

## **Express Trains to Heaven: Diversity and the Gospel of John**

by John Linscheid

“People, come to Jesus!” the subway evangelist calls as I step from the last car of the Broad Street line. “I tell you, no one—the Bible says No one—cometh to the Father but by me.”

“No one cometh . . . No one . . . No one . . . No one . . .” The judgment echoes through the underground chambers and follows me up the stairs as I hurry to make my connection to the Market-Frankford line. It galls me to hear the Gospel of the beloved disciple used to damn strangers. What does this evangelist know about the life I’m living and the people I love? He rails against adultery, abortion, homosexuality, television, our consumer culture. (I’ll give him the last two in his favor.)

I hear in his call to conversion a demand for conformity. Yet we both live in a world of diversity—in race, class, ethnicity, family patterns, gender, sexual orientation, and spirituality. I get the sense that for the subway evangelist, this diversity means that the world is falling apart. He uses John to convince us that we’re all headed for hell. But I find in John a Christ who embraces diversity, a Christ who calls us to heaven.

Classically, evangelical faith has used this Gospel in a relentless attempt to drive people into heaven. In my world, such threats drive more people out of the church. The people I know have diverse spiritualities. We discover God in a million places where normal Christianity finds only danger of heresy. Most of us are or once were deeply committed to the Christian church. At one or another epiphany, we turned a corner in our lives. We experienced our turning point as a liberating new beginning in our spiritual as well as our personal lives. But we found the church resistant or even hostile to our new direction.

For example, those of us who have found the male-obsessed language of traditional religion oppressive have begun using alternative language. Instead of celebrating our exploration of a broader understanding of the “image of God,” the church condemns it as pagan. What we find liberating, the avenue by which we come closer to God, is declared heretical. And so it has been for many. Some people find spiritual liberation in the wake of divorce. Some find God through African heritages. Some draw upon the wisdom of Eastern meditation. Some learn to know God through a gay or feminine Christ. Instead of celebrating spiritual growth, the church insists on theological retrenchment.

At first, we tried to explain our choices of new paths. But the church ignored us, put up roadblocks, and tried to steer us back to the familiar road that the church found more comfortable. Our attempts to justify “alternate routes” increased the church’s resistance. We found ourselves condemned as wanderers at best—as leading others to destruction at worst. Finally, deeply wounded by the betrayal of a church more interested in old roads than new spiritual discoveries, we left the institution behind, following the Spirit. In response, the church declared us lost.

The subterranean echoes of evangelical hell-fire and brimstone demand that we leave behind our spiritual experiences of God and replace them with the straight and oh-so-narrow religion that left us feeling dead in the first place. In the call to orthodoxy, my friends, my family, my church, myself—my people—experience an attempt to drive a wedge between God and ourselves. For my people are a diverse people, and popular evangelicalism demands that everyone experience God in one way.

“One Way” remains the evangelical traffic sign. Evangelists issue their warning tickets from the Gospel of John: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (3:3), “He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him” (5:23), “I am the way the truth and the life, no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (14:6).

But have the spiritual traffic cops ever read this Gospel? As far as I can see, the Gospel of John takes off in a thousand directions at once. Its road map provides diverse ways to get from here to there.

The Gospel begins with the poetic hymn to the “Word”, which scholars trace back to traditions about Sophia (Holy Wisdom), a female partner in God’s creative acts. The Word plays the role that Sophia has in many Jewish scripture passages and other documents. The way that Jesus talks in the Gospel of John finds its precedent in writings that record the voice of Sophia. Sue Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig conclude, with other scholars, that either Jesus understood himself in the role of Sophia or his followers in the community of John did (Sophia, 1986, pp. 43-47). So, the Gospel of John begins with a feminine understanding of Christ. It continues with John the Baptist identifying Jesus as the true light and the Lamb of God (John 1:7, 29). According to this Gospel, the wilderness preacher, John, challenges the established religious expectations of the day by refusing to identify with any expected religious role that the religious establishment proposes. The priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem would like John to identify himself as the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet of the end times. Institutional rulers always find it more convenient to pigeonhole people as a way to discount them. But John refuses (John 1:20-22). Instead, he sends some of his own disciples, including Andrew, after Jesus. In telling of this, the Gospel of John seems to add a maverick, desert spirituality to its story. The next disciples join Jesus’ cadre almost passively. Simon Peter comes initially at the behest of his brother, Andrew, who asserts that Jesus is the Messiah (John 1:41). However, his decision to follow is sealed by a mysterious renaming, in which Jesus declares him a “rock” (John 1:42). Philip follows at no more than the command to follow (John 1:43). He brings along Nathanael, who joins the group after Jesus sees more about him than he thought possible (John 1:48). Nathanael concludes the first chapter of John by adding to the earlier titles given to Jesus (Lamb of God, Messiah) the titles Son of God and King of Israel (John 1:49). Is the Gospel adding to its eclectic spirituality a mysticism particularly tuned to Jewish tradition?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ women friends and followers do not fit the passive, homebound model that so many commentaries tell us characterized the role of women in that era. They are forceful, independent characters.

