

# *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies*

Vol. 12, No. 1 (2022)

---

## **The Last Discourse – John 13-17**

V. Rev. Timothy Lowe

The Gospel of John is organized around several discourses, that is, several long teaching sections which are unique only to this gospel. The discourses themselves reflect the ongoing issues the Johannine communities are facing both externally within the greater Roman Empire as well as internally with their fellow Jews and their relationship with the synagogue. In many ways, the Gospel of John is an apology of faith over and against the Judaism of its day focusing on the person of Jesus as the long-awaited messiah.

The Last Discourse is the longest of these. A last discourse is not unusual in the Bible as it is a common literary technique as a main figure is facing death. There are examples of Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and even Paul in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> I will examine the content and issues of Jesus's last discourse in the gospel of John, focusing on its pastoral themes as it relates to the context of the emerging post-apostolic community and a blueprint for future leadership in the Johannine communities if they are to survive and be faithful to the gospel of the crucified messiah as they face persecution from within the Roman Empire, excommunication from the synagogues, and divisions within their own communities.

One of the different things with the Gospel of John is that there is no account of the last supper in comparison with the other gospels, no Passover meal and no establishment of a new covenant. What replaces it is the washing of the feet in chapter 13. Hence, we must pay close attention to this seminal chapter and its focus and message to the Johannine community at the end of the first century and beginning of the second one.

While the Passover is mentioned as coming, they are gathered together two days beforehand where Jesus announces that his “hour has come to depart out of this world to the Father” and that he has loved his “own to the end” (13:1). The Greek word here is “telos”, a word meaning “end” as in reaching a goal or the finality of death. And in this case, the two are the same. This is our context for the last discourse chapters 13-17. This is the overarching rubric to understand them.

In chapter 13, verse 4, Christ symbolically lays aside his garments before he washes the feet of his disciples and we must connect this action with his coming death, the laying aside of his life for them. He then begins to wash his disciples' feet. In the ancient world no male would do this to another male.<sup>2</sup> The job was for slaves, women or children. Hence Peter's objection is not without merit in verse

---

<sup>1</sup> Gen 49; Deut 32-33; Josh 24; 1 Sam 12; Acts 20.

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 191.

6 and leads to an important dialogue and a needed message for the Johannine churches.

After Peter's first objection to Christ humiliating himself in such a way, Christ responds with a strange prophetic statement: "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand!" (13:7) In other words, the meaning of the symbolic action expressing the content of Christ's coming death on the cross can only be understood after the event and not beforehand. This is clear by Peter's response of rejecting the washing altogether because he does not understand it. Or to put it differently, he cannot know beforehand the full implication of Christ's death on the cross until after the event, until after the first cleansing. Hence it requires an act of trust on his part to be "done unto" and then have the weight of the action on his shoulders.

After Peter's rejection of the washing, Christ says clearly that he must receive it or be cast aside because only through the washing does he have an inheritance. The Greek word is "meros" which reflects the Hebrew word, "helek" and refers to one's personal inheritance from his father, or the Ancient Hebrews and their portion of the land.

Apparently, Peter has a problem of constantly telling Christ what to do whether it be expressed as an act of arrogance (knowing better than the master himself) or piety (not just my feet but my hands and my head as well), it is all the same thing despite calling him Lord. This is important because he is considered the religious leader par excellence, a "type" so to speak and his behavior is constantly being contrasted with that of Christ's in the text. It is one of misguided zeal, grandiose gestures, and narcissism the likes of which is hard to tame.

After the dialogue with Peter and the completion of the act of humiliating service, (loving them to the end to hearken back to verse 1 of our chapter) Christ puts his clothes back on, reclines again and gives them a teaching moment: "Do you understand what I have done to you?" (13:12) The text does not give us their reply, but we know that they are clueless. In the gospel of John no one understands the condescension of love vis-à-vis the arrogance of the human being.

The text squeezes the disciples by confronting them with their own piety: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am" (John 13:13). It is at this point that the game is over and the weight of confession of faith is now the sword of Damocles hanging over everyone's head because the issue now becomes one of hearing and doing as students of the master: "Once you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (13:17).

