

The Upper Room Experience

Perspectives of the Four Gospel Writers

“When Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.”

—John 13:1

THE VARIOUS INCIDENTS

which took place in the upper room the night before Jesus’ death were recorded by all four Gospel writers, though they did not all note the same details. Part 1 of this article, which appeared in last month’s issue, dealt with those experiences chronicled in the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as Jesus and his twelve chosen apostles gathered together that evening. In Part 2 of this article, we will consider the record provided by the Apostle John in his Gospel.

John’s account of the upper room experience is found in the verses which follow our opening text. (John 13:2-35) Like Matthew, John was present on this occasion, being one of the twelve. His narrative is strikingly different, however, from that of

Matthew, as well as those of Mark and Luke. John seemed to have a much different perspective than the other Gospel writers, which gives reason for us to briefly examine why this was so.

UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

John's unique perspective of Jesus' life, including the upper room experience, can be largely attributed to the time at which he wrote his account, which was evidently much later than the other three Gospel writers. As mentioned in Part 1 of this article, the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were probably written in a range of years from approximately AD 40 to 65, and all prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

In the book of Revelation, which John also wrote, he states that he was on the "isle that is called Patmos" when he received this special vision from the risen Lord. (Rev. 1:9) Many religious and secular scholars believe that John was exiled to Patmos by the Roman emperor Domitian around AD 95. This means he would have recorded the vision of Revelation sometime after that. It was probably shortly thereafter, however, because by this time, John was possibly 90 years of age or more. We also note that, because of similarities in style as well as in some of the wording in the closing verses of both books, Revelation and the Gospel of John were apparently written close to the same time. (John 21:22-24; Rev. 22:18-20) Based on all these factors, most authorities place the writing of John's Gospel between AD 95 and AD 100.

If, as seems to be the case, John penned his Gospel record in the closing years of the first century, this

was well over sixty years after the close of Jesus' earthly ministry. It was also thirty to sixty years later than the writing of the other three Gospels, and at least twenty-five years after Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. It is, therefore, easy to understand that, from his much later vantage point, John's perspective of things was somewhat different from those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

At the time he wrote, John was undoubtedly the last living apostle. The Jewish nation no longer existed in any form, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and their people had been scattered throughout the earth. John no doubt observed that Rome was now not only the center of a great civil empire, but had also become the focal point of Christianity, and he rightly perceived that this would soon have perilous consequences. Although the Early Church was well established by this time, John could see that the "spirit of antichrist" was already working. (I John 2:18,22; 4:3; II John 7) In addition, through the vision of Revelation, although he did not understand its meaning, it must have become clear to John that there was much still to happen before the Messianic kingdom would be established and the throne of David restored.

He could appreciate the fact that the followers of Christ who remained loyal to the Gospel message in its original purity would soon face very difficult experiences—ones which would test their faith to the very core. With this perspective, and as the last living apostle, John's primary objective as he wrote his Gospel account was to provide for the spiritual benefit of the church over the long-term, even down to our day. Thus, as he looked at what Matthew,

Mark, and Luke had recorded many years earlier, he felt the need to direct special attention to some of the more spiritually-focused lessons of Jesus' ministry. Indeed, we are thankful that God, through the power of his Holy Spirit, guided all of the Gospel writers to testify of everything relative to Jesus' life and ministry which would be necessary for his consecrated followers throughout the Gospel Age.

JOHN'S UPPER ROOM ACCOUNT

It is this same spiritual focus which permeates John's account of the experiences which took place in the upper room, as he recorded them over sixty years later. Our opening text, which begins John's testimony, is a prime example. Rather than explaining the immediate purpose of gathering together with his disciples, which was to keep the Passover type, it is the great love of the Master that is emphasized. As the elderly and very wise apostle now looked back on the entire upper room experience, in which he shared, he saw that although it was necessary for Jesus to fulfill the Passover feature of the Mosaic Law, his chief motivation for assembling together with his closest disciples was that of love. This was the Master's final opportunity to be with them before he was arrested, tried as a blasphemer, and crucified; and he knew how difficult those experiences would be since the disciples were not yet spirit-begotten. John could truly testify of Jesus: "He loved them unto the end."