When Jesus appears reluctant to respond to the lack of wine at a wedding, his mother forces his hand. By telling the servants to follow his instructions—even after Jesus rebukes her for suggesting it—his mother occasions the first “sign” or revelation of his glory in the Gospel (John 2:1-11).

The Gospel identifies the woman at the well as a multiply divorced woman in an extramarital relationship. Yet far from condemning her, it pegs her as the founder of the Samaritan church (John 4:1-42).

Martha and Mary both make bold confessions concerning Jesus, even in the midst of their grief over Lazarus’ death (John 11:1-44). Later, Mary takes the menial task of footwashing and transforms it into an extravagant anointing (John 12:1-8). Jesus subsequently uses footwashing as a model of love for his disciples at his final meal with them (John 13:2-17). Did Mary give Jesus the idea?

Some scholars say that these depictions of individuals arise from the memory of historical events. Others favor the theological concerns of the author as their source. Still others say that the characters portrayed represent parts of the community in which the Gospel was written. Whatever our conclusion, the diverse character of John’s characters suggests a comfort with pluralism that challenges the intolerance of modern evangelicals who use John to enforce uniformity. What we read as dogmatic and exclusive in our current context may have served an entirely different function in the community that gave it birth.

I have lived, focusing attention on this Gospel, for the past couple of years in my own spiritual life. I now suspect that John reflects an essential stage for a spiritual group that has been marginalized. Perhaps the community of John asserts spiritual power in response to being disempowered by another, dominant group. I suspect this because I read John in the midst of a spiritual community that lives in just such a context.

My spiritual community consists of feminist women, men’s-movement men, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, tax resisters, divorced folks, single people, unmarried couples living together, interracially coupled people, people

with AIDS, economically stressed individuals, people who have been sexually abused—that only scratches the surface. Some of these folks are more or less affiliated with the urban church that I attend. Some have left official and/or institutional Christendom altogether. Whoever we are, mainstream churchianity holds us a doctrine's-length or two away. "Respectable" gatherings of Christians, when they consider us at all, can only understand our lives as problematic at best. If they speak of us, they choose adjectives such as "broken" or "struggling."

For a long time, we accepted their assessment of us. We saw ourselves as dominant church bodies and the rest of the world saw us: religiously suspect, sinners, broken and struggling people, perhaps even heretics. We shared with each other the realization that common religion didn't work for us, that we didn't find God or the realm of God there. Often we were much better at critiquing the dominant religious positions and practices than at articulating our own. That was largely because we still accepted the dominant group's definition of God and religious experience. Since we hadn't experienced God as "they" said we should, we wondered if we even believed in God. Nevertheless, we weren't quite ready to let go of our knowledge of ourselves as spiritual beings. We might not be Methodist or Mennonite or Baptist anymore. (Some might no longer identify as Christian.) But we felt spiritual. We experienced life in ways that could best be described with spiritual language. And a lot of those experiences were intimately connected with the conditions that set us apart—what the wider church saw as "broken" or "struggling."

