

David J. Hawkin

---

## The Johannine Concept of Truth and its Implications for a Technological Society

---

---

*Professor Hawkin, who teaches in the Department of Religious Studies in the Memorial University of Newfoundland, is a valued contributor to The Evangelical Quarterly. His present essay is distinguished from being simply a piece of able biblical exegesis by its conclusion which aims to show the relevance of the discussion for the church in modern society.*

The Fourth Gospel, like the Synoptics, represents Christ as the climactic revelation of God's plan. But the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Christ goes beyond the scope of the Synoptics in its treatment of Christ's relationship with the Father. This theme runs throughout the Fourth Gospel and is explicated in such a way as to leave no doubt that it is this very relationship which is the reason for the rejection of Jesus by Jewish authorities. Jesus is presented throughout the Gospel as the revealer of the Father (1:18; 6:37-40; 8:28ff.; 10:30; 14:9-11; 14:31; 15:15). R. Bultmann finds the symbolic picture of Jesus as the man who descended and ascended a 'puzzle' inasmuch as Jesus never reveals what he has 'seen and heard', but only reveals that he is the revealer.<sup>1</sup> But the Johannine Christ is himself the revealer of the Father (14:9). Thus he is *the way*, for he is truth and life (14:6). As he alone is 'truth' (and, therefore, 'life') he is the *only way*. This concern for truth belongs to the very substance of Johannine soteriology.

It is therefore important to uncover the nuances of the Fourth Gospel's use of truth if we are to understand the Fourth Gospel properly. But this is no easy task. It is a fundamental hermeneutical principal that if we are to understand an author well, we must understand the world of meaning which governs his disposition of ideas. That is, it is important to ascertain the background of thought against which the author writes. It is this task which is so difficult in dealing with the Fourth Gospel. Fifty years ago B. W. Bacon was able to speak unequivocally about *The*

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Bultmann, 'Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quelle für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums', *ZNW* 24 (1925), 102.

*Gospel of the Hellenists*<sup>2</sup> but subsequent scholarship has not endorsed Bacon's view. Other scholars attempt to understand the Fourth Gospel exclusively against a background of Old Testament and Rabbinic Judaism,<sup>3</sup> or Mandaeen Gnosticism,<sup>4</sup> or Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>5</sup> Hence if we are to fully appreciate the subtleties of the Johannine use of 'truth', we must attempt to resolve the question of whether the Fourth Gospel uses the concept in a Hellenistic or Hebraic way, or perhaps even in some other sense. Such a discussion, moreover, if it is to avoid being antiquarian, must always have as its ultimate goal the clarification of what it means for us today. Accordingly, this study will first attempt to determine the background against which the Johannine concept of truth is to be understood and then conclude with some remarks about the importance of such an understanding for Christians in our contemporary technological society.

The theology of the Fourth Gospel is pre-eminently a theology of revelation. This note is struck in the Prologue and continues throughout the Gospel. The Word is the light that shines in the darkness. John the Baptist is 'sent by God' but he is not the revealer. He is a witness to the revealer; his sole role is to testify to the light.

The dramatic element of the Fourth Gospel is epitomised in 'divine initiative' versus 'human response': The initiative of revelation (Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν . . . ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον) and the response of unbelief (ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω . . . οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον). Yet the divine initiative did win a positive response. There were those who welcomed the light, who not only 'saw his glory' but who 'knew' him, 'accepted' him, 'believed in his name' and thereby became 'children of God'. The Prologue concludes with a charged epitome of the Gospel's theology of revelation (1:14e-18). We will

<sup>2</sup> B. W. Bacon, *The Gospel of the Hellenists*, ed. C. H. Kraeling, (New York: Holt, 1933).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., A. Schlatter, *Die Sprache und Heimat des vierten Evangelisten* (BFCT 6; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1902); F. Büchsel, *Johannes und der hellenistische Syncretismus* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1928); A. Guilding, *The Fourth Gospel and Jewish Worship: A Study of the Relation of John's Gospel to the Ancient Jewish Lectionary System* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960). These attempts have been unsuccessful in showing that this is the *exclusive* background to the Fourth Gospel. It has, of course, to be concluded that the Fourth Gospel does use the Old Testament—see e.g., C. K. Barrett, 'The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel', *JTS* 48 (1947), 155-169. But this is only one woof woven into the whole fabric of the Gospel.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., W. Bauer, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1933).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1963).

return to this passage of the Prologue, but only after endeavouring to determine as exactly as possible the sense of 'truth' (ἀλήθεια) in the Johannine redaction.