So now the disciples must wash each other's feet as the seminal expression of obedience and love of Christ, as proof that they have an actual inheritance from him, an inheritance of teaching and example as a deposit towards eternal life. I take the text here to mean not disciples in the general broad sense, but specifically relations between the leaders of the churches, for the example must always start there. Bishops and priests, the appointed shepherds, must be committed to this kind of service to each other lest the sheep themselves wander away. If you will, this is basic Christianity 101, the heart of Christ's final hour, the consummation of his teaching and cross. If we fail on this point, the whole thing collapses. This is why the episode of the washing of the feet is, in my opinion, more powerful than the Last Supper accounts and critical to the post-apostolic age until the present time as it expresses the fundamental attitude leaders must have with each other and their common witness to their flocks.

In chapter 13, verse 18, we have a second reference to the coming betrayal of Judas and John's gospel will spend 13 verses on this topic which means it is a key centerpiece like the washing of the feet that needs our close attention. Is it just a stumbling block to be explained, "How could someone from

Christ's disciples betray him?" John references it as both something known to Christ and the fulfillment of Scripture and is sharing this knowledge beforehand so they will be prepared and understand the larger picture of his humiliating shameful death and its root causes. The passage is brilliant and has a shocking element as Christ is deeply troubled and testifies generically at the beginning that one of the 12 is going to betray him.

We are all acquainted with the word "testify," or to bear witness and we know it is technical and legal and not just opinion. What is even more odd is John 13:22: "His disciples stared at one another at a loss to know which of them he meant." The point is one of shock and horror. If Christ washing their feet was disturbing enough, now they have a brother betrayer in their midst! And yet Christ tells them beforehand so that they will not be "unmade" by the scandal! So is not this the message? In the larger context of Johannine communities and leadership, the point is that betrayal will constantly be with us and on the same level of handing over Christ to his enemies! Scandal will come from the highest levels of leadership and we should be prepared for such. And we should teach and prepare our people for such as well, and in the gospel of John the source is money/greed/earthly power, pure and simple. No one is safe from the seduction of money, greed and power. This section ends with Judas heading out into the night to do his business, showing his allegiance to the darkness of the evil one, and the text makes it clear that the others still had no idea what was going on around them even though they have been told.

In chapter 13, verse 31, Jesus exclaims: "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him." The movement of the chapter has been one of washing the feet, ushering Judas forward to his appointed task and now the above exclamation. We are all acquainted with the biblical word "glory," the very weight of God's presence as he expresses his power in a victorious conquering of his enemies. And yet where is this "glory" that Christ proclaims is being visibly demonstrated, for glory cannot be hidden? Is it Christ's mere acceptance of the divine plan/will which leads to the cross? Or has the full content and meaning of the cross already been functionally demonstrated in the washing of the feet making the second act of the crucifixion functionally anticlimactic for those of us who have been "done unto"?

While Jesus tells the remaining eleven that he is leaving them and they cannot come with him at this time, he sandwiches this cryptic saying between a key verse:

*A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. (John 13:34-35)*

So the glory of Christ is demonstrated in acts of love and these demonstrations of power are now referential as a singular commandment and identifying mark of being his disciple. Again, notice that the emphasis continues to be on the inter-relations of the future leaders. Not only must they humiliatingly serve each other but they must do it out of love without grinding their teeth in the process.

The chapter ends with Peter again trying to preempt the process with his own bold self-assertions: "I will lay down my life for you," he exclaims (John 13:37). Christ is not asking Peter to do anything other than serve his fellow brothers with love, and Peter himself wants to focus on Christ's own coming death. If he cannot die to himself, he will end up denying Christ altogether when put to the test. This is the whole point: "I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times!" (John 13:38) Are we the next Judas, the lover of money? Are we the next denier? Are we the next one to reject the washing of the feet? These are questions posed to the Johannine community as

they are kicked out of the synagogue and create divisions among themselves, if the historical context is to be believed by current scholars.

Chapter 14 continues the last meal discourse begun in chapter 13 and the break for the new chapter is artificial. The chapter is clustered around a series of three questions from the mouths of Thomas, Philip and Judas (not Iscariot). If we understand the questions, we understand the chapter.