As a defense against the condescension directed toward us, we wore our struggle as a badge of courage and our brokenness like a purple heart. What did these other Christians know who had never lived with divorce, a minority sexual orientation, poverty, urban violence? These people had gained their power and ease by conformity to traditional social and family patterns. How could they judge those of us who were victims of their exploitation and social oppression? How dare they look down on us as broken people in need of fixing! The faith of questions and doubts and hurts and oppression was more honest and therefore preferable to respectable religion.

After awhile, we realized that our struggle was not so much against our limitations as against the social and religious forces arrayed against us. We wouldn't be nearly so broken if regular Christians would quit beating up on us. We struggled primarily to surmount barriers they threw in our path. As we realized this, our desire to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the dominant churches diminished. We ceased to try to justify ourselves in terms that the majority could accept. Instead, we valiantly claimed the authenticity of the margins.

We began to examine our spiritual experiences in our own context and to tell each other our own good news. Our active knowledge of God, gained in the midst of oppression, held more authority than whatever beliefs might seep into some passive spectator in a pew. Discovering the power of our own religious journeys, we claimed our own spirituality as central.

Ironically, what alienated us from the world—the religious world in particular—aligned us with the spirit of holiness. Like the Word, in the Gospel of John's first chapter, we came to our own and our own "received us not" (John 1:11). Yet we found our lives "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). We might be on the margins of popular religion, but we were at the center of God's attention. Although the world and the church would not claim us as their children, we experienced ourselves as "children of God" (John 1:12). The Word did not reign on high, distantly detached from or looming judgmentally over our lives. It dwelt among us, God made flesh in our experience.

That's where I hear echoes of the Gospel of John. In John's community, the direct encounter with God claims the center of faith. I suspect the Gospel of John was written in a community that had been marginalized but was subsequently claiming its faith as central. I suspect this because the language of John is the language of my spiritual community.

As I currently understand church history, Christianity began among a group of people whose direct experience of the risen Jesus shaped their self-identity, behavior, and social worldview. This group was Jewish, although later writings remembered contact that Jesus had with non-Jews. Following Jesus and experiencing his res-

urrection dramatically reshaped his disciples' understanding and their practice of Jewish religion—but they did continue to practice Jewish religion. Early on, however, some Gentiles also had religious experiences with the risen Christ as a result of their contact with Jesus' followers. This wouldn't necessarily have been unusual. Scripture records a number of Gentiles interacting with Jews in that time.

The Gospel of John places Jesus within an extremely pluralistic Jewish context. It doesn't present a scenario in which Gentiles are good and Jews are bad. Jesus' closest disciples are Jews. In fact, most positive characters are Jews. The first to declare faith in him—and the last—are Jews, according to the Gospel of John. The Gentiles who are described in any detail at all are negative characters: Pilate, the soldiers of the arrest and crucifixion. Even the most favorably portrayed Gentiles come to Jesus in the course of their pilgrimage to a Jewish festival in Jerusalem (John 12:20).

The Gospel of John shows us a diverse Judaism, in which Pharisees, political leaders, crowds, and small factions vie for influence. Theological debate is alive. No monolithic Judaism marches in lockstep to the beat of the Pentateuch or to the dictates of religious and political leaders of the day. Through the figure of Nicodemus, the author suggests that some in the social/religious hierarchy were quite responsive to leaders like Jesus. John's Gospel depicts some Jews following Jesus, others taking a middle course toward him, and others rejecting his teaching. This diversity reflects what other sources reveal about the Judaism that Jesus and the early church would have known. There were collaborators, syncretists, separatists, bandits, Pharisees, and political revolutionaries. Some readings of the history of that time suggest that Jews fought with each other as much as or more than they fought with the Romans.

Why then did the terminology "the Jews" become such a negative term in the Gospel of John? Remember, this Gospel also declares, "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22).

Assorted Gentiles had been attracted to Jewish religion now and again for centuries. During the first century, different Jewish groups responded to this interest in different ways. At least as the story is now received, the disciples who first brought Gentiles into circles of Jesus' followers considered trust in the risen Jesus as the defining characteristic of faith—so central as to make other traditional religious practices relative. But a significant group of Jesus' followers did not agree. These followers did not believe it possible to follow Jesus apart from the religion that Jesus himself had practiced. Their faith was the Jewish religion, albeit renewed and perhaps redefined by Jesus and the experience of his resurrection. Their experience of the early church was that of a group within Jewish society and religion—one living out what they believed to be the true (Jewish) religion. A Gentile who wished to join this community must therefore become a Jew—must convert. Apparently, some Gentiles were quite ready to adopt circumcision. Paul's letter to the Galatians inveighs against Gentile circumcision as part of following Christ (Gal. 5:2-6).

