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A THEOLOGICAL KEY TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

by CHARLES DE SANTO

DR. DE SANTO, who is Assistant Professor of Bible and Religion at Maryville College, Maryville, Tennessee, finds in the Fourth Evangelist's references to the critical "hour" or "time" a key to his presentation of the significance of the gospel.

"**I**F there is a God, why does He not do something about the terrible mess the world is in? Why does He not intervene in the *historical scene* and make things right? Why does He not communicate with man—face to face as it were—and share with him His plan and purpose for the world of men? Why does He not manifest his power to redeem and deliver man?" Questions like these have always come into the minds of men. The Fourth Gospel gives a clear, positive, and satisfying answer to such questions. The author of the Gospel of John relates how the Word of God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth for the purpose of executing the divine plan of redemption. God's plan for the Son was not a haphazard one, but one which was precisely planned, one which the Son carefully unfolded, culminating in that great hour of revelation and redemption on the cross. Jesus was possessed of a very real and urgent sense of destiny. "When the time had fully come", God sent His Son on a mission of reconciliation and nothing could interfere with its fulfilment.

It is when the life and work of Jesus, as presented by the Fourth Evangelist, are seen as those of a Man who was conscious that He was on a divine mission, a mission which was to be consummated at a given *hour*, that the Gospel becomes most intelligible. Jesus' sense of destiny is evident from the beginning of His ministry in Cana of Galilee and continues to His resurrection. This sense of destiny is seen in the use of two nouns, ὥρα, which refers, not to a *chronological hour*, but to the *fit or opportune time for action*, a decisive moment, and καιρός, which also refers to the *proper or opportune time for action*. These words are found in the Fourth Gospel in the following statements: "My hour has not yet come" (2: 4); "my time has not yet come" (7: 6); "my time has not yet fully come" (7: 8); "the hour is coming" (4: 21; 5: 28);

"the hour is coming, and now is" (4: 23 ; 5: 25) ; "his hour had not yet come" (7: 30 ; 8: 20) ; "the hour has come" (12: 23 ; compare 12: 27 ; 17: 1) ; "when Jesus knew that his hour had come" (13: 1) ; "the hour is coming" (16: 2, 25, 32 ; compare 16: 4 and 16: 25 context).

In the Fourth Gospel it is no secret that Jesus is the "Son of man" (3: 13 f. ; 5: 27 ; 6: 27 ; 6: 53 ; 6: 62 ; 8: 28 ; 12: 23 ; 13: 31), the "Son of God" (1: 34 ; 3: 18 ; 5: 25, *et al*), the "Messiah" (1: 41 ; 4: 25 f.). Jesus is presented as the Messiah who from the beginning was conscious of His foreordained mission of revealing the nature of God in His words, as well as in His vicarious suffering. But, though Jesus was conscious of His messiahship and mission, His disciples did not fully understand the nature of that messiahship and mission until after Pentecost (2: 22 ; 12: 16 ; 14: 26). In the Fourth Gospel a complete concept of Jesus' redemptive work is presented. In Chapters 1-12 Jesus is engaged in discussion and debate with the inner circle and the world, revealing the nature of God and His will for man ; in Chapters 13-17 Jesus addresses only the inner circle concerning the nature of the Christian community and its relation to Him and the Father, and the nature of His vicarious suffering. Jesus' sense of destiny unfolds itself clearly when the above references to the *hour* are kept in mind. In the Fourth Gospel it will be observed (1) that Jesus refuses to offer Himself publicly as Messiah, (2) that Jesus has already brought *eternal life* with Him, (3) that Jesus' *hour* for decisive action comes when the Greeks come to see Him, and (4) that Jesus instructs His disciples concerning the kingdom now that the *hour* has come.

I. "MY HOUR HAS NOT YET COME"

Let us first examine those statements which read, "My hour has not yet come". When Jesus was at the wedding in Cana of Galilee with His mother and His disciples the host ran out of wine. Jesus' mother came to Him and said, "They have no wine". Jesus replied, "O woman, what have you to do with Me? My hour has not yet come" (2: 1-4). Jesus was here telling His mother that she had nothing in common with Him ; her concept of Messiah and His were radically different. The *hour* for Him to demonstrate His full messiahship had not yet come. The people were not yet ready for the revelation of the glory of God in His cross. The idea of a suffering Messiah was still foreign to them, although Isaiah and possibly the Qumran Scrolls taught this. Jesus did go on and perform the sign, however, and changed the water into wine. Through that miraculous sign Jesus taught that the

old wine of Judaism had run out, and that God was now offering the new wine of the Gospel in the revelation of Himself in Jesus the Christ.

On another occasion (Chapter 7), after Jesus had performed the sign of feeding the five thousand and had taught the people that He was the Bread of Life that came down from heaven, His brothers came to Him with the request that He should leave Galilee and go to the Feast of Tabernacles at Jerusalem. They wanted Him to demonstrate His messianic power and person openly, thereby making a bid for the kingship of Israel. Jesus' brothers had seen Him perform miracles, but they were not convinced that He was *the* Messiah. He answered their request by saying:

My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil. Go to the feast yourselves; I am not going up to the feast, for my time has not yet fully come (7: 6-8).