After the final disturbing news of chapter 13, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later,” (John 13:30) Christ tells them not to have troubled hearts over this for he goes to prepare a place for them and thus will return later to gather them (John 14:1). This leads to our first question placed in the mouth of Thomas: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (John 14:5) Sadly this comes after Christ announces that they know the way, so there is a clash and disconnect. You would think that Christ would repeat his examples of laying aside his garments and washing their feet as betrayal looms and yet the point of Thomas’s ignorance is to demonstrate the difficulty of truly accepting the message of the cross and the end of an earthly messiah and an earthly kingdom. One of the quagmires of pastoral work or teaching is the assumption that the hearers and/or students actually understand what you are saying and then believe it. Thomas here does not get anything and that is the point which allows Christ to clarify again who he is and what he actually is doing.

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you knew me, you would know my Father as well!” (John 14:6-7)*

In other words you cannot dismiss the previous chapter once you have been “done unto” by Christ as I am calling it. In fact, Christ gets nastier by following up with the statement: “From now on, you know him and have seen him” (John 14:7).

Philip, not to be undone in stupidity by his counterpart Thomas, responds with, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us” (John 14:8). This leads into a long monologue of patient discourse: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you for such a long time?” (John 14:9) The answer is of course, “no.” Speaking as a priest of 35 years, this is most telling because enduring cluelessness is part of our landscape. We speak and speak and speak. We teach and teach and teach and still our words fall on a lot of deaf ears. Finally, Christ tells Philip to look at the works themselves that he has done as vindication that there is more going on here than empty talk. And here we must hearken back to the previous chapter as the culmination of “his works” in symbolic washing as expression of his consummate love and death on the cross.

What follows now is the whole notion of doing greater works than Christ by asking them in his name since he will now be able to answer prayer just as the Father has answered his requests. If you will, it has taken the aura of a talisman, the magical formula of power for Christian success: “In Jesus’s name. In Jesus’s name. In Jesus’s name.” And so the text traps us again because the formula often does not work and thus we stand condemned for our own failure and unbelief! But the corrective comes in the next verse, “If you love me, you will do what I command” (John 14:15). Think back to the previous chapter where Christ gives them a new commandment, which is now repeated.

Having said this, you would think it would be enough, but Christ continues and talks about another lawyer, the Spirit of truth to be with them forever, coming from the Father. This means they will have no excuse whatsoever if they are unbelieving, unknowing, unfruitful and weak. Christ sums his actions up in the phrase: “I will not leave you orphans” (John 14: 18). So the disciples, leaders of

the next generation and those beyond have been given the tools to do the job at hand. Therefore, we are all left without excuses, and this is the whole point.

Now notice how the argument circles back around again at the end to the commandments:

*Whoever has my commandments and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. (14:21)*

In the end, “the way” is the way of Christ’s commandments, so we should not drift too far from them, let alone get excited by any other signs or wonders, as they may in fact be temptations, or at least, distractions.

This means we have come to our last foil with a question from Judas noted as “not Iscariot”: “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?” (14:22) This serves again to emphasize in boring repetition the issue of love of Christ being synonymous with obeying his teaching: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching...he who does not love me will not obey my teaching” (14:24). If this was not enough, Christ claims that these words come directly from the Father so there is no room for discussion or negotiation. Again, reference is made to the coming lawyer, the Holy Spirit, who will remind us of all that has been taught which means that it is singularly an issue of obedience and nothing else.

Verse 29 brings again the technique which we have heard twice previously, “I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe.” So, these two chapters which open the last discourse are designed to strengthen our belief in the gospel of the crucified messiah and not be ignorant of the commandments flowing from his side, to use a later Johannine image from chapter 19. Christ closes the chapter with the singular positive reference to the world when all of his work is accomplished: “The cosmos must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (14:31). This means there can be no longer any confusion or misunderstanding about who he is. The meal summarily ends, “Rise now, let us leave from here” (14:31).

Chapter 15 begins a new meditation that is distinct and disconnected from the two previous chapters. There is no departure despite the reference above. It opens with the statement: “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.” Isaiah 5:1-7 is the clear reference in the background where the vineyard is the rebellious house of Israel which is about to pass through judgment and destruction. This chapter has a clear dimension of judgment for those branches extending from the vine that are not fruitful. They will be cut off by God the Father and thrown into the fire to be burned. Those branches/disciples that are fruitful will be pruned so as to bear more fruit. Without fruitfulness, we are worthless.