But for other disciples involved with Gentiles, experience of faith in the risen Christ or through an encounter with Christ overwhelmed all other spiritual realities. For them, circumcision, laws about food, and other matters of Jewish covenant identity became secondary (and eventually unnecessary). At first, it must have seemed radical just to suggest that Samaritans, Gentiles, and others who ignored or even repudiated many Jewish practices might be included in Jesus' circle of the faithful. The account of the Jerusalem conference in Acts seems to remember just such a discussion over who might be tolerated under what circumstances (Acts 15). That conference still insisted that Gentiles fit certain conditions for entry into the community of Jesus—even if they didn't meet all the standards necessary for faith as the more traditional Jews and Gentile converts defined it (Acts 15:19-20).

These traditionalists within the church defined religion in a way that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. In rejecting the message of those who defined faith narrowly by tradition, the Gospel of John uses the term "the Jews" much as many of my friends now use the term "the church" or "Christian." Having been defined out by people claiming the title "Christian," some of my friends identify that term only with narrow-mindedness and rejection. They use the term with a disdainful inflection just as one would speak of Nazis or the Ku Klux Klan. Perhaps John's community experienced similar dynamics from those pushing the church toward one brand of Judaism and similarly identified the traditionalists in the church with the term that they claimed so self-righ-

teously.

Perhaps in the community in which the Gospel of John was written, the “marginal” nontraditional believers gained the majority. As a result, their Gospel—the Gospel of John—turns the debate about standards for inclusion on its head. The traditionalists would have considered these witnesses not only marginal but beyond the pale. Yet John makes the people originally considered marginal into central witnesses to Christ’s reality. The first declaration that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Son of God, occurs not in Jerusalem among the religious authorities, but among the wilderness following of John (John 1:18, 29, 41). Samaritans, who were ethnic and religious opponents of the Jews, gladly receive the living water and the revelation that Jesus is the Messiah (John 4). A sick man who has been living next to a pool for thirty-eight years more readily obeys Jesus than do adherents of tradition (John 5). A blind beggar persists in his confession of faith to the point of excommunication (John 9).

The normative religion and social structure of the day come under relentless attack. While “cleansing” the temple, Jesus overturns the economic foundation of worship and declares himself to be the new temple (2:19-22). He wins the respect of a religious leader, Nicodemus, with talk of spiritual renewal in now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t, first-here-and-then-there terminology (John 3), and Nicodemus later risks his political respectability advocating for Jesus when his fellow rulers want Jesus arrested (7:50). Some people take offense at the intimation that they might be considered illegitimate. Jesus names as demonic the socio-political superiority they claim (8:39-44). He subverts the political authority of Rome by claiming that Pilate’s power is limited by heaven, not by his Roman commission. Essentially, Jesus calls Pilate a puppet in the overarching scheme of things (19:11).

The Gospel turns the world upside down, declaring what the world considered the margin to be the central place where God functions. The old “center,” according to John, is powerless. A personal encounter with Christ and stubborn adherence to that experience in the face of all society’s efforts at denial constitutes authentic faith (John 9).

Isn’t that vintage evangelicalism? The stress on a personal relationship with Christ. A conversion experience after encountering God. You might hear the same thing preached from the subway evangelist I listen to on my way to and from work. Storefront congregations would proclaim this happily. Or would they?

Popular evangelicalism is about conversion and a personal faith—narrowly defined. It accepts the standard model of Christian faith that holds that an authoritative community (the church) bears the authoritative pattern for life (scripture as interpreted and applied by the church). It understands conversion primarily as a matter of switching rulebooks. The convert leaves the old world order behind and takes on the culture of popular evangelicalism as his or her new world order. Popular evangelicalism is inclusive—narrowly defined. It will take anyone who willingly conforms to its world view, its interpretation of the Bible, and its understanding of Jesus. Yet it jealously protects its prerogative to define the faith for everyone and to control its expression by anyone. Popular evangelicalism cannot tolerate people who have new visions, interpret scripture differently, or encounter Christ in nontraditional ways. Such individuals challenge the power of the existing group to define faith and reality for others.