The theme 'truth' is so interwoven with the theme 'word' (ὁ λόγος) in Jn. 8:31–55 that the two appear to be reciprocally defined. The relationship between them finds a first expression in vs. 31f.: Ἐὰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ ἐμῷ, . . . γνώσεσθε τὴν ἀλήθειαν. Those who seek to kill Jesus do so because ὁ λόγος ὁ ἐμὸς οὐ χωρεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν (v. 37). Or again, νῦν δὲ ζητεῖτέ με ἀποκτείνειν, ἄνθρωπον ὃς τὴν ἀλήθειαν ὑμῖν λελάληκα (v. 40). The accusers of Jesus are not truly Abraham's descendants; if they were they would love Jesus. The Son claims no independent rights; he has been sent from God (v. 42). They do not understand Jesus' word because their father is the devil, and the devil is the father of lies: ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ οὐκ ἔστηκεν, ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἀλήθεια ἐν αὐτῷ . . . ψεύστης ἔστιν καὶ ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ (v. 44). Therefore they cannot comprehend the truth: ἐγὼ δὲ ὅτι τὴν ἀλήθειαν λέγω, οὐ πιστεύετε μοι (v. 45). They would believe Jesus if they were of God (v. 47). The word of Jesus, which is truth (v. 45), is also eternal life (v. 51). The texts of Jn. 8:31ff., in which the theme 'truth' is interwoven with 'word', supply a specific justification of the general agreement among scholars that the theology of the Fourth Gospel is a theology of revelation.

There is, however, significant disagreement over the background against which ἀλήθεια is to be understood. Bultmann<sup>6</sup> and Dodd<sup>7</sup> argue that the Johannine usage of ἀλήθεια reflects a Hellenistic rather than a Hebraic background. This is disputed by I. de la Potterie<sup>8</sup> who thinks that it reflects rather a late biblical and post-Biblical background of sapiential and apocalyptic literature. This is an important discussion, for, as we have already noted, the resolution of the question whether the Johannine usage of ἀλήθεια reflects the Hebrew or the Greek background will greatly aid our understanding of the intended sense of the word in the Johannine redaction. A detailed examination of the issue is thus called for.

The etymology of the word ἀλήθεια suggests the root meaning

<sup>6</sup> 'Untersuchungen zum Johannevangelium: ἀλήθεια', *ZNW* 17 (1928), 113–163; ἀλήθεια in *TWNT*; *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946), 145ff.; *Interpretation*, 170–178.

<sup>8</sup> 'La verita in San Giovanni', *RivBib* 11 (1963), 3–24; "Je suis la Voie, la Verite et la Vie" (Jn 14:4), *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 88 (1966), 907–942; *La vérité dans Saint Jean. Tome 1: Le Christ et la vérité, L'Esprit et la vérité. Tome 2: Le croyant et la vérité. Analecta Biblica* 73 & 74 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977).

of 'non-concealment'; that is, 'the full or real state of affairs'.<sup>9</sup> Thus for historians ἀλήθεια would be real events as opposed to myths, whilst for philosophers it would indicate real being in the absolute sense.<sup>10</sup> The two adjectives derived from ἀλήθεια are ἀληθινός and ἀληθής. Ἀληθής means 'corresponding to facts', 'true' or 'veridical'—i.e., a thing really is as seen or represented. Ἀληθινός applied to objects of experience means 'real' as opposed to 'pictured' objects (τὰ ἀληθινά as opposed to τὰ γεγραμμένα).

