

# The Gospel of John as Priority Text for Postmodern Teens

By Cameron Cole

Mark Ostreicher, in his book *Youth Ministry 3.0*, offers a caution to those ministering to students about the uniqueness of the teens of this present postmodern generation.<sup>1</sup> While many youth workers believe they can approach postmodern teens in the same manner in which they were approached, Ostreicher contests that this generation possesses distinctive characteristics.

Postmodern teens have been socialized in the age of technology, where they can access their every want with the stroke of a keyboard. They live in a time of superb healthcare, where the average life expectancy in the United States exceeds eighty years. These features have contributed to socializing a generation with little concern about death. They also have generated a group of teen fixated on instant gratification and their immediate personal experience.

While these trends stand for better or for worse, they have serious implications for student ministers striving to share the Gospel with postmodern teens. Offering a person eternal life<sup>2</sup> upon death has little sizzle or appeal to a student focused on how he or she feels right now. Teens generally give very little thought to death, however, they hunger for relief, hope, and joy in their daily lives. In the mindset of a postmodern teen, they have very deep needs. However, they do not connect these needs to their eternal condition but to their immediate experience. Consequently, student ministers must emphasize the benefits offered through Christ in the present age or risk no connection with their audience.

Given this need to speak to the daily needs and experiences of teens, the Gospel of John constitutes a priority text for student ministry in the postmodern era. While the Synoptic Gospels discuss eternal life almost exclusively in eschatological terms, John uniquely emphasizes the benefits of eternal life for believers in the present age. He overtly states that the purpose of his Gospel is that his readers may have life through Christ, the source of life. John sees eternal life as beginning and growing as a person places and increases faith in Jesus in this life.

## The Purpose of John

The purpose statement of John declares the evangelist's intention to portray Jesus as the source of life and to help his audience experience that life in this age through faith in Christ. The evangelist addresses his readership in his purpose statement more directly and boldly than the other three Gospels.<sup>3</sup> He writes in John 20:30, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." John writes his Gospel first for the sake that readers would accept, both intellectually and spiritually as ultimate truth, that Jesus stands as the promised Messiah of the Prophets and the Son of God. In this way, the Fourth Gospel has historical and philosophical intentions of convincing readers of the truth of Christ as Lord.

Secondly, John also has purposes related to experiencing eternal life. In John 20:31, he concludes his purpose statement, writing his ultimate hope, "that by believing you may have life in his name." He hopes that readers will gain "life" by accepting this truth about Jesus.

Breaking down the parts of the second section of the purpose statement provides a view of the three components of the theology of eternal life in John. First, John expresses the hope that his readers "may have life." He aims for his account of Jesus to result in the experience of life for his audience. Second, he points to Jesus as the source of all life in the phrase "in his name." Finally, the evangelist links the life he hopes readers may possess and the source of life, Jesus, with the phrase "by believing." John presents faith

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Ostreicher, *Youth Ministry 3.0* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> According to C.H. Dodd, the term "life" [ζωή] and "eternal life" [αἰώνιος ζωή] are used interchangeably with discernible difference in all four Gospels. Thus, in this paper both terms point to the same meaning of eternal life.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 699.

as the vehicle through which believers gain life through Christ. This paper will examine the three parts of this purpose statement in order to demonstrate why John has such great value for postmodern teens.

## That You May Have Life

As previously stated, John intends for his readers to experience life through Christ. He uses the term “life” [ζωή] to represent an ultimate sense of “happiness and satisfaction”.<sup>4</sup> The Greek text in the purpose statement reveals much about John’s focus on experiencing eternal life in this age. John’s purpose in presenting Christ as Messiah is “in order that [his reader] may have life” (“ἵνα ... ζωὴν ἐχητε”). The verb (“ἐχητε”) is a present active verb in the context of a purpose clause. In Greek, present verbs have a continuous, rather than a completed nature, meaning that the verb constitutes a continuous process without a defined endpoint. Therefore, the text suggests that John hopes that believers have life in the present and that this experience continues for perpetuity. Jesus’ parable of the Good Shepherd furthers this present emphasis when Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10). John intends for believers to see life as an “immediate gift.”<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, John’s theology of eternal life contains more than simply experience in the present age. In several contexts, John refers to eternal life in eschatological terms. In the conversation with Nicodemus of John 3, Jesus talks about believers having life so that they will “not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). He goes on to say that he did not enter the world to “condemn” but to “save” (Jn 3:17). In this context, Jesus’ words carry eschatological connotations. In these verses, John’s view of eternal life most resembles that of the Synoptics.