As a footnote to the experiences that evening, John recalls something important in the words of verse 2. Although it may not have been apparent to him or the other disciples at the time, looking back

he now understands that Judas had consented to the influence of Satan—"the devil having now put into the heart of Judas . . . to betray" Jesus. Here is a sobering reminder and warning to the church throughout the Gospel Age—that there is the possibility of one entering among us as a wolf "in sheep's clothing," "not sparing the flock."—Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:29

AN EXAMPLE OF SERVICE

Following his solemn reminder of Judas, John recalls that as the Passover meal was concluding, the disciples began arguing about who should be the greatest among them. This contention was recorded by Luke, and is discussed in Part 1 of this article. (Luke 22:24-30) Luke, however, did not record the great example of service which Jesus provided, and that most likely was the immediate result of the disciples' wayward discussion. Realizing that neither Luke nor the other Gospel writers recorded it, John gave testimony to this all-important lesson, which he knew would be of great assistance to all consecrated believers during the Gospel Age.

In John 13:3-17, we have presented to us Jesus' great example and lesson of humble service, which he provided in the upper room. "He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded." (vss. 4,5) As he looked back on this, John realized that all of them were puzzled by what Jesus did, yet no one said anything or questioned him—until he came to Peter.

Peter was the spokesman of The Twelve, and on most occasions he was quick to speak his mind or ask questions. This instance was no different. He said, echoing the same question they all likely had in mind, “Lord, dost thou wash my feet?” (vs. 6) Then is recorded what must have seemed to be a vague answer from the Master, who said to Peter, “What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.” (vs. 7) In hindsight, John knew how true this was, that none of them understood at the time what was happening, and why Jesus was washing their feet. They would “know hereafter,” when begotten of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

“Thou shalt never wash my feet,” Peter replied. “Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.” (vs. 8) John does not say precisely what motivated Peter to reply as he did. Perhaps he thought it was too menial a task for Jesus to perform—that a slave or servant should be doing this. Another possibility is that Peter did not feel that he needed his feet washed, since he had most likely kept the customs of the Law related to washing prior to entering the room.—Mark 7:3,4

Given the rest of the account which follows, both of the above may have been plausible reasons in Peter’s mind to respond as he did. However, John does not say, because he understood that the real lesson of the experience was yet to be revealed by the Master. It was not nearly as important to know exactly why Peter did not want his feet washed as it was to learn the lesson Jesus was about to give in the following verses. Thus, John simply records Jesus’ statement that Peter and the other disciples—including us—could have “no part” [“no

share," *Weymouth New Testament*] with him unless they allowed this lesson to be given, and eventually learned.

ALREADY CLEAN

Upon hearing these words, Peter asked the Lord to not only wash his feet, but also his hands and head. (John 13:9) At this juncture, John begins to testify of the real lesson the Master intended to give. First, Jesus reminded Peter that, as far as literal washing was concerned, he was already clean, because he had done the customary washings prior to the Passover meal. The only exception, perhaps, was with regard to his feet, which could no doubt always benefit from the refreshment provided by washing. (vs. 10) By this response, Jesus hinted that the real lesson he was conveying was not about literal washing, whether it be feet, or any other part of the body.

Continuing with the account, Jesus said, "Ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean." (vss. 10,11) Just as the lesson was not about literal washing, these words indicate that the real import was also not about symbolic, or spiritual, cleansing. "Ye are clean" in that way also, Jesus says, except for one—Judas, whose heart had been entered into by Satan, and was now defiled—unclean.

John, as he looked back on this experience through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, knew well that Jesus would not have said, "Ye are clean, but not all," if the lesson had been that of either literal washing or even spiritual cleansing. Literal washing was proper and needful for the

physical well-being of the body, and Peter and the other disciples had undoubtedly taken care of these matters. Yet, this was not the point of the lesson.

