

How Does John 13–17 Fit John’s Evangel?

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, some have quibbled over viewing John 20:30–31 as the overarching purpose for John’s Gospel.¹ They observe that John’s Gospel contains both U-TRUTH (truth for the Unbeliever) and B-TRUTH (truth for the Believer). They see John 20:30–31 as a U-PURPOSE passage (a purpose aimed at the unbeliever). In a nutshell, their conundrum can be stated as a thesis:

John contains much B-TRUTH that seems unrelated to the U-PURPOSE of 20:30–31, so how could it possibly be the book’s overarching purpose statement?

What can be said about the hermeneutics of those posing such a question? There is both good news and bad news.

First, the good news: Yes, it is true that John does contain many truths that can only believers can apply. Yes, it is true that John does contain many truths that can unbelievers cannot apply. Yes, we can heartily agree that it would be a travesty for an unbeliever to attempt to apply truths that only believers can apply.

Then, the bad news: It is not sufficient to identify: “Is this a truth that only believers can apply?” It is also important to ask: “Does John’s Gospel indicate that proper application of this passage by believers will have a persuasive effect on unbelievers?” Let me give an obvious example from John 13:34–35: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*

Clearly, Jesus commands believing disciples to have mutual love. He does not command this of unbelievers. However, He speaks of the application of His command in terms of its effect upon others. In particular, He speaks of its effect upon unbelievers. In that light, John 13:35 is more than B-TRUTH. Those who wonder how B-TRUTH contributes to John’s U-PURPOSE have not observed that much truth that they would regard as B-TRUTH is more than B-TRUTH, even though only believers can apply it.

Let us consider the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–17) afresh. In many ways, the impact of that passage upon unbelievers was designed to be akin to what Romans 11:11 says about the Church being on earth (in part) to provoke Israel to jealousy. At a yet-future date, Israel will see (as they look upon Gentile believers) how ludicrous it is for them (as God’s chosen people) to stand in rebellion against God. They will look upon Him whom they crucified in a new way and they (through faith) will live. Similarly, the Upper Room Discourse has an evangelistic side to it.

¹ Technically, it is the purpose for the inclusion of the signs in the book, but the testimony given by the signs is integrated so thoroughly into the Gospel that it is (for all intents and purposes) the book’s purpose statement. Unless otherwise noted all Scripture is from the New King James Version (Nashville: Nelson, 1982).

THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE

JOHN 13:1–30: FOOTWASHING AND JUDAS

The Footwashing Itself: Many evangelicals squirm at Judas being present through the first thirty verses of John 13. It is not until verse 30 that he left. Many a sermon has apologized for the fact that Judas was present, as though Jesus did not know how to handle the presence of an unbeliever. How do the sermons apologize? Preachers say such things as, “John 13–17 has no relevance for unbelievers. Judas was there for part of it, but everything here is directed towards believers.”

When Jesus sought to wash Peter’s feet, he objected. Jesus was able to correct Peter and the other believing disciples, without neglecting Judas in John 13:6–11.

⁶Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, “Lord, are You^{singular} washing my feet?” ⁷Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing you^{singular} do not understand now, but you will know after this.” ⁸Peter said to Him, “You^{singular} shall never wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you^{singular}, you^{singular} have no part with Me.” ⁹Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you^{plural} are clean, but not all^{plural}.²” ¹¹For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, “You^{plural} are not all clean.”

When Peter objected, Jesus explained to him (verse 8) that he would lack rewards inheritance [*you will have no part with Me*].³ Thus, verse 9 addresses the believers.

Verse 10 differentiates between the believers and the one unbeliever, Judas. The eleven are clean. Their problem is analogous to the need for footwashing, whereas Judas has a more fundamental need (everlasting life). Jesus used the term *bathed* as a figurative way to describe the solution. Judas had never believed in Christ, whereas the others had. Jesus quietly let Judas know that He knew that Judas still needed to believe in Him. Peter’s initial refusal of footwashing gave Jesus opportunity to differentiate between the complete purification that an unbeliever needs from the partial cleansing that believers need for fellowship. The point is that Jesus did not ignore Judas as He ministered to the believers.

Thus, what Jesus said in this passage cannot be characterized as B=TRUTH only.

² The translation drops “of you” that is in the NKJV, because the Greek lacks the “of you.”

³ Many assume that *you will have no part with Me* is a denial that Peter was eternally secure. However, the fact that Jesus pronounces eleven of the disciples clean (verses 10–11) should cause an immediate rejection of that view. The idea of *part* is an allotment for inheritance. Jesus is warning Peter against losing rewards inheritance.

Identifying the Betrayer: When expositors assert that the Upper Room Discourse has no relevance for unbelievers, they fail to note that Jesus continued to address Judas' problem. Jesus addressed the issue of unbelief discretely, as evidenced by the fact that none of the eleven discerned that Judas was an unbeliever who would betray Jesus. Observe that Jesus directly or indirectly addressed Judas several times during the meal. He particularly did so as He dipped the bread. We should not assume that Jesus wrote off Judas, just because that is our tendency. Jesus continued working with him as long as the door remained open. Would not the unbeliever see Jesus' concern for Judas until the very end? Can we deny the persuasiveness of Jesus reaching out to the very one who He knew would betray Him.

