

Episode 7: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Stan:

You are listening to season 2 of conversations in the Gospel of John this is episode 7 this episode was recorded in the spring of 2024 at Friends University in Wichita Kansas welcome to the second season of conversations in the Gospel of John I'm here today with my co-host Douglas Estes

Douglas:

hi I'm Douglas I've written and edited books on the Gospel of John and published essays and articles on the same topic

Stan:

I'm Stan Harstine recently I've been doing more work in first John and so it's going to be a great pleasure for me to come back into the Gospel of John we are recording these podcasts at Friends University in Wichita Kansas we're grateful that you are listening to our conversation around the Gospel of John today our guest in our conversation is Andy Byers originally from Georgia he finds himself currently in in Cambridge the United Kingdom Andy what would you like to tell our audience about yourself

Andy:

well Stan thanks I'm really glad to be with you and Douglas today and uh as you said I'm from the US and uh my my accent gives me away of course over here in Cambridge I've been here for two years a little over two years but I've been in the UK for 12 years I am a Baptist minister in an Anglican world for the first uh six years of my teach teaching career I was affiliated with Cramer Hall at St John's College and now I'm at Ridley Hall here in Cambridge part of the Cambridge Theological Federation like the two of you I love working on and writing on the Gospel of John one of the first things we ask just to uh clarify for our audience is way back when you were um just thinking about doctoral studies or Graduate Studies what caused you to be so interested in studying

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the Gospel of John it was actually before I ever ever imagine myself pursuing any form of an academic vocation you know today we have this socially acceptable phrase called Gap year where it's it's socially accepted that some people after they finish University or maybe before they start they may take a year off right and and do some traveling I decided I wanted to travel overseas and uh and I wanted to live by faith to to be honest I now look back on that as a fairly misguided season in many respects and uh but thought well you know God God doesn't want me to work in a secular job and keep doing the Landscaping I was doing or go back to the lumber yard I was working at he wants me to do something Godly and holy like pray all day and read the Bible all day so it was misguided in many respects but uh this this was where I was in my spiritual growth and development at the time I followed those impulses and spent a lot of time praying and reading the Bible and I don't know why but it was the Gospel of John where most of my focus was directed in that Bible reading and no way that I think I would do a doctoral thesis on this or dissertation on this but that's exactly what happened

Stan:

we're going to look at John 17 as what you've been looking at most recently so what lens do you use as you're looking through the the gospel now in 2023 that um would help our audience understand the approach we're going to take today

Andy:

well since I'm talking to someone who's written a book on reading John through johannine lenses I'm tempted to say I try to read this through johannine lens Stan yeah you refer to the fact that when I was first interested in this uh this theme that I ended up writing on years later I I had none of the technical terminology at my disposal that later on I began to hear as a doctoral student and as a Seminary Student actually before that uh as far as the lenses through which I view the Gospel of John and I'm I'm certainly drawing on a range of tools so uh the historical critical tools that are available to us as

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we work with these uh texts as artifacts from the ancient world that arise out of specific social and historical context I remember also sitting in a class at Be and Divinity School and Dr Norfleet day was teaching on the gospel of Mark one of one of the most profound Revelations for me in seminary at B was that the gospels are narratives now that sounds really obvious but I grew up with a strong appreciation of narratives I was reading books at a young age devouring novels my dad taught English literature at a high school for years and he would come home and read to us like my bedtime stories were Edgar Allan Poe right so so I had a real appreciation for literature but i' never thought of these texts as literary they were just these devotional things that we did in read in church or in the morning in our quiet times and that that that revolutionize my approach to these texts thinking of these authors as literary artists so you've got the historical critical uh tools I'm drawing on and then what we call narrative criticism or engaging the gospel these gospel texts as stories uh and attentive to all that goes into making a story happened but I'm also very much a theological reader of these texts I'm very much interested in God addressing me God addressing the church through my reading of the text so it's a confessional and Theological lens as well

Stan:

well a couple of notes on that first um you had the wonderful experience with uh Dr Norfleet Day I only knew her as Norfleet Day she was in the program when I was studying at Baylor theologically it's a great thing that we have Douglas with us today because I estimate that uh you and he think more theologically about the text than I actually do I tend to be very very practical in that sense but let's go into John 17 when I wrote my chapter on John 17 what stood out to me opposed to John 5 or 12 was the total diversity of approaches taken across the board what piques your interest in John 17 and what are you thinking about and working on these days Andy