Spiritual cleansing is of absolute importance to the child of God. Each must be cleansed, have a pure heart, and thus be protected from the defilements of the world and the flesh to the greatest extent possible. Various Scriptures point out the sources of this symbolic washing: God; the blood of Christ; the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit; the water of the word of truth; and our full cooperation with all of these agents of cleansing.—I John 1:7,9; Rev. 1:5; I Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:25,26; Heb. 10:22; II Cor. 7:1

As critical as symbolic washing is to the consecrated believer, however, it likewise was not the primary focus of the lesson Jesus provided in the washing of his disciples' feet. The disciples gathered in the upper room had not yet received the benefits to be derived from the blood of Christ, or from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, though, could read their hearts, and saw that, except for Judas, they were "clean" to the extent which was possible at that time.

HUMBLE SERVICE

Returning to John's account, after explaining to the disciples that the meaning of his action was not particularly related to washing, Jesus sat down again and asked, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" (John 13:12, *WNT*) Looking back, John must have realized that, at the time, none of them could have answered the Master's question

affirmatively. He continues, however, with the record of Jesus' explanation: "Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."—John 13:13-15

It was proper, Jesus said, for them to call him "Master and Lord," but he was also there to serve them, and had just demonstrated that by washing their feet. This was most often the job of a lowly servant, but Jesus had taken on this role. Furthermore, if it were appropriate for him to take on the role of a humble servant, how much more should his disciples do the same toward one another. "I have given you an example," Jesus says, of the kind of humble service which should be rendered by one fellow body-member toward another.

Jesus emphasized this lesson by his use of the words "servant," "lord," and "sent." He said, "The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him." (vs. 16) Each disciple was a "servant," and Jesus was their "lord." He was also, however, a servant, and they were not to consider themselves "greater than" he by refraining from being servants in like manner. Similarly, those with Jesus in the upper room were chosen to be his apostles, which in the Greek means "one sent forth." (*Thayer's Greek Lexicon*) As those who would soon be "sent" by their Lord to preach the Gospel and establish the Early Church, they were not to consider themselves "greater than" the one who sent them to engage in this service.

“IF YE DO THEM”

Jesus concluded his explanation by saying, “If ye know these things, happy [blessed] are ye if ye do them.” (vs. 17) There seems to be a particular importance in these words to the Lord’s people today. We indeed “know these things,” and understand the real lesson contained in Jesus’ act of washing the disciples’ feet, but only if we “do them” will we receive the Lord’s approval and blessing.

The washing of one another’s feet should not be considered as our having the authority to cleanse or wash a fellow brother or sister from sin. As already noted, the Scriptures indicate the many means by which cleansing from sin is accomplished in a consecrated believer. None of these, however, include the presumption that it is our responsibility to look for the shortcomings and faults of fellow brethren, and then attempt to “wash” them—even if our intentions are good. We can, and should, be of assistance by being an example, providing encouragement, praying for each other, reasoning together on the Word of God, and helping in other ways, but not with the thought of cleansing.

Just as Jesus explained when he gave this lesson, humble service is also our means of “feet-washing.” In addition to the aforementioned assistance we can render to one another, other forms of service might include: engaging in frequent fellowship; providing assistance to the brethren; sharing our experiences—joys, sorrows, successes and even failures—with one another; opening our homes for meetings and entertaining the brethren; visiting the sick and isolated; comforting the bereaved or others in severe trial; providing a warm handshake

and smile to our brethren each time we see them; always seeking to edify and build up one another; supporting the activities of the present Harvest work in its many forms; telling our brethren that we love them. These, and many more activities constitute the washing of one another's feet. What a refreshment is provided to those who receive these helps, and what a joy it should be to render such service at every opportunity!