As the adjectives indicate, ἀλήθεια is susceptible to two nuanced interpretations. When the truth of a statement means 'that which corresponds to the real facts', ἀλήθεια can refer to the abstract quality of truthfulness or the content of a statement. Ἀλήθεια can also mean 'reality' as opposed to 'appearance'. In Hellenism ἀλήθεια thus comes to refer to eternal or divine realities. 'It still retains its sense of genuineness, since the divine being is that which in man comes to share in order to be saved and thus attain to his own genuine or proper being.'<sup>11</sup> But the presupposition that ἀλήθεια is accessible to thought has been abandoned; it is accessible only when human limitations are transcended (as in ecstasy or revelation). In this sense ἀλήθεια has become an eschatological concept.<sup>12</sup>

The LXX translates *emet* as ἀλήθεια. *Emet* primarily has the connotation of 'trustworthiness' or 'steadfastness' and is used as an attribute of God in this sense. The Hebrew concept of truth is different from that of the Greek; for the Hebrew truth is moral rather than intellectual.<sup>13</sup> What sense, then, does ἀλήθεια have in early Christian usage? Bultmann gives a comprehensive account of the various nuances the word has in early Christianity: that which has certainty and force; that upon which one can rely; the real state of affairs.<sup>14</sup> We are, however, concerned with its meaning specifically in the Fourth Gospel. On this topic Bultmann says:

Ἀλήθεια and ψεύδος [in John] are understood as genuine possibilities of human existence . . . Yet in revelation there is disclosed to man the true possibility of his own being when, in the face of the word of revelation which encounters him, he decided to

<sup>9</sup> Bultmann, ἀλήθεια, 238.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>12</sup> See J. Blank, 'Der johanneische Wahrheits-Begriff', *BZ7* (1963), 164–173.

<sup>13</sup> J. Giblet, 'Aspects of Truth in the New Testament', in *Truth and Certainty*, eds. E. Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973), 36f.

<sup>14</sup> ἀλήθεια, 241–245.

surrender himself . . . The antithesis of divine and anti-divine reality emerges at 8:44 in a formulation which derives from Gnostic mythology . . . But indirectly this asserts that the ἀλήθεια gives life, and that what is not determined by it leads to death.<sup>15</sup>

Dodd agrees with Bultmann that the background against which the Johannine concept of truth is to be understood is Greek rather than Hebraic. In his *Johannine Epistles* he defined ἀλήθεια as 'the ultimate reality as revealed in Christ'.<sup>16</sup> He has a more extensive discussion in his *Interpretation*.<sup>17</sup> Ἀλήθεια is 'the eternal reality as revealed to men—either the reality itself or the revelation of it'.<sup>18</sup> Dodd admits to only one passage in the Fourth Gospel where a reader would see ἀλήθεια used in a way strange to the natural (Greek) idiom of the language: 3:21. He admits that in 16:13 the Hebraic connotation of the word may 'find an echo' but argues that the context rules out the Hebrew meaning:

The context speaks of things to be spoken, announced and heard. The Paraclete hears the word of Christ, receives them and announces them to the disciples. The content of these words is precisely summed up in the word ἀλήθεια which is therefore not *emet* 'faithfulness', but 'truth'.<sup>19</sup>

In 1:14 the phrase πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας derives from a Hebrew source, but again, argues Dodd, 'While the mould of the expression is determined by Hebrew usage, the actual sense of the words is determined by Greek usage.'<sup>20</sup>

A mediating position on the Johannine background of ἀλήθεια is taken by Schlier<sup>21</sup> and Büchsel,<sup>22</sup> who affirm that the Johannine concept combines Biblical and Greek philosophical ideas. De la Potterie, however, has argued that the choice should not be restricted to Greek or Biblical background. Neither does he think in terms of Greek and Biblical. In the apocalyptic and sapiential literature of post-Biblical Judaism one finds a new usage and sense unrestricted by specifically Greek thought-forms.<sup>23</sup> This new sense is moral, as in the Bible, but nuanced to include more

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, 145.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, 170–178.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>21</sup> 'Meditationen über den johanneischen Begriff der Wahrheit', *Festschrift für Martin Heidegger zum 70. Geburtstag* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1955), 195–203.

<sup>22</sup> *Der Begriff der Wahrheit in dem Evangelium und in den Briefen des Johannes* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1911).

<sup>23</sup> 'La verita in San Giovanni', 5f.

than fidelity and; in fact, to signify 'uprightness'. Moreover, ἀλήθεια in these writings often intends *revealed truth* (as in the doctrine of wisdom), and so is often synonymous with μυστήριον: the divine plan revealed to men. In, for example, the 'book of truth' (Dan. 10:21) is written the plan of God for the time of salvation (cf. Wis. 3:9; 1QH. 7:26f.; 1QH. 6:6).