In the Synoptics, Jesus speaks about eternal life exclusively in eschatological terms. In the story of the Rich Young Ruler, Jesus discusses the requirements to “inherit” eternal life and to escape judgment in the age to come (Mt 19, Lk 18). In multiple contexts, when Jesus forecasts his death and resurrection, he says he will be “raised to life” after he dies (Mt 16:23, Lk 9:22). In the Synoptics, a person gains eternal life when they leave this world and enter the age to come. This eschatological portrayal is consistent with the Jewish conception of eternal life, which viewed it as a future reality.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, John most commonly talks about eternal life in both a present and eschatological manner. In John 6:40, Jesus states that the “Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” He also says that “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (Jn 5:24). Furthermore, in John 11:25, he refers to himself as the “resurrection and the life” with “resurrection” pointing to salvation upon dying and “life” referring to the present age.<sup>7</sup> In these passages, John illustrates how believers will receive eternal life as soon as they place saving faith in him. This impartation of eternal life remains with them until their death and continues into the age to come. Dodd reinforces this point by adding that believers in Christ are “already living in a pregnant sense which excludes the possibility of ceasing to live” when they die.<sup>8</sup>

Either Greek thought or John’s Greek audience influenced his fuller theology of eternal life. Hellenistic religion and philosophy, particularly gnosticism, sought enlightenment and salvation in this life.<sup>9</sup> Philo, a Jewish theologian and philosopher heavily influenced by Greek thought, emphasized the quality of present experience, contrary to what one may expect from Jewish writers of his time.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, John’s exposure to Greek thought influenced his focus on the present benefits of life in Christ. At the same time, John may have understood that his Greek readership had a high value of their present experience and

---

<sup>4</sup> George Barker Stevens, *The Johannine Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1907), 327.

<sup>5</sup> E.F. Scott, *The Historical and Religious Value of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Mifflin, 1909), 57.

<sup>6</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 290.

<sup>7</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation*, 148.

<sup>9</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation*, 150. Also C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 179.

<sup>10</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation*, 150.

little concern for their ultimate salvation, and, therefore, wrote about eternal life in the present age to adapt to this specific audience.

John's complete view of eternal life, as both present experience and eschatological salvation, yields a level of versatility to his reading audience. With his references to eternal life in eschatological terms, John connects to his Jewish audience, who considered the concept in light of the age to come. By focusing on this experience of life in the present age, he effectively engaged his Greek readers, as well.

## In His Name

Jesus as the only source of life constitutes the second element of John's theology of eternal life. In John's purpose statement he attaches the phrase "in his name" (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ) to modify the means by which believers "may have life." The term ὀνόματι has deeper connotations than simply a title or appellation. In this sense, "name" means power or authority. Bultmann believes that John intentionally adds the phrase as a connection to the prologue where John says "to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). These two central verses in John connect relationship to Jesus as adopted children of God and experiencing eternal life. John could have said simply that he hopes his audience has life by believing, but this additional phrase expresses the necessity that life comes through Jesus.

This phrase in the purpose statement ("in his name") reflects the major theme in John's theology of eternal life that Jesus stands as the exclusive source of life. Christ explains that "the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man" (Jn 5:26). He attributes the Father as the source of all life, who has transferred to him this life and authority over eternal life. He also says, "just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it" (Jn 5:21). Stevens goes as far as to say that the "very purpose" the Father sends the Son is to give life to whom he chooses.<sup>11</sup>

John extends this view of Jesus as the life-source to a level of exclusivity, where Christ constitutes the only source of life. Jesus, in one of his "I am" statements, declares, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:26). Jesus offers no other avenue by which a person can inherit and experience eternal life, except through himself. Jesus' critique of the Pharisees reflects this exclusivity, when he says, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (Jn 5:39-40). Christ's words suggest that a virtuous endeavor, studying scripture, yields no life if not connected to relationship with him. The concept of Jesus as the only authorized source of life comprises an important element of John's theology of eternal life in his gospel account.

## By Believing

John communicates his gospel's intention, that readers may have eternal life, and establishes Jesus as the only source by which believers may access true life. The evangelist bridges believers to the life-source in his purpose statement with the participle "by believing" (πιστευοντες). Hence, John views faith as the vehicle by which believers experience eternal life. Again, the Greek text reflects the nature of John's view of eternal life as present experience. The participle, πιστευοντες, is a present active participle, meaning it signifies a continuous, perpetual act. John's Gospel views faith as belief initiated in time, which continues throughout this life.<sup>12</sup> He portrays a broad view of faith in relationship to eternal life, which frequently relates to seeking life in Jesus to satisfy the temporal needs.

In some passages in John, Jesus explicitly states that one obtains eternal life through by believing. Jesus tells Nicodemus that "the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (Jn 3:15). In John 5, Jesus says to the Jews, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent

---

<sup>11</sup> George Barker Stevens, *The Johannine Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1907), 60.

<sup>12</sup> An entire dissertation could be written on faith in John's Gospel. In this paper, I will focus on faith as a continuous act linked to gaining eternal life in the context of passages about eternal life.

me has eternal life.” In many of the passages Jesus directly uses the term “believe” to demonstrate to his audience how they may have eternal life.

