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Coming to Faith in the Gospel of John

John Bowen explores the way in which John's Gospel describes the process of coming to faith. Through considering the cases of the woman at the well, the crowd, the first disciples, Nicodemus and the blind man, Bowen argues that this gospel offers vital insights into people's journey to faith, shedding light on contemporary understandings of evangelism and apologetics.

It has become commonplace in discourse about evangelism to say that evangelism is a process. That is, people come to Christian faith gradually, through a series of influences, and over a period of time which may take months or years. Jesus' own frequent use of the imagery of sowing and reaping is sufficient testimony to the accuracy and usefulness of the concept of process evangelism.¹

The idea of process evangelism has, in my estimation, been a useful corrective to the church's practice of evangelism in several ways. It has forced us to reconsider the adequacy of once-off evangelistic events (also known as 'drive-by evangelism'). It has returned the onus for evangelism back where it belongs: on the whole body of Christ, since any Christian can have a part to play in the process, not just the evangelistic preacher. And it has encouraged a fresh appreciation for consecutive evangelistic teaching, of the kind Paul practised daily for two years in the Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus: Alpha and similar courses exemplify the benefits of this approach.

If evangelism is a process, however, fresh questions arise. One is this: when may we say that someone has 'become a Christian'? When they are baptized? When they pray 'the sinner's prayer'? When they make public profession of faith? Should we even be asking the question at all? When we thought that the move from darkness to light was like flipping a light switch, we knew which was which. If the move to darkness to light is more like a sunrise, however, we may know when it is really dark and when the sun has fully risen, but when may we say sunrise actually happens? And, of course, does it really matter as long as the sun does rise?

The Gospel of John has some helpful and provocative light to shed on this subject, not least in the role John gives to the asking of questions in the process of evangelism. Let me begin, however, somewhere other than John. How does one

1 A superficial survey reveals that this is a theme for a wide range of writers including: William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1989; Becky Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker*, IVP, Downers Grove 2nd edition 1999; George G.

Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, Abingdon, Nashville 1999; Richard V. Peace *Conversion in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1999; and John P. Bowen, *Evangelism for 'Normal' People*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis 2002.

recognize when someone has become a disciple of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels? For these writers, it is often simply a matter of Jesus saying 'Follow me!' and the person responding. This is how the calling of Simon and Andrew, James and John, and Levi is described. The rich ruler is also invited to 'follow me' but refuses (Mark 10:21). Peter then points out that he and the others have 'followed' Jesus, and they are affirmed for it (10:28). That seems to be the general pattern: a disciple is one who is called to follow and who responds by following.

For the Synoptics, the primary issue is not one of 'Do you believe?' although that element is clearly present. Indeed, 'following' implies faith. John's Gospel, on the other hand, does not stress 'following' as the key to discipleship with the same regularity as the Synoptics do. In fact, only Philip has the classic Synoptic experience of beginning his discipleship by hearing Jesus say, 'Follow me!' and obeying (John 1:43). Even then, we only presume that Philip does so, because John does not explicitly say, 'And he got up and followed' as the Synoptics might do.²

So how does John understand the beginning of discipleship? John prefers to understand it in terms of belief. An indicator of this is that, while the Synoptics have a total of perhaps thirty references to belief and believing between them, John uses the term almost a hundred times. But what then does John mean by believing? My argument is that when John speaks of someone as 'believing' he does not mean a sudden, once and for all, translation from darkness into light, as Paul might characterize it.³ For John, belief means rather that someone is engaged in a movement away from darkness and towards light. They are in what we might call an evangelistic process. 'Believing' for John is simply an indication of direction.

I will attempt to demonstrate that, in John, people often signal their movement towards discipleship by asking a question. More, these are normally questions which express uncertainty, doubt, and tentativeness. In John's book, such questions mean that people should be considered disciples and not just 'seekers' on the way to discipleship. I will offer five case studies to illustrate this contention.

1 The woman at the well, John 4

The woman in John 4 is a classic example of process evangelism in action. Jesus himself reflects that, at Sychar, 'one sows and another reaps' (4:37). Even within the chapter, a sequence of steps towards faith is visible. It is beautifully summed up by the fourth-century commentator, Ephraem the Syrian:

First she caught sight of a thirsty man, then a Jew, then a Rabbi, afterwards a prophet, last of all the Messiah. She tried to get the better of the thirsty man, she showed dislike of the Jew, she heckled the Rabbi, she was swept off her feet by the prophet, and she adored the Christ.⁴

So, at the end of Jesus' conversation, when he finally reveals himself as the Messiah and the harvest in her soul is presumably ready for reaping, what happens? She

2 John also has Jesus say (twice) to Peter at the end of his Gospel, 'Follow me' (21:19, 22), but this is obviously a call to continue in discipleship, not to begin it.