The Commandment of Love: John 13:34–35 says, *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.* How often have we all heard a believer say, "The love between Christians is what attracted me to the Bible when I was an unbeliever." We read these verses from the standpoint of Christians seeking to have an impact upon unbelievers. Is it possible that John included these words here for them to cause the unbelieving hearer who listened to the Gospel being read aloud?

Christ Preparing a Place for Believers: John 14:3, says, *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.* Believers take comfort in this, but it could be a wonderful apologetic to an unbeliever. Jesus does not just give people everlasting life, but He has prepared everything ahead of time for when we are to be in His presence. Jesus is making the promise of everlasting life attractive.

Jesus Is the Way: John 14:6, says, *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.* Certainly, everyone can see how this passage can have an impact upon unbelievers. Christ presenting Himself as the only road that is not a dead-end has caused many to consider what else He says and does. How many times have we seen John 14:6 in gospel tracts? Tract writers perceive the attractiveness of this verse. Jesus has not forgotten the unbeliever in the Upper Room Discourse. How is it that we fail to appreciate this?

Jesus Is the Vine: The care that Jesus shows for His own is evident here. If John 15 is comforting to us, how can we miss its low-key appeal to an unbeliever? Note also how verse 3 reiterates John 13:10, but this time, all those hearing Jesus' words in person were believers.

The World Will Hate You: John 15:18ff. reminds the reader that Jesus performed his signs before a world that hated Him without a cause, so it is not surprising that the world will hate them also. Believers appreciate those words in one way, but an unbeliever hearing those words has opportunity to reflect upon the case that John has made for Jesus as the Christ who irrevocably gives life as a gift.

The Spirit Will Convict the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment. John 16:9 says that He will convict the world because they do not believe in Him. In all seriousness, this passage is not focused on believers at all—even though it is in the Upper Room Discourse.

The High Priestly Prayer: In John 17, Jesus did not only pray for the eleven, but also *for those who will believe through their word* (verse 20). Persuading the unbeliever was prominent in Jesus' thinking, as it was for the apostle John. This is part and parcel of what Jesus and John were all about.

RETHINKING A SHARP DIVISION BETWEEN U-TRUTH and B-TRUTH

Some believers seem to fear the possibility that an unbeliever might read John 13–17. Apparently, they assume that nothing within those chapters would benefit an unbeliever. At best, it seems that they figure that an unbeliever will find nothing of value. At worst, they think that John 13–17 might be confusing.

We have seen that the unbeliever is prominent in Jesus' thinking within these chapters. We have also seen that Jesus carefully distinguishes between believers and unbelievers. Believers are bathed, unbelievers are not. He has prepared a place for believers to be with Him, but not for unbelievers. Believers are the ones whose mutual love for one another will affect unbelievers. Believers are the branches of the vine, unbelievers are not. The world hates believers without a cause, just as it hated Him without a cause. The Spirit will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (in part) because they do not believe in Him. Jesus does not only pray for those who are believers at one point in time, but also for those who will believe through their words. A careful reading would enable an unbeliever to see that Jesus did not expect unbelievers to apply things for which believing in Christ is prerequisite.

We have seen that truth applied by believers can have a persuasive effect on unbelievers. In that regard, we must not say that B-TRUTH is irrelevant to unbelievers. It is quite relevant as part of what John presents in a book designed that its readers might gain life. Note the uses of you in John 20:30–31. The readers needed to believe and they needed life. The readers were unregenerate unbelievers.

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [the eight signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing [this] you may have life in His name.⁴

WHICH IS GEARED FOR UNBELIEVERS?

Oddly, some who dismiss the idea that John 13–17 is part of the persuasive message for unbelievers are inclined to find their gospel message in books written to believers (such as Romans). Based on John 20:30–31 we can safely say that John intended for unbelievers to read his Gospel. Therefore, we can safely say that John sought to make the message as simple as possible. We can also see evidence that passages often characterized as B-TRUTH are set forth in such a way that an unbeliever should have little difficulty getting the general picture even in these passages. Furthermore, the sense that they will gain (even from these passages) is designed to persuade them of the truth that Jesus irrevocably gives life to believers.

On the other hand, what evidence exists to say that Romans was designed for anyone to read, except believers? Romans is a book that is saturated with B-TRUTH in a format that will be a challenge (to put it mildly) for an unbeliever.

If we think through this issue, we will find that Jesus and John do speak of truths that can only be applied by believers. However, John's Gospel presents such truths in a way that seeks to attract the unbeliever to believe. We must look at application of truth by believers in the way that Jesus presented it in the Upper Room Discourse—truths that have the potential of attracting unbelievers to the message of life as those truths permeate the lives of believers.

⁴ Author's translation.