JUDAS, THE BETRAYER

John, as he continued to recall the events which took place in the upper room, knew that Matthew, Mark, and Luke had all previously recorded Jesus' prediction that one sitting among them would betray him, along with the ensuing interchange that took place with Judas and the rest of the disciples. Yet, rather than forego a repetition of this episode, John provides it once again, with even more detail than the other Gospel writers. (John 13:18-30) We may wonder why John chose to do this, as it seems to take away from the important lesson of humble service which he had just recorded.

Although we cannot be sure of his reasoning, John may have seen the appropriateness of mentioning the episode concerning Judas for the very reason that it took place immediately after the lesson of feet-washing. Jesus had washed the feet of all twelve disciples, including Judas, even though he knew that evil was in his heart. By washing his feet, the Lord perhaps gave an indication to Judas that he still had an opportunity to change his heart and repent, even at that late hour. Regrettably, this did not occur. Thus, John felt it was appropriate to

reiterate the account concerning Judas which followed the great lesson of service—a lesson which Judas sadly did not learn.

LEAVING SHORTLY

The next portion of John's record of the upper room experience is also unique to his Gospel, as had been the lesson of feet-washing. He called to memory that, upon Judas' departure, Jesus turned his full attention toward the remaining eleven disciples, whose hearts were clean. While they did not yet understand the import of what was happening, and even asked questions which demonstrated their lack of knowledge, their hearts were right and they loved their Lord and Master very much.

In verses 31 and 32 is recorded a veiled reference by Jesus to his impending departure. He says that although God was already being "glorified in him"—that is, by his words and actions—there was soon to be a greater glory manifested in his beloved Son. This was to be when God would "straightway glorify him" with the divine nature. Although John did not understand this at the time, he and the other disciples later recognized that Jesus' glorification had to be preceded by his death as man's Redeemer.

In gentle words, Jesus then spoke more directly: "Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you." (vs. 33) As he looked back, John could no doubt appreciate that these were some of the most difficult words Jesus had ever spoken to his disciples. Nevertheless, they must be said, because they related directly

to the very next words he uttered, which, down to this very moment, stand as one of the most important statements ever made by the Master.

A NEW COMMANDMENT

Only in John's Gospel do we find these vitally important words of Jesus: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34,35) Not only was this the statement of a new commandment, but it also was a climactic moment with regard to all that had happened that evening in the upper room. They had gathered to eat the Passover meal. Almost immediately there was contention about who should be the greatest, which indicated a lack of unselfish love. Jesus had then given the lesson of feet-washing, or humble service, as being the outward manifestation of love, though they did not yet comprehend the meaning of his actions. The disciples had even been reminded, by observing the character of Judas, of the terrible results of an evil heart—filled with hatred and betrayal.

In climax to all of this, Jesus now sums up the entire matter by directly telling his disciples, and us, that having unselfish, godlike love for one another is a commandment. If love is not developed and possessed, our position as a consecrated member of the body of Christ is in grave danger. It is by love, Jesus says, that we will be known by "all men," and God, as his disciples. We will have no part in any reward or work in God's coming kingdom if we fail to keep this commandment.

MEMORIAL NOT CITED

After recording the “new commandment” given by Jesus, John mentions the exchange of words which took place between the Master and Peter, which concluded with Jesus’ prediction that Peter would deny him three times before the night was over. (vss. 36-38) This exchange is also recorded by the other three Gospel writers, all of whom place it as occurring after Jesus had instituted the Memorial Supper.—Matt. 26:26-34; Mark 14:22-30; Luke 22:17-20,31-35

John did not record the Lord’s inauguration of the Memorial. However, in comparing his record of the prediction of Peter’s three denials with that of the other Gospel writers, and their placement of this incident as cited above, we can reasonably conclude that the Memorial Supper took place prior to verse 36 of John’s account. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that Matthew, who, like John, was present in the upper room, recorded the episode concerning Judas just prior to Jesus’ institution of the Memorial. (Matt. 26:21-25) As already noted, John’s account concerning Judas ends at chapter 13, verse 30, and beginning with verse 31 he immediately transitions to Jesus’ words about his imminent departure, followed by the giving of the “new commandment,” recorded in verse 35. Taking all this into account, placement of the Memorial into John’s account would seem to put it between verses 35 and 36.

