bear on today's discussion.

I also reflected on the need to ground our traditional view of spiritual growth in a biblical perspective. The traditional purgative, illuminative and unitive ways have themselves been mostly interpreted in a individualistic way. They were developed in a monastic context (more on this later) which emphasized the individual's growth into union with God. If John's Gospel presents the first intimations of what later became this threefold way, it would be important to be aware how it expands the traditional view. In the Gospel, a similar three phases are presented in an open, secular or inimical religious context, not in a monastic atmosphere where all presumably share the same goals. In fact, the monasteries were often quite conflictual themselves, but they were at least all aiming at the same goal. The Fourth Gospel puts spiritual growth in the context of a hostile world, much more suitable to our present world situation than the monastic focus. Whether or not my hypothesis proves entirely adequate to John's intent, the very study of his perspective on Christian growth in a hostile world can be a guide and a strength to those of us who find ourselves in a similarly threatening environment.

Such considerations have moved me to make my reflections available to a wider audience. What I have tried to present is not a comprehensive commentary. If one wants detailed study of individual passages or even of the whole, there are many works available. On the other hand it is not simply a devotional meditation book that bypasses scholarly analysis. I have tried to give the reasons behind my analysis and to cite relevant literature, and to be as accurate as I can about the author's actual situation and that of the Gospel, recognizing the many uncertainties that will continue to remain. Rather, it is a kind of brief commentary which focuses on spiritual growth. I have not attempted to "prove" my developmental perspective, if such a "proof" would even be possible for such a controverted work. Enough for me that my argument is reasonably grounded and brings out a powerful meaning for many passages that could otherwise seem scattered and disjointed. What I offer is a perspective on John, a way of looking at his Gospel from the point of view of stages or phases of spiritual growth. It is hoped that it will help the ordinary believer to deepen their understanding of spiritual growth, and the scholar may be challenged to see some of the material in a new light. It has been my experience that our spiritual life comes alive when it is deeply grounded in Scripture and in the realistic context of the original revelation. Our age has become inundated with developmental theories, and it is strengthening to see how one early Christian community dealt with such spiritual development. It is hoped that the reader will be encouraged by the actual presence of God in his or her own life in the midst of crises and personal trials. That divine presence seems to flow out of every passage of the Gospel and strengthens

the reader to "overcome the evil one" (1 Jn 2:13.14) and come to an inner union with "the one who *is* from the beginning."

I begin with an introduction explaining my perspective on John's Gospel and the Johannine letters. Then in chapter 1 I look more closely at various views of spiritual development to situate John's three stages that I examine more closely in chapter 2. Beginning with chapter 3 and following I comment on the Gospel itself. I decided that the easiest way to present the material is to cite the text in full with the divisions I use to structure it. That way, the reader will have the actual text available to reflect on. I follow the text with short explanatory comments, and then a reflection on its relevance for spiritual growth, and conclude with possible suggestions for personal reflection and prayer. I believe we can find our own lives in John's work and this will provide a biblical foundation for our spiritual growth.