De la Potterie notes that the following expressions are missing from Greek and Hellenistic literature, but are paralleled in the Bible, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the writings of Qumran, etc.: ποιεῖν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (Jn. 3:21); ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ (Jn. 4:23f.); ἐν ἀληθείᾳ (Jn. 17:19). Still more probative of de la Potterie's hypothesis on the background of ἀλήθεια is the close tie with λογός. In fact in Johannine usage λαλεῖν signifies revelation (e.g., Jn. 17:17 and Jn. 8:40). In Hellenistic and Gnostic dualism ἡ ἀλήθεια is not a word which is heard, but the divine word seen or contemplated on arrival at the spiritual goal (CH. 8:3). In apocalyptic literature, however, the explanation of enigmas is heard, and in Daniel this explanation is 'emet.<sup>24</sup>

The ultimate test of this hypothesis must be, of course, exegetical. Let us focus on two specific texts—Jn. 1:17b–18 and Jn. 14:6—with the purpose of testing de la Potterie's hypothesis.

The text of Jn. 1:17b–18 reads:

ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ ἐγένετο.  
 Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε·  
 μονογενὴς Θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ Πατρὸς,  
 ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

Our primary question is: What is the sense of ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια? Brown<sup>25</sup> thinks that χάρις and ἀλήθεια are linked together to reflect the Old Testament pairing of *chesed* and 'emet. He translates the phrase as 'enduring love'. But if we accept de la Potterie's argument concerning the meaning of ἀλήθεια to be essentially correct, and understand the phrase ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια as a hendiadys, it might quite plausibly be rendered 'the gracious gift of revealed truth (came through Jesus Christ)'.<sup>26</sup>

Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν denies, as Bultmann observes, that God is directly accessible to men.<sup>26</sup> It may also be a polemic against the desire to see 'the glory of the Lord' (cf. Ex. 33:18) and mystical visions of the divine.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> *The Gospel according to John (i–xii)* (Anchor Bible 29; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Bultmann, *John*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, Vol. 1, (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), 278.

There are several variant readings for 1:18b.<sup>28</sup> μονογενῆς Θεός is the best attested reading, and is to be preferred. In the phrase εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ Πατρὸς, although in Koine Greek εἰς with the accusative is often simply the equivalent of ἐν with the dative,<sup>29</sup> it is possible that εἰς is used deliberately here to indicate the dynamic force of the relation of the Son with the Father.<sup>30</sup> The whole phrase is a metaphoric expression which implies intimate communion (cf. Gen. 15:5; Deut. 13:7; I Kings 17:9).

Ἐξηγηθῆναι could mean 'to lead', but here probably means 'to reveal (divine mysteries)'. What, then, is revealed? It is the sonship of the Word, eternally turned to the bosom of the Father by whom he is generated.

All of this indicates that the Fourth Gospel's theology of revelation is not concerned with the revelation of divine nature, but rather *it is a theology of divine persons*. This becomes especially apparent when we look at Jn. 14:6.

The text of Jn. 14:6 reads:

λέγει αὐτῷ Ἰησοῦς, Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ· οὐδεὶς ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα εἰ μὴ δι' ἐμοῦ.

The real problem posed for exegetes is to determine the exact relationship between ὁδὸς, ἀλήθεια, and ζωὴ. Bultmann finds here the dualist and gnostic theme of the ascent to light and truth (*Exc. Stob.* II, B, 5). He interprets this verse to mean that Jesus is simultaneously the way and the goal.<sup>31</sup> De la Potterie argues that this is mistaken, and points out that the view of ancient writers was that Jesus was the way to the goal.<sup>32</sup> De la Potterie substantiates his own interpretation of this verse ('C'est moi, le chemin') by a literary analysis and an examination of the milieu out of which 14:6 springs. In the first place, Jn. 13:33-14:6 is dominated by the theme of the *departure* of Jesus (a theme introduced by the departure of Judas in 13:30). The motifs of 'going' and 'following' are dominant.

In 14:1-4 Jesus seeks to console the disciples: all will be reunited in the Father's house, for he goes to prepare a place for them. 14:4 specifies the topic for the next few verses: οἴδατε τὴν ὁδόν; that is, the issue is 'the way'.

