

October 7, 2007

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Almost from the beginning of Christian history attentive readers of Holy Scripture have referred to the author of the Fourth Gospel as "John the Theologian," thereby testifying to the special theological depth that seemed to set him apart among the evangelists. Only in recent times, however, have biblical students been disposed to analyze, critically and systematically, those distinctive features that render John so unique, and to arrange those features into a synthetic picture.

We may contrast their treatment of John, in this respect, with their treatment of Paul. Even as Christians referred to John as the "Theologian," it was the theology of Paul that they critically and systematically analyzed and arranged into a synthetic whole. There seem to be two reasons for this anomaly.

First, it is a fact that the New Testament contains more information about Paul than about John. The Acts of the Apostles in particular provides a biographical outline, of sorts, for the Apostle to the Gentiles, an outline that gives the careful student a measure of critical and analytical control in the study of the Pauline epistles.

Thus, it is possible to detect a personal development in Paul's theology. Under the influence of the Acts of the Apostles, a synthetic reading of Paul's thought takes on something of a biographical character, which links his theology more closely to his person. Such an approach to Paul is discernable as far back as St. John Chrysostom.

This kind of approach is far more difficult in the case of John. Except for a few extra-biblical references, there is no historical way to control the study of John's writings. Among the works traditionally ascribed to John, only the Book of Revelation actually claims to have been written by him (if it is the same John!). Consequently, readers of the Johannine corpus have often differed very much among themselves about which of these writings should rightly be ascribed to John. To say the least, this situation makes it very difficult to form a synthesis "Johannine theology." How can we arrive at a synthesis of Johannine thought if we are uncertain about which books John really did write?

There is a second reason why a systematic, synthetic analysis of Johannine theology has been relatively slow in coming: Unlike Paul, who dominates the epistolary section of the New Testament, the Gospel of John, the major component of the Johannine corpus, is simply one of four gospels. Hence the study of John has tended to be a subsection of a more ample category, namely, "Gospel studies," where John was compared and contrasted with the Synoptic Gospels. While it was always recognized that John is special among the four gospels, it was always a case of "among." There was no consistent pattern of isolating John's theology itself as distinctive, because the study of John was normally part of a larger picture.

I have indicated another problem to be faced in elaborating a Johannine theology--the limits of the Johannine canon. In this respect the problem in John is identical with the problem in Paul, namely, the limits of the particular canon.

The problem in John usually has to do with the Book of Revelation. If this book is set aside from the Johannine corpus, the final product of Johannine study will be more abstract, less historical, because it will be missing the prophetic, apocalyptic dimension supplied by that book.

How then should one proceed? I believe that the only viable presupposition on which to base a systematic study of John is the prior acceptance of Johannine authorship, at least broadly understood, for all the writings traditionally ascribed to him--to wit, the Fourth Gospel, three epistles, and the Book of Revelation. This hypothesis is not attractive to those who find it difficult to imagine that a single author was responsible for works that differ so much among themselves with respect to genre and style.

I confess to a lack of sympathy for their failure of imagination.

I believe that the full synthesis of John's theology requires the study of three different literary forms, each with its separate characteristics: meditative narrative, epistle, and apocalyptic vision. This combination is true of no other New Testament writer.

It is also my persuasion that the acceptance of this authorial hypothesis is amply justified by the resultant fruits of such a study.

©2007 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php