Andy:

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well I I have a lot of chords of my johannine guitar that I like to strum but but one of them that I am constantly thinking on and playing so to speak uh is on the theme of Oneness actually that appears here in John 17 one of the features of this text this idea of praying that they may be one is we are one I have done quite a bit of writing on this theme of one Oneness arguing that it's not the way it's been interpreted I argue that it's not to be understood uh primarily as a call to uh Unity for a fractious and divided Johannine community and context you know for us biblical Scholars and for those preachers listening Bible study leaders we know that context is important right to understand the meaning in these texts and uh I suppose the first thing I would want to point out is that uh this Oneness idea or this whole prayer even it it's not designed to address an internal problem as much as an external problem so if you look at John 16 just right before Jesus prays uh in John 16:29 he Jesus is explaining to his disciples that a crisis is about to uh is about to befall them and this is the crisis of his departure which leads to their scattering so he he's going to he is the shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep and in that act of his own death there will be a scattering of these disciples and so this prayer is one of gathering them into one and the scattering is one that comes about uh from external forces actually that are threatening them uh and as you turn the page into John 8 you see that there is this this large contingent that comes to arrest Jesus and they are scattered so it's it's really external opposition that is creating the crisis here not so much internal fraction and debate and uh internal um as as vter Bower calls it fratricidal hatred his comments one John that's not necessarily what we see Happening Here what we see is an outside for set of forces that are threatening uh the Integrity of this community they're being scattered

Stan:

the thought that just pops in my mind as we have this little conversation is not only does he ask that they would be one but that others would believe because of that and

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that drums me right over to chapter 20 at the end after Thomas confession where Jesus says blessed are those who will believe without seeing so there's a there's an internal link between this that defies some of those historical critical approaches that say well this was just here and this was here and we've got this going on because as literary people we're trying what is the text trying to say how are we hearing it and it just jumped out to me that that concept of other people believing and Jesus words after the Thomas confession are are intricately related in that regard so

Andy:

yeah I Stan that really helps my case thank you for that

Stan:

anything to help you anything to help you

Andy:

yeah hey thanks well what you are directing our attention to has to do with uh how well the language often use is um behind the text and in front of the text and you're calling us what I'm trying to say and what you're affirming here is that actually this is there's a rhetorical aim that's looking uh in front of the text to the readers who will come across this text later more than trying to reflect or mirror an internal set of debates or disputes but if we go back even further in the gospel Oneness one Oneness has been undergoing a very intentional theological development throughout this gospel so it first appears in in John 8 and here we have a reference to the shamal so this is the confession of Israel isn't it hero of Israel the Lord Is Our God the Lord is one and and in John chapter 8 there's a reference to the shama in which uh that that I think signals this is where John is thinking I'm I'm turning my pages there to get to john8 we have one father even God the Jewish leaders say to Jesus so that that that idea of one father is drawing on the idea of the shamal and then when we get when we move a little further we see that John is also interested in the Oneness language not just of the shama in

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Deuteronomy 64 that theological Oneness he's also interested in the Oneness language in Ezekiel chapter 34 and Ezekiel 37 and uh here we have reference to one David right one king and also uh the Gathering Together of Judah and the tribes of Israel into one so this this is one of the uh one of the the ological crisis uh in in in the uh in the Old Testament that we have one God but yet the nation is divided into two so there is a division here there is a social element here that we need to consider bringing together these two but this sort of um uh this this sort of language of of Oneness that is theological is being paired with this social Oneness and with the christological Oneness of one Shepherd who will come one day to bring them together so what I think is happening here in John 17 is that this is a call for for for the disciples and the the hearers of this gospel the later readers of this gospel to align themselves with the one God of Israel under the one Shepherd who Ezekiel tells us will come one day to bring us together into one people

Douglas:

you know one thing that you mentioned uh one thing I know I yeah couldn't avoid it uh one thing that you mentioned that I I I thought that I thought was very interesting so I'm going to make a comment rather than a question but earlier this year I published an essay in Catholic biblical quarterly about uh the Paradox in John 1320 which as you were speaking made me realize actually how related what I was talking about to what you're talking about because my argument was simply the fact that uh in order to explain the mission of the disciples that John utilizes as a paradox there to say that Jesus's mission is well God's mission is Jesus's mission which is disciples Mission which is our mission and he puts it all together in one neat little paradoxical package so I mean in a way you you mention that as well because even in Oneness there's still plurality thoughts