<sup>28</sup> See Schnackenburg, 279f.

<sup>29</sup> F. Blass & A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Chicago: University Press, 1961), paras. 205 & 218.

<sup>30</sup> 'La verita in San Giovanni', 10.

<sup>31</sup> *John*, 603-612.

<sup>32</sup> 'Je suis la Voie, la Verité et la Vie', 908-910.

14:6 displays a chiasmic structure:

6a ἐγὼ εἰμι . . .

6b . . . δι' ἐμοῦ

Moreover, of the two questions of 14:5:

(a). οὐκ οἶδαμεν ποῦ ὑπάγεις

(b). πῶς δυνάμεθα τὴν ὁδὸν εἰδέναι;

14:6 emphasizes the answer to (b):

(b). ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς

(a). οὐδεὶς ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα

(b). εἰ μὴ δι' ἐμοῦ

The significance of this literary analysis lies in the fact that in it ἀλήθεια and ζωὴ play no significant role; they are no more than explanatory comments on ἡ ὁδὸς. The sense is this: Jesus is the way to the Father precisely inasmuch as he is truth and life: 'I am the way (for I am) truth and (therefore) life'.

This conclusion is quite in accord with what we have asserted about the background of the Johannine concept of truth. Certainly, its sense as defined above is neither gnostic nor Greek. Moreover, the Biblical parallels to this verse, such as Ps. 86:11, are different from Jn. 14:6, for they intend ἀλήθεια as rectitude, a moral quality.<sup>33</sup>

Thus ἡ ὁδὸς here is metaphorical, and does not suggest anything of the gnostic ascent to the realm of light and truth. Furthermore, truth is not 'the reality of the divine', nor is it the goal. Its sense is perhaps best given by reference to the *Acts of Thomas*, where Christ is 'the richness of truth', he who 'mounts the way to truth', 'the teacher of truth'. This guides the exegesis of Jn. 14:6—Jesus is ἡ ἀληθεια as 'perfect revealer', as 'plenitude' of revealed truth.<sup>34</sup> Thus ἀλήθεια in the Fourth Gospel is not 'an object of intellectual research, but the essential principle of the moral life, of sanctity; for it is the thought of God on man, perceived and heard in faith.'<sup>35</sup> 'To be of the truth' is *to cultivate an interior disposition, bringing oneself into harmony with ἡ ἀλήθεια, remaining habitually under its action, acquiring a connaturality and affinity with the truth.*

The truth 'frees' the follower of Christ (Jn. 8:32). It is the word of Jesus which frees, and it frees from sin. Η ἀλήθεια is a divine, power-charged concept. Thus 17:17 means, in effect, 'Set them on a course of holiness by the [power of the] saving word of revela-

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 918f.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 925.

<sup>35</sup> 'La verita in San Giovanni', 20.



tion'. Expressions such as ποιεῖν τὴν ἀλήθειαν, περιπατεῖν ἐν ἀληθείᾳ now take on a rich, specifically Christian connotation. Even a seemingly colourless expression such as ἐν ἀληθείᾳ becomes 'a magnificent compendium on [John's] whole moral teaching'.<sup>36</sup> It is a pure semitism. To love one's brother 'in truth' is not to love them 'really' but to love them with the power of the ἀλήθεια which abides in us. The Johannine concept of truth is to be differentiated from the intellectualist concept of the Greeks and the cosmic dualism of theosophy. For the Fourth Evangelist ἡ ἀλήθεια is the word of the Father addressed to men, incarnated in Christ and illumined through the action of the Spirit.<sup>37</sup> Salvation consists in communion with 'the Father'; such communion is mediated by the gift of 'eternal life', and this 'gracious gift' is nothing other than 'truth'. As Jesus is not simply the revealer but the revelation itself; he alone is the way to salvation.

What relevance does all this have to a Christian in our contemporary society? It has special relevance to the discussion of Christian involvement in the world. There have always been Christians who have embraced a religious 'quietism'—an attitude of passivity and receptivity before God. Such Christians have stressed the 'spiritual' aspect of Christianity and eschewed involvement with the world. Concretely, this has meant no political involvements and little concern for social issues. Often such Christians have defended their viewpoint by appealing to the Fourth Gospel. Is not the Fourth Gospel, after all, the 'spiritual Gospel'? Does it not have an emphasis on spirituality and show a marked lack of concern for the world and its problems?