Jesus still had much revelatory work to do concerning the nature of God, the kingdom, and the means whereby man might enter it. His *hour* for decisive action had not yet come. Although Jesus did go up to the feast, He did not go up to offer Himself as Messiah. He went up to the Temple to teach that He was God's revelation, that His Father was vitally concerned with all men, and that He, like His Father, was engaged in redemptive activity seven days a week. Only those who were blind to the things of God would fail to see the Father in His life and work. John then adds: "So they sought to arrest Him; but no one laid hands on Him, because His hour had not yet come" (7: 30; compare 7: 44).

Finally, as Jesus moved on into the Temple treasury He voiced one of His great claims: "I am the light of the world" (8: 12). The Pharisees, because of their extreme hostility toward Jesus, desired to destroy Him, ". . . but no one arrested Him, because His hour had not yet come" (8: 20).

Jesus was engaged in revealing the Father's will for men and nothing could prevent Him. When His revelatory work was accomplished and that decisive *hour* came, the forces of evil would be permitted to apprehend Him, only to discover that the cross would be their own undoing.

II. "THE HOUR IS COMING, AND NOW IS"

Let us now examine those statements which paradoxically state that "the hour is coming, and now is". In John 4 the evangelist recorded the incident of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well. It was a revolutionary encounter because in it Jesus tore away all that was superficial and non-essential in

a vital relationship with the Father. The woman, having been brought face to face with her need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God, raised a question concerning the proper place to worship—at Gerizim or at Jerusalem? Let us assume that the woman was genuinely puzzled about the proper place to worship. Jesus answered:

Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (4: 21-24).

In these crucial verses our Lord announces that beginning now, in His messianic mission, the *hour* of salvation has already come. Localism in worship has been swept away. Not *where*, but *how* we worship is the important matter. God is the Father of all men, Samaritan and Jew. It is God who seeks men to worship Him—men with honest and sincere hearts. It is man's attitude which determines whether or not he is acceptable to the Father. The Temple and the mountain have nothing to do with meeting God in a life-giving and life-sustaining encounter. Further, our Lord teaches us here of God's concern for women as well as men. God the Father is concerned with all as they are, in this very *hour*. What is it that makes the *hour* of salvation a present reality? It is none other than the presence of the Messiah—God's instrument of revelation. The kingdom is proleptically present in the earthly ministry of Jesus.

In John 5 Jesus is recorded as saying:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment (5: 25-29).

Obviously, 5: 25 refers to Jesus' contemporaries. The context of this passage tells us that Jesus, as God's Son, is revealing the will of God for man. Acceptance of God's revelation in Jesus brings man into the Kingdom of God, i.e., gives him eternal life. The dead whom Jesus is addressing are those in His hearing who refuse to accept Him as God's messianic revealer and deliverer. The Son of God has the authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of man. He is the personified Son of man who brings in

the kingdom by His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. God the Father entrusts judgment to the Son who is to be His instrument for redemption. At some future date, the *parousia*, the Son of man will make a separation between the righteous and the wicked.

We have seen above that Jesus was possessed of a sense of destiny. He was conscious of an *hour* which had not yet come, one in which he would publicly offer Himself as Messiah, that is, the *hour* when he would fulfil His messianic mission on the cross.

III. "THE HOUR HAS COME"

We pass on now to consider those statements of Jesus which say that "*the hour has come*". In John 12, after the triumphal entry of our Lord into Jerusalem where He was hailed "king of Israel", He and His disciples continued near the Temple. Greeks from Galilee came to Philip and requested that he secure an audience with Jesus for them. Philip, perhaps not too certain about what he should do, sought out Andrew to discuss the matter. Both then informed Jesus of the Greeks' request. Jesus had taught that there were "other sheep" which were not of the Jewish fold (10: 16), and now they had come to seek Him. This incident in which the Greeks come seeking Jesus should not be passed over lightly. I would like to suggest that it is the *turning point* in the Fourth Gospel. For as soon as the disciples bring Jesus this word about the Gentiles, He says: "The *hour has come* for the Son of man to be glorified" (12: 23 ; compare 17: 1). Although representatives of the Jewish world (disciples) and those of the Gentile world (Greeks) had come, they had failed to understand the true nature of His messiahship, their concept and His being radically different. Jesus took this incident to be the sign that *the hour* had come for Him to glorify the Father on the cross. This was *the hour* when He must turn His face toward Calvary. Jesus was to be glorified by the Father in the cross, and this same event was to glorify the Father. Jesus was now to reveal to a selfish, cruel world, the unselfish, tender love of God. He used the analogy of the dying of a grain of wheat in order to give forth "new wheat" to illustrate how He was going to bring new life by His death. He taught also, in the above context, that death to self is the way to new life even for man.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus does not seem to reveal His messiahship openly and where His sense of destiny is not emphatically stated, the Fourth Evangelist presents Jesus as the Messiah who is always in complete control of His destiny. There was no hesitation on Jesus' part when He realized that the time

for decisive action had come. He is recorded as saying:

Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say, "Father, save me from this hour"? No, for this purpose [the cross] I have come to this hour (12: 27).