Andy:

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yes yes very good I like that the Oneness there's still plurality yeah this is a this is a major theme oh we might call it a paradox don't you go with your language yeah that the idea of unity and plurality are uh and the very first lines of the Gospel in the beginning was and a Jewish hearer of this text would supplant already God but oh wait no logos so we sort of equate logos God we think oh they're they're one right these two but then the very next line indicates that they are actually not one and the same uh the word was with god oh wait a minute they seem to be distinct beings but then the Word was God oh wait no they are the same and then the next line he was in the beginning with God so so there is this unity and a plurality that coiner around who Jesus is and who God is and their inter relation you know when you read through John 7 17 and you follow that Oneness language it's there in as you mentioned stand John 17:21 through 23 but it's also in uh in verse 11 and 12 or yes verse 11 there's a lot of in this language that they may be in you as I am in you and we may be in them right so this Oneness is an inness in some way it's it's not just let's all agree on some confession or Creed which is important it's deeper than that it's like a um it's like we're we're identified as God's people because we are enclosed within him in some way we are comprehensively participating in the relational reality of the unity and plurality of father and son and I would say parenthetically by the spirit because John certainly will emphasize that as something to be coming later in the life of uh the what well the church actually so I think this is a call to be inside the reality of God enclosed within who he is and within that sort of relationality that we see Jesus sharing with the father so a Oneness that is also in inness

Douglas:

so let me ask a meta question if if you will okay um I and I was thinking about it as you were talking I would describe myself as not a fan of the theories of Janine authorship that include the idea that there was a a lot of fighting in the joint community

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and a lot of fighting between the Johannine community and other Christian communities I think they debated things sure you know this idea that there was deep emotional damage to the author I I'm just not I'm not sure that I I can go there so recognizing that's a limitation of mine this whole talk about the unity this Oneness but also this plurality is it possible that it is an echo of what is going on in the author's life I mean is there a possibility like even when we get to uh the end of the gospel and you have the plural we you know it's uh an emphasis of everything that's going on in John 17 it's not actually uh a statement again uh about uh Brokenness but is actually more of a statement of unity and we interpret it as Brokenness

Andy:

Douglas yeah I I actually agree with you of course here I do think it relates to uh a particular context I think that there is certainly an attempt by the author to help what I believe to be a Jewish Christian audience understand their Christ belief within a Jewish theological framework I think what John is doing is he's drawing on Israel's scriptures Israel's theological tradition to uh create a vision for how they can understand these Janine Christians who I believe are Jewish Christians how they can understand what's happening and who they are in light of challenges from their context that they've departed from their Heritage I think this Oneness language in John 17 is a way of securing their uh maybe some un uncertainty around the fact that maybe they've compromised or departed no actually John prays or has Jesus pray the prayer is that you may be one aligned with the one God of Israel who has sent the one Messiah long anticipated in Ezekiel that you might be the one people of God you are actually part of the one people of God regardless of the conflicts that externally are being lodged against you so yeah I think I think this does relate to a context and I'm only comfortable being General about that context but I think generally there is a conflict between these this Jewish Christ belief uh within the the wher Jewish mileau

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Andy:

so if a pastor came to you and said you know Professor buers based on your great wisdom and knowledge I am wanting to teach on John 17 what is one historical thing that I don't want to miss what is one theological thing I don't want to miss and what is one literary thing that I don't want to miss when I teach this text on Sunday

Andy:

this is great I actually did preach from this text about a year ago actually so I was perceiving it from that sort of uh angle I I think a couple of things that are so important and I'm not these won't necessarily map tily onto the categories you just gave me Douglas sorry but me I think this text is like Ephesians 1 and that we we hardly have anywhere else than outside of say Ephesians one and here maybe Colossians one such a grandio sense of who we are in Christ as God's people I mean we are loved as God loves Jesus we hear in this prayer I would want a congregation to know this also we are we share in the glory the Divine Glory that Jesus shared with his father this is part of their prayer uh I think it's also really important pastorally for people to know that Jesus prayed for you Jesus prayed for them for us in this prayer there there is also a prayer for those who will come along later and believe and I think it's also important to point out the missional element of this and something that came out in my own work here my own sermon on this text is that uh one of the most missional acts that we can offer the world is to recognize that we are ourselves loved by God and that is coming right out of this text obviously to be missional is to love others but another missional act may be to live as if we actually are loved the way Jesus says that we are loved and the way he interacts with his father in this prayer