However, John uses different words and images other than “believe” to portray his concept of faith in relation to eternal life.<sup>13</sup> Words such as eat, drink, receive, learn, being born, and confess all relate and contribute to John’s concept of faith.<sup>14</sup> John’s concept of faith has a close relationship to knowledge but exceeds simple intellectual assent to the reality of Christ as Messiah.<sup>15</sup>

John views belief as continual relating, obeying, and pursuing of Jesus. In response to Thomas’ question in John 14, Jesus says that eternal life comes through “knowing” him (Jn 14:5-7). Jesus proclaims that he is the “light of life” and that anyone who “follows” him will have the “light of life” (Jn 8:12). He says that anyone who “comes” to him never will lack for eternal life (Jn 6:35). In John, the faith, which yields eternal life, begins with intellectual acceptance of Jesus as Messiah and includes union with Christ and “life-giving” dependence.<sup>16</sup>

The relating, depending, and pursuing of Christ represent the continual, daily nature of faith which John depicts in his Gospel. One can observe this concept of continually trusting Jesus in Christ’s metaphors and language, which repeatedly lean on the daily, earthly needs of his audience. In particular, Jesus uses metaphorical language related to food and drink, hunger and thirst, in passages related to eternal life. Christ refers to himself as the “bread of life” and pledges that “whoever comes to [him] will never go hungry, and whoever believes in [him] will never be thirsty” (Jn 6:35). He goes on to say that “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life” (Jn 6:54). Finally, in his conversation with the woman at the well, Jesus offers that “whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). Jesus awakens people to their most basic needs for survival in the context of seeking Christ for eternal life on a continual basis. He calls for believers to feed and drink and consume Jesus to have eternal life here and now. In the same way that consuming food and water perpetuates one’s physical life, so does continually trusting Jesus supply a person with eternal life on a daily basis.

This mode contrasts starkly with the needs Jesus elicits in the Synoptics. Christ engages the eschatological concerns of his audience. In a call to strict obedience, Jesus warns, “it is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire” (Mk 18:8-9, Mk 9:43-44). Here Jesus elicits his audience’s concerns with the condition of their soul upon death to motivate obedience. In another context in the Synoptics, Jesus promises that “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (Mt 19:30). Here Jesus offers glorious reward and eternal life in the age to come for those who surrender all for Christ. Christ taps into needs in the future when discussing the attainment of eternal life.

This juxtaposition illustrates how intensely John’s Gospel concentrates on present experience and perpetual faith. Bultmann writes, “For [John] the faith of Christians is not a conviction that is present once and for all, but it must perpetually make sure of itself anew”.<sup>17</sup> This emphasis in continually believing in Christ in no way suggests that a person compromises their promise of eternal life in the age to come if they fail in trusting; instead John presents daily trusting Jesus as the means by which believers may have most abundant eternal life now. Furthermore, his presentation of trust possesses depth far beyond intellectual assent and encompasses a person pursuing and depending on Christ with their whole being.

## **Analysis of John as a Priority Text for Postmodern Teens**

John most likely knew the religious and philosophical climate of the Greek world in which he wrote. Their worldview focused on maximizing their experience in the present age with less concern about the age

---

<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, Jesus is the one choosing and using the words. Since the paper focuses on the distinctiveness of John’s authorship, I will refer to John as the one choosing the words which Jesus spoke.

<sup>14</sup> James Gaffney, “Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel,” *Theological Studies* 26 (1965): 219-22.

<sup>15</sup> E.F. Scott, *The Historical and Religious Value of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Mifflin, 1909) 58.

<sup>16</sup> George Barker Stevens, *The Johannine Theology*, 327.

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 699.

to come. Consequently, he authored his gospel account with the purpose of helping his audience experience eternal life in the present life and forever. He clearly proclaimed Jesus as the solitary source of life and showed through metaphorical language how continual faith in Christ yields life now.

Similarly, with a postmodern generation fixated on present experience, John constitutes an essential and priority biblical text for student ministers. John's offer of eternal life as an immediate, not a deferred, gift, resonates with postmodern teens. His offer of pursuing life in Christ right now- not just when you die- has an empowering message to an instant gratification generation.

Student ministers need to recognize that most postmodern teens resonate little with the eschatological concerns of eternal life in heaven or everlasting judgment in hell. However, they listen to how trusting Jesus affects them here and now. Simultaneously, in the same way that John offers passages which relate to the pressing needs of his audience, student ministers need to understand and lean on the daily needs of teens, which are met fully in Christ. Whether teens struggle with loneliness, despair, loss, or depression, student pastors must help them see the needs in their heart and how trusting Jesus meets these needs. Every teen and every person ultimately needs eternal life today and forever, and we must point them to trust daily in Jesus, the only source of life, as John so aptly demonstrates.