The Gospel of John, I would argue, does not do what many of us are tempted to do—pick a place on the margin and redefine that as the new center. Instead of substituting a new orthodoxy for an old one, it pushes its readers toward a view of conversion and personal faith broadly defined. It does this because the community of John needed to hold together the diversity within it. The Jews in this community alone represented diversity—followers of John the Baptist, Pharisees, people with a love for Sophia/Logos (the Word), etc. Add to that mix various Samaritans and Greeks.

How does one hold together such diversity? The usual solution is to pick one place where God has been newly encountered and redefine that as the central reality for faith. Then call everyone to confess the same new “center.” We might expect the experience of the Samaritan woman or the blind man or one of Jesus’ disciples to become the new norm.

The Gospel hints that the disciples were looking for just such a new orthodoxy or new “way.” At the last supper, Peter, Thomas, and Philip—in rapid succession—ask Jesus to give them concrete directions and spiritual revelation (John 13:36-14:10). But this Gospel poses a creative alternative to fighting an old orthodoxy with a new one.

It presents Christ as a “moveable center.”

In a community where domination by any one group could spell disaster, this Gospel makes each person’s encounter with Christ central. By doing so, it redefines the power structures within a community. It gives every individual who chooses to define herself or himself in relationship to Christ an equal claim to authority. The faithful are not defined by which mountain they worship on but by worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:21-23). Religious leaders cannot define another person’s spiritual experience (John 9:24-34). Political authorities fool themselves by imagining that they have real power over life, because politics is essentially a spiritual reality (John 19:10-11). Faith happens in a lot of different places, because Christ meets people in many different places.

Faith is defined first here, then over here; not always in the same terms or in the same place. Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” For us, this meets the requirement for a comfortable new orthodoxy because we have had Jesus handed down to us as a neatly packaged theological proposition. When we hear these words, we do not hear them as the disciples heard them, as a strange and ambiguous response that prompts further questioning. We hear them with all the careful definitions that two millennia of theologians have loaded onto the name of Jesus.

Yet for Jesus in the Gospel of John, these words summarize an amazingly diverse and ambiguous collection of sometimes-nearly-contradictory views of faith.

To hold it all together, Jesus defines adherence to his way chiefly as commitment to a friendship that will grow and change through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel acknowledges that the disciples’ understanding of what Jesus meant changed over time as they reflected on it in relation to Scripture (John 2:22). The Holy Spirit will teach them more after Jesus is gone as well as prompt their memories of Jesus (John 14:26). Even the model of servanthood (John 13:15-16) is superseded by friendship (John 15:15).

Finally, it is God’s love for Jesus, Jesus’ love for God, the disciple’s love for Jesus and Jesus’ love for the disciples which is the fundamental spiritual reality (John 17:25-26). When social, religious, and political persecution leads to betrayal of the relationship, love remains the fundamental reality (John 16:27-33). The changeable patterns of love in a growing relationship supersede static definitions in the faith that is characteristic of John’s diverse community.

Like John’s community, my friends and I live in a world faced with perplexing diversity. Our experiences of God differ significantly from each other’s. My experience of Christ alone is diverse. I have known Christ as straight, as gay, as man, as woman, as stranger, as friend.

In my adolescence, Christ was a stranger: a sort of distant moral teacher who entered my life from time to time. I found Jesus mysterious and fascinating. I wanted to follow him—especially because of his “theory of non-violence.” It seemed particularly relevant in the midst of the Vietnam War. The Christ of political change and nonviolence has stood me in good stead through subsequent years, though I still find Christ strange and a bit obtuse in the political arena, and somewhat hard to identify with the same person I now know as a friend. In my first year of seminary, I began experimenting with prayer—specifically prayer to Jesus. Pretty soon, I found myself carrying on conversations that were not always one-sided. I began to trust Christ’s companionship in times when I felt no other source of support. Today, I find myself conversing with Christ as a matter of course, while I ride to work on the subway or file away another academic record at my job.