The recent debates on the supposed gnosticism of the Fourth Gospel and the nature of the Johannine community have given a sharper focus to this issue of Johannine quietism. E. Käsemann and L. Schottroff have argued<sup>38</sup> that the Fourth Gospel is actually gnostic, and as such, of course, sets up a metaphysical dualism in which there is a 'flight from history', a view of sin as a combination of ignorance and imperfection, and an emphasis on redemption as *gnosis*. Although this understanding of the Fourth Gospel has generally been rejected, Käsemann and Schottroff did point to an inescapable fact—the Johannine world of discourse is quite different from that of the Synoptics. Redaction criticism has stressed that we cannot simply harmonise the Fourth Gospel with

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (London: SCM, 1968); L. Schottroff, 'Joh iv 5–15 und die Konsequenz des johanneische Dualismus' *ZNW* 60 (1969), 199–214; 'Heil als Innerweltliche Entweltlichung' *Nov T* 11 (1969), 294–317.

the Synoptics without sacrificing its integrity. *The Fourth Gospel has to be understood in its own terms.* R. E. Brown's inquiry into the nature of the Johannine community has shown what can happen when one does this.<sup>39</sup> Brown has sketched a fascinating picture of the development of the Johannine community, showing that within it there were disagreements over precisely the issues to which we have alluded: Is the human existence of Jesus salvifically important? Or is Christianity rooted primarily in an experience of the Divine? If so, does this intimacy with God result in sinlessness? Does it further mean that responsibility for others is unimportant? Put in modern terms, is it important for a Christian to be socially and politically involved in the world?

Francis Bacon's famous summons to control nature 'for the relief of man's estate' epitomizes the modern view of science as control over nature (as opposed to the ancient view of science as the understanding of nature). In our technological society this view has been wedded to the idea that *man's essence is his freedom to make the world as he wills.* It is this doctrine of Liberalism<sup>40</sup> which completely dominates our society today. Man is seen as a creature who wills—indeed, who *must* will—his own ends. Mastery of human and non-human nature have become the ends of man; these ends are not grounded in an idea of good but in some vague idea of happiness and comfort, 'for the relief of man's estate'. The characteristics of the technological society are activity, utility and technique,<sup>41</sup> in sharp contrast to the traditional emphases of contemplation, thought and virtue.

So how is the Christian to react to such a society? The question of how much Christianity should accommodate itself to the spirit of our secularized age is, of course, one which has been in the forefront of theological debate for more than a century. It is a crucial question, and one which has evinced very different answers. But whatever differing views Christians might have, almost all agree that the starting point for the discussion must be the Bible. And it is here that we see that our discussion of the Johannine concept of truth does have relevance. For what our discussion suggests in concrete terms is that the truth of Christianity is not something to be *contemplated* but something which is *done*. The Greek understanding of truth is *operative-*

<sup>39</sup> *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

<sup>40</sup> G. P. Grant defines liberalism as 'a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumption that man's essence is his freedom and that therefore what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as he wants it' *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 114, n. 3.

<sup>41</sup> See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964).

*theoretical* whereas the Fourth Gospel understands it as *operative-practical*. One does not seek to validate Christian truth in the realm of theory, rather one tests and verifies it in practice, *for it is the practice of Christianity which bestows new life*. Thus Christians should be involved in the world, but their activity must always be rooted in a spiritual life. It is not to be activity for activity's sake. The end of life is not 'the relief of man's estate' but communion with God.

The Fourth Gospel is not 'quietist'. It does not advocate mere passivity and receptivity before God. *But neither is it 'activist'*. The Fourth Gospel maintains that there should be no sustained and intelligent Christian action unless it is informed by the whole life of faith. The life of action should not be divorced from the life of the Spirit. Thus a Christian's activity in the world has a fundamentally different starting point from that of secularized, technological man. The Liberal philosophy which undergirds the technological society asserts that man's ends are willed from within the horizon of the finite. The Fourth Gospel summons men to live beyond the limits of the finite, in communion with the Father. Loving one's brother 'in truth' liberates us *from* ourselves and the world, *for* ourselves and others. This message of the Fourth Gospel is of vital importance for Christians today if they are to understand the nature of their faith in a technological society.