3 See, for example, Col. 1:13. Of course, Paul's own experience of conversion was just that kind of sudden darkness-to-light experience.

4 Quoted in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, Word Publishing, Vancouver BC 1987, p 66.

says nothing to Jesus, but returns to the city to announce, 'Come see a man who told me everything I've ever done. He can't be the Messiah, can he?' (4:29).

Can such an indecisive question (introduced by *meti*) be considered a true confession of faith?⁵ The rest of the story clarifies John's intention: 'Many Samaritans... believed in him because of the woman's testimony, He told me everything I have ever done' (4:39). The word testimony is *marturion*, the same word used earlier of John the Baptist's witness to Christ (1:7). As in the case of the Baptist, the effect of the woman's testimony is to point others to Christ. Her faith, it seems, is as real as that of John.⁶

If we have any doubt, it is resolved by the gratuitous detail John provides: the woman leaves her water pot behind (4:28), presumably a clue that she has found the living water and no longer needs to carry water. Evidently, in John's estimation, the woman has come to believe, and her question, though the tentative nature of the wording might imply doubt, is sufficient to indicate that.

2 'Many in the crowd', John 7:31

A similar construction is found in chapter 7. The context is the controversy Jesus causes at the Feast of Booths. His teaching prompts a number of questions: 'Is this not the man they are trying to kill?' (7:25); 'Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?' (7:26); 'Where does this man intend to go?' (7:35); 'What does he mean?' (7:36); 'Has not the scripture said...?' (7:42). But the one most relevant for our purposes is in verse 31: 'When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?' What makes this question different is that John signals its importance by introducing it with the crucial term 'believe': 'Many in the crowd believed in him, and were saying...'

Again, this appears to be a tentative question (introduced once again by *me*). The speakers are still uncertain about Jesus' identity: they cannot say more than that, on balance, it seems that Jesus is the best contender they have yet seen for the title of Messiah. This hardly seems like a clear-cut declaration of faith, compared particularly with Thomas' definitive statement of faith: 'My Lord and my God' (20:28). Nevertheless, in John's understanding of faith this response seems to be quite adequate, since he classifies it as believing.⁷

5 Barnabas Lindars says of the use of *meti*, 'John means it to be an expression of cautious faith': see *New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of John*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1982, p 193.

6 'As Barrett points out, [testimony] is the task of a disciple. She joined with John the Baptist as a witness to Jesus before the disciples bore any witness to her people.' Beasley-Murray, *John*, p 64.

7 Leon Morris agrees: 'The reason for their faith was not a profound one... But throughout this Gospel it is better to believe on the basis of miracles than not to believe at all. So there is no condemnation of this

faith as inadequate': *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: the Gospel According to John*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1971, p 415. Lesslie Newbigin, however, is not convinced: 'their belief rests on the great number of his miracles and not upon a true understanding of his person and his origin. A true understanding of one of his "signs" would have been enough to lead them to the secret of his person and his origin and so to a true and life-giving faith': *The Light Has Come: an Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1982, p 98. If the bar is set this high, however, who in the Gospels can be counted a believer?

I want now to return to an earlier example of this same phenomenon. At first sight, it might not strike the casual reader as anything out of the ordinary, but in light of these two clear indications that a tentative question can indicate true faith, I want to argue that it actually has great significance in John's understanding of faith.

3 The call of the first disciples, John 1:35-51

The first contact between Jesus and his inner circle, according to John, comes not with Jesus' invitation to 'follow me,' but with an exchange of questions. Jesus asks Andrew and (presumably) John, 'What are you looking for?' They reply, 'Where are you staying?'⁸ He says, 'Come and see.' (1:38-39). The following day, Andrew finds Peter and says, 'We have found the Messiah' (1:41). The first thing to note is that, like the woman in chapter 4, after asking his question, Andrew at once bears witness to what he has discovered about Jesus.

The next day, Jesus says to Philip, 'Follow me!' (1:43), the classic Synoptic call to discipleship. Philip then finds Nathanael and says, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law... wrote'(1:45). This testimony is directly parallel to that borne the previous day by Andrew ('We have found the Messiah'). The parallel may be represented thus:

Andrew

'Where are you staying?'
Spends the day with Jesus.
Finds Simon.
'We have found the Messiah.'
Andrew brings Simon.
Jesus accepts Simon.

Philip

'Follow me.'
[Implied: Philip follows.]
Finds Nathanael.
'We have found him of whom Moses... wrote.'
Philip says 'Come and see.' Nathanael does.
Jesus accepts Nathanael.