What is important is to understand the clear hierarchy in this meditation: God the Father is the gardener; Christ is the vine and the disciples are the branches. It is a hierarchy we saw in the previous chapter as well when Christ says that no one can come to the Father except through him. So, we are connected to God only through Christ and therefore we bear fruit solely by remaining/abiding in him. We can do nothing on our own. This point is repeated twice in verses 4 and 5. Later in verse 7 he references as well, his “words” remaining in the disciples as the key. In verse 10 he further clarifies that they must obey his commandment in order to remain in his love. It should not surprise us that love is primarily expressed as faithfulness to his commandments in view of the biblical Israel’s all-encompassing sin of harlotry.

He completes this thought by referencing his personal joy through faithfulness and sharing it with them and thus making it richer and more complete. Finally, they are told again to love each other as he has loved them but then interjects a novel idea found only here:

*I no longer call you servants/slaves, because a servant does not know his Master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.  
(John 15:15)*

In other words, they are given a unique status based on disclosed knowledge that brings with it the burden of mutual love because they share in this knowledge of the teaching of Christ. Again, the focus is on mutual relations within the community and in repeating this point again in verse 17, "This is my command: Love each other," we can surmise elsewhere, e.g., in the epistles of John, that the community was tearing itself apart with strife and disagreements.

John 15:18-25 addresses the issue of rejection and persecution that the disciples will face. The gospel of John lives in a black and white world both within the context of the Roman empire and rejection by the Jewish community. In 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Christianity, the apparent audience of the gospel of John, Christ still is the epiphany and forerunner in all things:

*If the world hates you, remember it hated me first. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours as well. (John 15:18-20)*

But then there is an odd but key insertion in verse 21: "They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me." The case in the gospel of John is that his opponents do not know His Father and that he is not acting in his own name or with his own words. Therefore, they hate both of them. In the gospel of John, it is inconceivable that there could ever be any marriage between the teaching of Christ in the nascent community of believers and the Roman Empire. This would undo all that they knew and understood of the gospel itself and its teaching. John 15:22 says it concisely, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin."

In the end, Christ concludes that he has been hated without reason but nonetheless as he leaves the earthly community, he will send the Spirit of truth from his father to continue the testimony in future generations. The promise of the coming Spirit and the ongoing teaching are the links between the apostolic witness and all future generations.

Up to this point I have said nothing about the overall unity of the last discourse chapters. A case could be made that they are in fact a patchwork of discourses put together with repetitions of theme and thought so that there is no real literary unity at all. At the end of Chapter 14 when Christ closes and says mealtime is over, let us go from here, the narrative starts all over again. Peter and Thomas ask Christ where he is going in chapters 13 and 14 and then in the chapter 16:5, Jesus says that no one asks him where he is going. All of this is to state that chapter 16 opens up again with the theme of persecution and the cause of the persecution is ignorance of the Father and therefore Christ himself.

But the principle in the gospel is quite simple, since you have been told everything beforehand, you will be prepared for the ensuing persecution (excommunication) and hatred (martyrdom) of the Roman authorities or the misguided zeal of your fellow monotheists, the Jews. All of this is put under the rubric of Christ's imminent departure and so he will no longer be able to protect them. The counterweight though is the promise of the Spirit who will both continue and complete the teaching

of Christ as his agent. Just as Jesus was the agent of the Father, so the Spirit will now be the agent of Jesus: “He will take of what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14).

What is a constant underlying conviction and belief about the gospel of John is that no one really can understand Jesus until after his resurrection, after his final glorification and the coming of the Spirit. This again puts the squeeze on the community who live post-resurrection and post-Pentecost. The haplessness of the disciples is temporarily excused because Jesus is still with them, but the haplessness of the disciples afterwards, their unbelief and barrenness is inexcusable. The hour of scattering is no longer in play as the peace of Christ; his glorification has conquered the world. Our job is to do the commandments focused solely on the menial tasks of loving service with clarity in understanding the manner in which we share in the “hour” of Christ.

Like many elements of the Gospel of John, chapter 17 has nothing to compare itself with. The entire chapter is a long prayer and can be divided into three parts: Verses 1-8 where Jesus prays for himself, verses 9-24 where he prays for his present disciples and future generations, and verses 25-26 where he restates his work and mission. Similar to the washing of the feet which replaces the episode of the Last Supper and the breaking of bread, this episode replaces the agony in Gethsemane of the Synoptics. The previous chapter ended with the declaration: “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” essentially moving us beyond this synoptic point of crisis and submission to the divine plan of suffering.