Douglas:

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so what I hear you saying is that the mistake that might be made in trying to cover this passage in a Bible study is to not make it too focused on ourselves and the disciples but to make it more focused on what Jesus has done

Andy:

well obviously we want to focus on what Jesus has done yeah some people need to stop reflect on themselves so much but some people need to hear oh actually no Jesus does God loves me the way he loves Jesus so I think I think I think those two actually belong together in many ways obviously I would always want to be more christologically centered but if if we recognize that the glory that Jesus shares is ultimately displayed by the glory of Christ crucified on the cross as as as John puts it here in in his gospel that sort of selflessness Glory displayed in selflessness then I think we can't own uh some of these uh benefits that Christ makes for us makes available for us

Stan:

two thoughts that I have about this uh conversation one is closely related and that is um as I mentioned in my intro I've been doing a lot of work in first John and the verse that really uh struck me as I was working through first John is 4:16 and both of the verbs are in the perfect tense right but he says we have come to know and have have come to believe the love which God has for us and um depending on how the verses separate that's kind of different because then it goes on for the second time say God is love and the one who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him and what the the writer of First John is saying is a I think a recognition depending on you know chronological order and stuff like that but the the love God has for us is making a difference in how we live and therefore we are abiding in God because we recognize he loves us not trying to earn it not trying to gain it not trying to do all those things so I think that's the one point that stands fairly close to what we're saying the second part which I in my older age I'm starting to ponder as some older Scholars do is the relationship between Paul and John

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and that as you were talking about all that in-ness I couldn't help but think that is John describing in Johannine language the concept that Paul uses of Simply being in Christ

Andy:

yeah well hey thanks for that I I really I'm grateful for the reference to one John 4 and that if God is love that's that's helpful for me I want to think more about that in relation to John 17 and the love that uh we see described there uh I think he very much is in his own idiom picking up on this idea of what we call participation in in Paul and uh and providing a uh a robust and theologically sophisticated and narrative format vision of how that works

Stan:

so Douglas any final thoughts or questions

Douglas:

yes let me ask this question so given all the things that we've talked about what is the one thing that you would be worried someone would miss if they went to a Bible study and they taught this

Andy:

yeah I I think uh what I would be most concerned they would miss is the cumulative development of Oneness that has already been underway in John's gospel long before Jesus prays that they will be one as we are one I I think the way we handle text often in preaching and in Bible studies is that we we we get the little chunk of text right that we're assigned and we just work with that what I found so helpful uh in seminary is the like Norfleet day gave me go read Mark tonight the whole book really really and and for and and since then uh yeah when I'm preaching from a text I will read large sections of the text either the whole thing through or the whole section large section just to ensure that I'm not missing some sort of Prior development because you know we're we're all those of us here on the podcast we're all alert to the fact that these these texts uh

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they're not just little chunks or pericopes as they've often been called they actually belong in a in either a longer series of arguments or they belong in a longer series of threads that are that keep unfurling that keep being uh developed so yeah that's that's what I would be afraid they would miss

Douglas:

we talked about history Theology and literature literary approaches right so in one sentence or less can you explain how your approach manages history Theology and literature how you put all three of those together

Andy:

I'm trying to be attentive to the theological force behind Oneness and its prior literary uh development right and understand that Theology and literary development within a particular but General historical context of early Christianity with uh early Jews who were Christians struggling within their wider Jewish milieu

Douglas:

okay great I don't have any other questions well

Stan

we do appreciate this time we thank you for being our guest on this second season of conversations in the Gospel of John we hope that you can utilize some of our materials and but most specifically we hope that our audience can take some of these ideas that we have going on in our heads almost constantly as we're thinking about the big picture and trying now to bring it down to what is really applicable which John's trying to do he's trying to say this is a big story but here's the here's the basis people you're going to have some some trials as you mentioned you're going to be going out there's going to be some changes and uh you need to abide and that is demonstrated in Oneness I think that we appreciate it and thank you very much

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Douglas and I want to thank you for joining us for the first episode of season 2 of of conversation in the Gospel of John please contact us at cgj.stanartstein.com if you have any comments we look forward to hearing from you bye [Music] now English