Jesus had come for *this hour*, the hour of redemption, through suffering and death, and He was determined to go all the way. When Jesus asked, "Father glorify thy name" a voice spoke from heaven saying, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (12: 28). The Father assures Jesus that He has been glorified through Jesus' life up to this point, and that He will be glorified in His cross.

When Jesus received these words, He stated:

"Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." John adds: "He said this to show by what death He was to die" (12: 31-32).¹

Jesus here proclaimed that *Satan had already* been cast out! When Jesus decided to go to the cross and glorify the Father, Satan was cast out. The victory was won when Jesus declared that "the hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified". The Jews did not understand a suffering Son of man; therefore, they asked Jesus whether the Messiah was not to live forever. Jesus did not attempt to instruct the unbelieving Jews concerning the nature of His messianic mission any further, but turned to address His disciples.

The emphasis must be placed upon the victory of Jesus on the cross—a victory which began when Jesus proclaimed that "the hour has come", the hour when He would unflinchingly and courageously go to the cross and there glorify the Father, overcome Satan, and the world (14: 30; 16: 33; compare 1 John 3: 8). In a very real sense, Paul's words that ". . . God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Christ", appropriately applies to the *hour* of suffering and victory on the cross.

IV. THE HOUR OF THE DISCIPLES

Finally, there are a series of references to an *hour* associated with the disciples' activity after the hour of Jesus' triumph on the cross. These constitute instructions that will aid the disciples in understanding what is expected of them as members of the Christian community.

In John 13: 1 we find that since "Jesus knew that His hour had

¹ Compare Luke 22: 53 where implicit is the idea that the cross is the *hour* of triumph for Christ, which the resurrection and ascension demonstrates.

come", He began to instruct His disciples in the need for humility in the work and fellowship of the kingdom. Humility was to be that one virtue which all believers should possess. Each must seek to serve as the Master did. He was one who fearlessly did the will of God, and yet He never ran roughshod over those who were honestly seeking the Father.

In John 16: 25 Jesus speaks of the hour which "is coming" when He will speak plainly, simply, and clearly to His disciples. He will no longer use parables or figures. This obviously refers to the coming of the risen Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit (compare 14: 25 ; 15: 26 ; 16: 7-11, 12-15). The Holy Spirit will reveal the true messianic character of Jesus, namely, that His messiahship was one of revelation and redemption through His life, vicarious death, and resurrection. Note that the Holy Spirit is almost always associated with the revelation of Christ to the believer.

In John 16: 1-4, 16-24 there are references to an *hour* in which the disciples would be persecuted for their discipleship and to an *hour* of sorrow because Jesus is going on to the cross. The disciples are warned not to be alarmed when persecution comes, for the disciples are not better than their Master. As Jesus was persecuted, so they will be persecuted. But Jesus calls them to take hope.

When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come ; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you (16: 21-22).

This clearly refers to the death as the "birth pangs of Messiah" and the resurrection as the birth of the kingdom. The *hour* of the cross is the inevitable prerequisite to the hour of resurrection triumph.

V. OUR HOUR

Now, what is the Fourth Evangelist saying to us ?

First of all he says that active belief in, and acceptance of, Jesus as the revelation of God's redeeming love, gives victory over sin, selfishness, and Satan. The ruler of this world, according to the Fourth Gospel, has already been cast out. Christ is already exercising dominion in those hearts which have been opened to Him. Christians already have *eternal life*—that abundant quality of life made possible by the indwelling Spirit of God. Judgment has already taken place. There is, however, a final day of judgment still to come at the parousia.

Second, he says that God is a suffering God, one whose suffering

nature is revealed in His Son, not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles. John says that, if the *hour* in which Jesus glorified the Father was the *hour* of vicarious sacrifice, then we, the Church, and the individual members of the Body of Christ, need not think that we can glorify the Father by anything less than a life of sacrificial service. One of the enigmas of the Christian Church in America is that people can live in luxury, complacent about the needs of others, and still profess discipleship to a suffering Saviour. According to the Fourth Evangelist, we *cannot* be true children of God and continue in our present state of egocentric "Christian" living, disobedient to his demands for *agape*-love.

Finally, he says it is now *man's hour*. The Father has invaded the human scene at a definite hour in history in the person of His Son, Jesus the Christ. Christ has lived, died, risen and ascended to the Father in order to bring to a world of lost men the Good News of forgiveness from the God whom they have offended. It remains for man to respond to this offer of God's love.

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