Chapter 17 opens up with Jesus’s declaration, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your son, that your son may glorify you” (verse 1). Jesus realizes that it is only his father who can make him appear victorious to all and the time has come for that to happen and only then can he in return glorify his father. Jesus declares he has been absolutely faithful to his mission and in verse 5 makes the request to return to his original status:

*And now, O Father, glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was. ( John 17:5)*

I am not going to talk now about the “pre-existent” Son, but rather the manner in which Christ assures his disciples of the majesty of God and the comfort and assuredness of the divine plan expressed in the hyperbolic phrase, “before the world was.” In other words, no small thing is happening in front of the eyes of the disciples.

In John 17:6, the prayer focuses solely on the disciples as the ones specifically set aside by the Father to receive the “deposit of word” that is the teaching given to them by Jesus as the very words coming from the Father.

The second section begins Jesus’s intercession for his disciples. The opening verse, John 17:9, is odd because it states that Jesus is solely praying for those who have been faithful and not for others in the world. It is here that we must remember the larger context of Jesus’s departure from them and therefore he can no longer take care of them in the manner his physical presence allowed. So he asks the Father to look after them while they remain in a very hostile world. He does interject a new thought that He will be glorified in them and this hearkens back to verse 1 and glorification happening through faithfulness to the teaching and mission of Christ. It is this common faithfulness to teaching and mission that unity is revealed and experienced as a oneness both with the Father and Jesus his Son and agent. As Christ has faithfully and successfully trained the 12 minus the son of perdition, so now the process must continue forward giving future generations the same assuredness of the original disciples

themselves.

So, living according to the deposit of words, means that the disciples are no longer of the world because they have been formed from above: “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:16). In verse 17, Jesus requests that the Father “sanctify them in truth”, that is make them completely holy and set apart by the truth that is the word of the Father.

John 17:18-19 continue the hierarchy of Father to Son, and Son to disciples: “As you sent me into the world, I have also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so they also may be sanctified by the truth.” So it is in being wholly set aside to the word of truth that the disciples can glorify Christ which according to this gospel will include persecution and hatred from the outside as well as the call to humble service to others.

The focus of John 17:20-23 now changes to future generations, which means everyone gets squeezed by this gospel. So the hierarchy of order continues, Father to Son to first disciples and then subsequent generations. This has nothing to do with the silliness of apostolic succession but is word/teaching based. The unity of verse 21, “That they all may be one, as you, Father are in Me, and I in You” is not a theoretical ontological based unity, but a functional unity of keeping the commandments of God, the obedience of genuine love. While we can acknowledge that the issues of doctrine and creed provide a structure of external unity, in the gospel of John it is the confession that Jesus has come from the Father, revealed the will of the Father and has returned to the Father and provided all things for his community left behind to continue faithfully in the same service and love.

In fact, the unity in John’s gospel is so powerful as to be a profound witness to the hostile world because it is not manufactured by human hands. Or to put it another way, the world will recognize in some fashion the truth of the teaching when they see the powerful witness of unity that flows from the well of keeping the commandments in love. So, unity is more about the question of entering into the unity that exists between the Father and his Son Jesus, a unity based upon Jesus’s complete and perfect obedience and love of his Father’s will.

John 17 ends with a repetition of Jesus’s earlier declaration that the world is ignorant of the Father, but he is not. He has now shared this intimate knowledge of God with his disciples, and that they have accepted the fundamental truth about who Jesus is. The unity of the three in love, Father, Son, and disciples is his final petition, and therefore it is his final legacy and warning to us, especially anyone in a leadership position. We are now held responsible for the deposit of teaching and the gift of washing. Yes, we are no longer fighting with fellow Jews over who Jesus is, or being excommunicated from the synagogue and being persecuted by the Roman authorities. Perhaps all theological apologies have largely ended within our church.

What remains for us is the teaching of Christ, focusing on the commandments themselves and our acceptance of humble service to each other, specifically any of us in positions of authority. While the gospel does focus on theological correctness about the person of Jesus, it balances this out with greater emphasis on obedience in love and humility. This is how we are called to witness as a community of faith to the outside world. This is how Jesus is glorified in us and thus how God himself is glorified. If the behavior does not match the confession of faith, then we become fruitless and are worthless branches cut off and burned. Therefore, we must heed the warnings of the last discourse and realize that we have no excuse for faithlessness for we have been “done unto” by Christ in teaching, washing, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, according to the Gospel of John.