John thus makes the exchange, 'where are you staying/come and see', and the response of Andrew and John, precisely equivalent to the command to 'Follow me!' and Philip's response, in spite of the fact that the former is far more casual, tentative and informal than the latter. And, in both cases (as with the woman in chapter 4), the genuineness of the discipleship is indicated by the willingness to testify to Jesus' identity.

The fourth example is one which has puzzled commentators over the years. Does Nicodemus become a disciple, a believer, or not? From the few actual references to Nicodemus, the evidence is ambiguous. In light of this emerging pattern of significant questions, however, I believe the answer is clearer.

8 Newbigin draws attention to the fact that the verb 'stay' or 'remain' (*meno*) is the same as that which is the theme of chapter 15: 'abide in me' (*The Light*, pp 19-20). This reinforces

the suggestion that when Andrew and John 'stay' with Jesus for the day, they have become disciples.

4 Nicodemus, chapter 3

Nicodemus is another person who asks questions: 'How can a man be born again?' (3:4) and 'How can these things be?' (3:9). Commentators often understand these questions as indicating Nicodemus' lack of faith and understanding, and, indeed, there is no indication in the conversation that Nicodemus makes any move towards discipleship.⁹

Nicodemus hardly appears again (except for 7:51-52 – also a question, though not to Jesus) until after the crucifixion, when he collaborates with Joseph of Arimathea in caring for the body of Jesus (19:38-39). In that context, John explains that Joseph 'was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one.' Though the same is not said explicitly of Nicodemus, the implication seems to be that he too is a secret disciple.¹⁰ Yet at what point between chapter 3 and chapter 19 did Nicodemus become a believer? If it is true that even tentative questions can indicate a sincere desire to 'believe', maybe Nicodemus' questions in chapter 3 are actually intended by John to be indicative of a genuine moving towards faith.¹¹

5 The man born blind, John 9

Like the woman at the well, the man born blind (chapter 9) illustrates that there are stages of faith, stages in the process of moving from darkness towards the light of Christ. After his sight is restored and the man is first asked about the miracle, he can say no more than that 'the man called Jesus' did it (9:11). Under questioning from the Pharisees, however, he goes further, and suggests that Jesus 'is a prophet' (9:17).¹² Does this make him a disciple, then? Certainly he asks the Pharisees, 'Do you *also* want to become his disciple?' which might imply, 'I am already: what about you?' though it could logically refer to others who are already Jesus' disciples.

The next step is that the man states: 'If this man were not from God, he could do nothing' (9:33). This echoes Nicodemus' statement, 'We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no-one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God' (3:2). For Nicodemus and the man born blind, such a statement seems to indicate that they are well on the way to discipleship.¹³ (After all, Jesus' opponents are characterized by their *not* accepting that what he does is from God.)

9 Raymond Brown, for example, suggests that, after this conversation, Nicodemus 'fades back into the darkness whence he came.' quoted in Newbigin, *The Light*, p 40.

Newbigin himself is somewhat positive: "How can this be?" might be a mere expression of bewilderment, or it might be (and the ensuing discourse suggests this) the serious question of a man who wants to know what has to happen in order to make this new birth possible.'

10 Lindars remarks that they make 'an obvious pair... both are public men and both are secret disciples.' (*John*, p 592)

11 Newbigin calls him someone who is 'coming to the light' (*The Light*, p 44). Morris' comments are worth repeating: 'We may, I

think, fairly infer that he had a love for the truth, but that he was rather a timid soul. In the end he came right out for Jesus, and that at a time when the disciples forsook Him. Which is saying a lot for a timid man' (*John*, p 210).

12 Beasley-Murray says: 'His eyes were opening wider!' (*John*, p 157) 'The man has moved on from his first position.... He still has a long way to go, but he is moving towards the light' (Newbigin, *The Light*, p 122. The woman at the well also realised that Jesus was a prophet before she realised that he was the messiah. (4:19)

13 Lindars says of Nicodemus' final appearance in the Gospel that it shows him as 'virtually a full believer' (*John*, p 304).

