

PANEL RESPONSE

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‘Reading the Gospel of John Theologically’

I would like to thank Professor David Ford for gifting us the first theological commentary on the Gospel of John written in light of an unprecedented global pandemic that has revealed the fragility and vulnerability of humanity.¹ His insightful interpretation of the text is a constant invitation to the integration of theology and life, and a model of reading Scripture as a source of meaning and truth for life today (p. 433).

The book successfully brings into conversation Johannine scholarship, Christian theology, and a diverse range of cultural manifestations (such as poetry and interfaith engagement) as it pursues ‘the deep, life-shaping questions raised by’ the most influential single text on Christian thought during the past two millennia (pp. xii, 14).

This unique theological perspective results in new ways of understanding this text. Instead of following the classic distinction between the book of signs (chs. 1–12) and the book of glory (chs. 13–21), the author has assigned to each chapter of the Gospel a heading that summarizes its main content and anticipates potential implications for today. For example, instead of referring to Jn 1.1–18 as ‘the prologue’, the author proposes a far more creative and noteworthy heading: ‘The unsurpassable horizon: God and all reality, Jesus and us, ultimate mystery and intimacy’ (p. 25). Consider also his suggestive heading for John 6, a chapter that describes two miracles performed by Jesus and a discourse about bread from heaven. Professor Ford refers to this chapter as ‘Food in abundance: Three dramas and four courses’ (p. 141). Traditionally, John 13 is called the washing of the disciples’ feet. The author, however, calls it ‘Love like Jesus – Utterly, intimately, vulnerably, mutually’ (p. 251).

The originality of this commentary is not restricted to the headings. The introduction skips most scholarly discussions about the author, the audience, the date of the Gospel, its relationship with the Synoptic Gospels, its use of the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish traditions, or potential conceptual and

¹David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), p. 22.

literary links with Paul's letters. Instead, the reader finds a profound reflection about the text as a Gospel of abundance, an account of how the christological question is presented and answered throughout the Gospel, and also an explanation of the relevance of the text for the church and the world today.

Another original feature of the commentary is the inclusion of sidebars with quotations from Bible scholars, theologians, church fathers, and modern church leaders. Each quotation expands the author's comments on the text and invites further theological reflection. For instance, the author links Jesus' sacrificial love for his disciples in Jn 15.13 with previous references to his forthcoming death in chs. 6, 12, 13, and also interprets this passage in light of Jewish wisdom literature, the Old Testament (Exod. 33.11), and classical Greek and Hellenistic texts. Additionally, the reader finds a quotation from Thomas Aquinas that expands and deepens the meaning of what seems to be Jesus' exclusive love for his friends: 'Our Lord came to die for his enemies, but he says that he is going to lay down his life for his friends, to show that by loving we are able to gain over our enemies, so that they who persecute us are by anticipation our friends' (p. 298).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the commentary is the interpretation of specific texts by paying attention to successive waves of meaning. The author takes Jn 1.1 as a paradigm for reading the Gospel. The first verse of the text indicates that 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. The Gospel gives its most important teachings in successive waves of meaning. This is clearly seen in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The first wave of meaning provides the obvious answer to the question 'Who has been born from above?' The next wave of meaning clarifies that Jesus became flesh and is the one who baptizes with the Spirit. This wave of meaning then advances the Christology of the Gospel in significant ways. The third wave of meaning explains how the mystery of being born from above becomes a reality in the world, and even challenges the reader about deciding either for life, love and joy or for whatever negates them.

I find this way of reading the Gospel of John more helpful for the church than the traditional approach of trying to find the putative stages of composition of the text all the way from Jesus' own teachings during the third decade of the first century to the final form of the Gospel at the end of that century. Instead of regarding the Gospel as a multilayered work, in which texts from various stages of the community's history have been preserved alongside one another, we should see the Gospel as a coherent theological text with different waves of meaning (p. 27).