Whether the above suggestions concerning the sequence of events in the upper room are precisely correct, we cannot be fully sure. Indeed, it is not critical to our understanding of the important

lessons of those hours to be certain of the exact sequence. However, we may rightly inquire as to why John makes no mention at all of Jesus' institution of the Memorial, nor of the symbolic emblems of the "bread" and "fruit of the vine," since these had such important significance, as detailed in Part 1 of this article.

John doubtless knew that Matthew, Mark, and Luke had all given specific accounts of the Memorial celebration in the upper room. He also was probably aware that later the Apostle Paul had reiterated Jesus' instructions, as recorded in I Corinthians 11:23-28. By the time John wrote his Gospel, late in the first century, consecrated brethren had been keeping the Memorial for over sixty years. For these reasons, we surmise that John may have felt it was unnecessary to repeat this part of the evening's events in his account, and simply chose to leave it out.

EATING HIS FLESH—DRINKING HIS BLOOD

While John did not record the Lord's institution of the Memorial in his upper room narrative, he does furnish important testimony on the subject of the body and blood of Jesus. In John 6:26-66, we are provided with Jesus' discourse about the bread of life, his flesh and blood, the requirement of his followers to "eat" his flesh and "drink" his blood, and the explanation that this was not to be considered literally, but that to eat and drink of him means to "live by" him.

We quote from this passage selected portions of Jesus' words: "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto

everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you.” “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” “Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” “For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.” “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.”

How true are these last words. (vs. 63) Literally eating Jesus’ flesh or drinking his blood “profiteth nothing.” Rather, it is by feeding upon and appropriating the words he spoke, the example he set, and the sacrifice he made on each one’s behalf, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that gives “life” to his consecrated followers—“that quickeneth” them. John realized that these words of the Master, though not spoken in the upper room, gave the essence of what is meant by the partaking of the Memorial emblems.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that this discourse of Jesus, partially quoted above, and which he gave shortly after feeding the five thousand, is only recorded in John’s Gospel. From his vantage

point of more than sixty years later, John may have seen that the Memorial celebration had, to some extent, turned into a ritual observance. Thus, in his perspective of the Memorial's significance, he felt it was more important to emphasize the greater spiritual lessons and daily application of the principles embodied in its symbols, rather than the specific instructions provided in the upper room concerning its annual observance.

JOHN'S ACCOUNT CONCLUDES

After recording Jesus' giving of the "new commandment," John ends his testimony of the upper room events, choosing not to repeat the Memorial institution provided by the other three Gospel writers. By doing so, he leaves Jesus' great commandment to stand on its own as the final, all-encompassing lesson of those moments spent with his disciples. John understood that without love, the partaking of the Memorial emblems would be meaningless, and counted as doing so "unworthily." (I Cor. 11:29) How sobering it is to realize the vital connection between the keeping of this annual Memorial and the fulfillment of Jesus' command to love one another.

The Matthew and Mark accounts state that after the Memorial observance, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn and began their journey to the Mount of Olives, where Gethsemane was located. (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26) In that intervening period, Jesus gave his final message to the disciples, and then prayed for them. Once again, only John records these all-important words, found in chapters 14-17. In them are much in the way of spiritual truths which they would understand once begotten of the

Holy Spirit, and which all consecrated believers down through the Gospel Age have come to know and apply in their Christian walk. How wonderful to know that we are included in the message and prayer Jesus gave. He prayed not only for the eleven disciples, “but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.”—John 17:20,21

John’s unique record of the upper room—especially Jesus’ lesson of humble service and the giving of the new commandment—set the stage for the account of the Master’s final message and prayer. How thankful we are that this aged and wise apostle saw the need to include these closing experiences of Jesus’ earthly ministry in his Gospel record. Let us seek to emulate John’s perspective, and to complete our walk of humble service and love faithfully, even unto death. ■