As a gay man, I have found the encounter with Christ as lover to be fundamental to my religious experience. Jesus is my most intimate companion, skin-close and spirit-close as only a lover can be. Sometimes, in certain

crises, only his arms wrapped around me keep me from falling apart. I talk to him, yell at him, berate him, thank him, listen to him, feel his spirit breathing upon me, wrap myself in his embrace.

In my dreams, I have also met Christ as a woman. She has danced before me and beckoned me toward the earth and its abundance. I have followed her, fascinated, hoping to discover the secrets she holds in her hand. And I have received through her kisses a wisdom I cannot verbalize.

But I have also known Christ as a straight man—indeed, I knew him that way for the first twenty-five years of my life. I distanced myself from that incarnation over the years. Western civilization's idolatrous equation of God with straight Caucasian males eclipsed any authenticity I could find in such an embodiment. But in my church, through straight men who are exploring their own authentic spirituality, I am coming to appreciate the sometimes-straight image of God. And I am rediscovering Christ as a straight man in ways still too foggy to articulate.

Propositional faith says Christ cannot be both friend and stranger, male and female, straight and gay. But the Gospel of John pushes me toward just such a faith. Jesus celebrates friendship, yet remains in some respects inaccessible to the disciples (15:15; 16:29-32). Jesus is Son and one with the Father (10:30); at the same time being the Word, the incarnation of feminine Holy Wisdom (1:1-18). The Gospel affirms a bodily closeness and companionship as one of the identifying features of Jesus' relationship with the disciple "whom he loved" (John 13:23-25). It affirms a sensuous relationship to women as well (12:1-8). Christ is found in the midst of Samaritans and in the midst of Jews (4:39-42; 11:45). The Christ of John's Gospel is even more diverse than the Christ of my limited experience.

No wonder that love becomes the theme of this Gospel's faithfulness. Love is a term of relationship. It embraces rather than excludes. It grows and changes with each new encounter.

The Gospel of John does not end with a demand from Jesus that Peter confess him as Messiah or Lord or Master. Rather, Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to redeem his triple betrayal (18:15-18, 25-27) with a triune declaration of love (21:15-17). Not out of theological correctness nor out of proper religion but out of love will Peter find the stamina to follow Christ. Earlier in the story, Peter had asserted his willingness to follow Christ to the death (13:37). Instead, he betrayed him. Now, in love alone, Peter's assertion that he will follow Christ to the death bears fruit (21:18-19).

As if to emphasize the diverse paths of faithfulness, the Gospel turns attention to the disciple whom Jesus loved. Peter seems to ask if the beloved disciple's fate will be similar to his own (21:21). But Jesus answers that his (Christ's) will may determine a different path—without martyrdom—for a different disciple. The shape of the beloved's faithfulness is not Peter's concern (21:23). Each disciple must be faithful to his or her own encounter with Christ. No two relationships with God will take the same path.

Yet, as it takes off in a thousand directions, this Gospel claims a peculiar unity. Though Christ's followers meet Christ in diverse locations and on myriad paths, they recognize a shared experience. They glimpse, in holy moments, a commonality breaking through barriers. They realize that though God comes to them in many ways, fundamentally their God is love. And love creates bonds of fellowship in the most unlikely circumstances.

The other day, I stood on the platform waiting for the A train on the Market-Frankford line. Across the tracks, a subway preacher waved his Bible, proclaiming that "no one cometh to the Father. . ." He ambled through the morning-dazed crowd, from left to right in my perspective. And from the right I heard the echoes of a woman's voice, declaring that we were all "on an express train to hell, sinner!" She marched into view, sandwiched between two poster boards warning of damnation. It seemed, as they neared each other, that the two evangelists were raising their voices against one another in their bid for an audience. Then they looked at each other and chuckled. The laughter spread lightly through the crowd, perhaps the one moment of shared spirituality that I will ever experience with all those diverse people, heading toward a thousand tasks. For one instant, we shared an ironic moment of truth. And the laughter became an express train to heaven.

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First published in *The Other Side* magazine.