A persuasive hermeneutical strategy of the commentary is the reading of sections of the Gospel in light of the prologue. The constant reference to the first 18 verses of the text to interpret Jesus' story reveals that the opening section of the Gospel is programmatic, shaping the way the reader should engage the rest of the narrative. Commenting on the enigmatic words of Jesus in the last section of the farewell discourses, the author uses the prologue to interpret Jn 16.25: 'I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father.' Ford explains that the prologue actually lays out the embracing reality of this revelation: 'God, the Word, all things, light, life, glory, grace and truth, and God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, making known the invisible God' (p. 322). Future scholarly challenges to the

integrity of the prologue as literary and theologically connected to the rest of the narrative will have to closely engage the observations and arguments of Professor Ford.

Elsewhere, however, this link between the prologue and the rest of the narrative is rather implicit. The commentary rightly indicates that 'John says far more about the Holy Spirit than do the other Gospels' (p. 7). Although the author observes that the noun 'Spirit' is not used in the prologue, he claims that the Holy Spirit is implied at every turn (p. 50). For the author, 'grace (1:14, 16, 17) is one of the main ways John talks about the Holy Spirit' (p. 50). He finds support in the history of Christian theology where that conceptual relationship is strong. Throughout the commentary, the Holy Spirit is linked to repentance, Christology, and the doctrine of the church (pp. 81, 151, 247, 337). However, those sections of the Gospel that explicitly talk about the Holy Spirit lack instances of the noun 'grace'. The reader of the commentary, then, needs more help to discern more specifically how pneumatology is related to grace in the Gospel of John. A question that one might respectfully ask is how the reader should link God's grace to the references of the Paraclete in the farewell discourses.

The book rightly emphasizes the dialogical nature of the Gospel. Commenting on John's unique use of the noun '*Logos*' in reference to Jesus, Ford remarks: 'The theological potential of the choice of this fundamental term is . . . immense. The way John uses it encourages intercultural theology, since one can be confident that Jesus Christ is already involved with all peoples and cultures' (p. 30). Ford is convinced that the author of the Gospel's way of doing theology can be a model for modern interpreters (p. 27). His commentary is the result of twenty years of intense dialogue with Christians, scholars and people from different religious backgrounds. In addition, the author recognizes that the twenty-first century has been particularly theologically fruitful. Many new voices from many continents, cultures and backgrounds have resulted on a 'blossoming of Christian thought and imagination' (p. 31).

In that spirit, I would like to suggest that the book can be enriched by bringing into conversation a theological commentary that was published in 1992. I refer to *El Evangelio de Juan: Análisis lingüístico y comentario exegético*, written by Spanish scholars Juan Mateos and Juan Barreto. Time constraints only allow me to offer a very brief example of potential ways the two works can enter a fruitful dialogue. Ford's treatment of the story of Barabbas's release in John 18 basically highlights the theological idea of soteriological substitution. He finds connections between the act of substituting one life for another and Jesus' sacrifice in chs. 1, 6, 10, 11, 15, and of course ch. 18. Juan Mateos and Juan Barreto, I believe, can add a further wave of meaning to the story of Barabbas. Instead of highlighting the idea of substitution, they focus on the idea of violence. They observe that throughout the Gospel Jesus has refused to embrace violence, especially during his arrest in the garden. In contrast, Pilate, who earlier refused to side with the truth, is portrayed embracing the option of violence. Similarly, the crowds choose the freedom of a murderer rather than the source of light and life. The reader then is challenged to decide either for life and truth or for death and violence.

I am largely sympathetic with Ford's assessment of the proposed community behind the Gospel of John. Traditional scholarship has characterized this community as sectarian. The group of believers behind the text is seen as operating

with a high degree of isolation and segregation from their environment and the Gospel of John is purported to reinforce the sharp delineation between this group and the world. Since there is almost no historical evidence in favor of this and suggested reconstructions are based on much speculation, it makes more sense to focus on the literary community that figures in the story (p. 41). I concur that the community around Jesus operated with a universal horizon (p. 42). This non-sectarian community with open boundaries has the mission to show God's love to the whole world.