In the case of the man born blind, unlike that of Nicodemus, the next step towards faith is recorded. Jesus seeks the man out. 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' he asks. The man replies, 'Who is he, sir? Tell me, so I may believe in him' (9:35-36). Here once again is the key tentative question, the one which indicates on the one hand how little the person knows, but on the other hand, and more importantly, their desire to believe. The man is perfectly willing to believe, if Jesus will only identify the object of his belief.¹⁴ Jesus identifies himself in similar language to that he uses with the Samaritan woman: 'The one speaking with you is he' (9:37, cf. 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' 4:26), and the man responds more unambiguously than does the woman: 'Lord, I believe.'¹⁵ John comments, 'And he worshipped him' – the only occasion in John when someone is said to worship Jesus.¹⁶

The man thus moves in the course of the chapter from referring to Jesus as a man to calling Jesus a prophet, to acknowledging him as Son of Man (whatever he understood by that), to worship. He seems to be moving in the direction of faith from at least the time of the miracle, and merely needs more information for his response to become fuller and more appropriate. There is a sense that the light dawns on him slowly, stage by stage, and that his pursuit of truth is rewarded with more truth.¹⁷

Conclusion

The theme of light and darkness runs right through John's Gospel,¹⁸ from chapter 1, where 'the light shines in the darkness' (1:5) to Jesus' final conversation with the disciples 'just after daybreak' (21:4). A key to understanding the role of this light is in chapter 3, where John writes:

'All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light... But those who do what is true come to the light, that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God' (3:20-21).

Since the Greek verbs are present indicative and thus linear rather than punctiliar, as the English implies, it might be helpful to translate this: 'All whose way of life is to do evil habitually hate the light and do not move towards it... But those who habitually do what is true move towards the light.'

This clarifies the sense of process which underlies the five stories discussed above. Those who respond to the light of Jesus are those who are already turned

14 '[H]e trusts Jesus enough to put his trust where Jesus shall point him. Then Jesus points to Himself': William Temple, *Readings in John's Gospel (First and Second Series)*, Macmillan and Co, London 1945, p 160.

15 The use of the word lord, *kurios*, is significant, at least for John and his readers. Morris overstates the case when he says that 'there is little reason for thinking that 'Lord' has less than the maximum content' (*John*, p 495).

16 Beasley-Murray also observes this sequence: the blind man 'gains his first sight, and then increasing insight as he progresses from referring to 'the man called Jesus'... to declaring him to be a prophet ... then one sent by God... and finally confessing him as Son of Man and *kurios*' (*John*, p 161).

17 Compare 'In your light we see light': Psalm 36:9.

18 It seems appropriate for Newbigin's commentary to be called *The Light Has Come*.

(or turning) towards the light of God which was present before they ever encountered Jesus, enlightening all people (1:9).¹⁹ What they see in Jesus is the fullest expression of that light to which they were already responding in some way.²⁰ Conversely, those who turn away from Jesus (although not the focus of this paper) are those who are bent on avoiding the light in whatever form it shows itself, and who therefore have particular hatred for the fullness of light they see in him. Hence Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees: 'I have come into this world... that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'

What does this feature of John's Gospel mean for mission and evangelism? It certainly underscores the contemporary insistence that evangelism is a process. In John's imagery, the process is one in which people move towards light and recognize Jesus as the fullness of God's light. But I believe John's use of tentative questions to signal a true disciple pushes us a step further. Recently I spent time with a young man who was asking questions about Christianity. At our first meeting, over coffee, his first question was, 'If I become a Christian, will I have to give up my leftwing politics and become a conservative?' It took another six weeks or so before he 'opened his life to God' (his words, not mine). Nevertheless, it seems to me in retrospect that that first question, though tentative, was in fact a clear indicator of someone moving towards the light. Should I have thought of him as a disciple from that moment on? It is difficult to say. Unlike Andrew and the woman at the well, he did not immediately go and talk to others about Jesus. Unlike the man born blind, he did not immediately worship Jesus. But then, neither Nicodemus nor the believing crowd did these things either. So had the sun actually risen or was this question just the first rays beginning to show above the horizon? In a sense, it hardly matters. What mattered was the direction in which Justin was moving. My job (before and after his 'opening his life to God') was to point him to the light I had received from Jesus, so that he could pursue it more closely if he chose. And he did.

I find that, if nothing else, this strand of John's Gospel helps to sensitize me to the slightest movement towards the light of Christ in an unbeliever. Even a tentative question, full of uncertainty and doubt, even scepticism, may indicate a disciple in the making. It seems to me that this is the right posture for those of us who follow a teacher who is himself 'gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:30). After all, he is also the Servant of the Lord, of whom it is said, 'A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench' (Isaiah 43:3). Thanks be to God.

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19 'Just as plants are light-loving, and instinctively turn towards the light, so believers love and turn towards the light of God.... Since Jesus is the light made flesh... all light-lovers will love him': Robert Brow, *'Go Make Learners': A New Model for Discipleship in the Church*, Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton 1981, pp 78f.

20 It would be a subject for further conversation to consider in what sense the woman at the well, say, was already turning towards the light of God. Some would argue that she makes at least one attempt to avoid the light (4:16-20).