I am also positively surprised by his proposal that the community reflected in the Gospel of John is 'multicultural and multilingual' (p. 57). This emphasis is not prominent in traditional scholarship. Evidence in the text points to the idea that early followers of Jesus represented different backgrounds, cultures and languages. People attracted to Jesus during his earthly ministry included disciples of John the Baptist in Bethany across the Jordan (Jn 1.28, 37), an Israelite from Galilee (Jn 1.43, 47), a ruler of the Jews in Jerusalem (Jn 2.23; 3.1), a woman from Samaria (Jn 4.7), a royal official in Capernaum (Jn 4.46), a former disabled man from Jerusalem (Jn 9.35), a family from the rural village of Bethany (Jn 11.1-3), Greek pilgrims from the diaspora (Jn 12.20), the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea (Jn 19.38), and fishermen from Galilee (Jn 21.1-2).

Even more, the Gospel reflects deep ethnic tensions between different groups. The woman from Samaria points to ancestry in her dialogue with Jesus about worship. Pontius Pilate, a Roman ruler, ironically asks Jesus 'Am I a Jew?' Some of Jesus' opponents in Jerusalem try to insult him by asking 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'

I suggest that Ford's observation that the community reflected in the text was multilingual and multicultural should shape our interpretation of important ideas in the Gospel. The emphasis on unity in Jesus' prayer, the love commandment, or the radical instruction to wash each other's feet acquire new meaning when we imagine that members of the community of faith represented different cultures and spoke several languages.

Unity among people from different cultural backgrounds was almost impossible in the first century. Roman imperialism brought peace, order and prosperity through hegemonial power, but failed to promote unity among people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Constant revolts and wars demonstrated that the Roman empire was incapable of bringing true unity to the ancient world. In John 17, Jesus prays for his future disciples who presumably will represent different cultures through the missionary work of the disciples. Jesus prays to his Father: 'I ask on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' Although this prayer has been traditionally used to support modern ideas about ecumenism, it is possible that John was primarily concerned with ethnic reconciliation among early Christians.

Similarly, John's emphasis on love can be read in light of the idea that the community reflected in the text is multicultural and multilingual. Love, grace and forgiveness are particularly necessary in multilingual communities where misunderstanding can be a daily reality.

Professor Ford has described the gathering of the disciples as the formation of a learning community. If we imagine that this community was multicultural, I would

like to suggest that the early disciples of Jesus were expected to learn not only from his teachings but also from one another. Jesus' followers were expected to learn from other disciples who were culturally and ethnically different from them. Similarly, the Gospel might encourage the reader to learn and develop theology in multicultural and multilingual settings in order to experience God's transformation through the Holy Spirit. One of the clear characteristics of theological interpretation of Scripture is its self-conscious ecclesial location.² The Gospel of John might challenge us to see our own ecclesial location as multicultural and multilingual. Our involvement and service among local and global Christian communities should inform the way we read, interpret and appropriate this Gospel.

Finally, I deeply appreciate the book's relevant comments about the Gospel of John in light of modern realities. Those comments help us to see the relevance of this first-century text for life today. For instance, the incident in the temple is linked to 'our world of global capitalism' and the 'global dominance of money-centered capitalism' (p. 73). The author rightly asks: 'How can God be worshiped and loved with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength in the face of the attraction and power of money? How can imaginations and desires shaped by advertising, economic incentives and imperatives, and fear of need be freed to delight in and serve God and other people? Can zeal for God and the worship of God compete for attention and time with the attractions of earning money and consuming?' (p. 73). I would like to suggest that in addition to these excellent reflections, modern readers should also incorporate questions that people living in the margins of society might ask. Christians around the world who follow Jesus in context of poverty, oppression, persecution, and marginalization might ask different contextual questions. Christians who are not necessarily distracted by the power of money or whose needs are not necessarily shaped by advertising or whose minds are not set on consumerism might have other questions that shape their readings of the Gospel of John. Christians concerned with obtaining their daily bread, or the basic gift of water, or surviving persecution might teach us how to engage this Gospel from the margins.

I conclude these comments by reiterating my gratefulness to Professor Ford for gifting us an excellent theological commentary that is a model of clarity and incisive reflection.

²Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), p. 2.