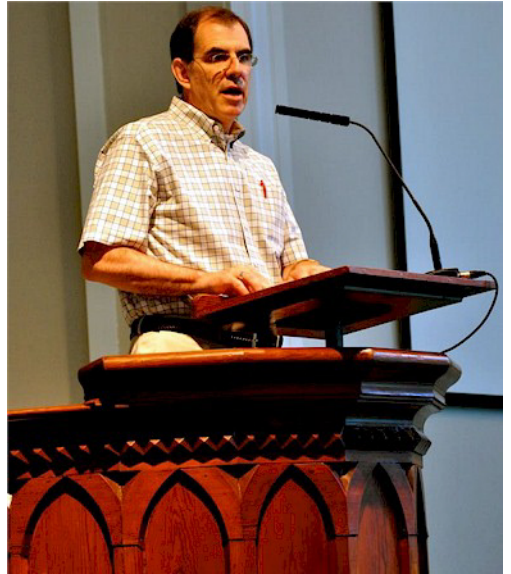


**John 17 from a Disciples of Christ Biblical Perspective**  
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Disciples of Christ teachers and preachers generally share the mainstream scholarly consensus regarding such issues as the character of the gospels; and, specifically with regard to the Gospel of John, the author, sources, process of composition, intended audience, place and date. Using as my source, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, I can comment, with relative dispatch, on each of these topics. This one volume commentary was written by much loved Disciples scholars, M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, and was published in 2004 by Westminster John Knox Press, a major publisher of mainstream Protestant Biblical studies.



What is a gospel? Boring and Craddock argue that it is a distinctive type of literature created by the early church. They point to two gospel texts to make their point.

John 20:30-31 --- Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

They note that "John indicates that the purpose of his writing is not historical or biographical, but to generate and nourish Christian faith."

Luke 1:1-4 --- Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

They note that "Luke indicates that the readers may have heard or been taught various versions of the story of Jesus, and that he writes in order to guide the reader into the authentic understanding, rooted in the tradition that goes back to the eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry."

From these two texts, they conclude that although "there are historical, factual, and biographical elements in the Gospels, their writers' concern is faith in Jesus as the Christ and the truth of the Christian message."

In their view, Gospels are historical, literary and theological. They are historical in two senses. First, each gospel reflects the historical events on which the Christian faith is based. And, second, each gospel reflects and addresses the historical situation in which it was written. That is to say, each gospel reflects not only the life of the historical Jesus,

but the historical setting of the church for which it was written. The gospels are literary works, in that each author had to decide how to begin, structure, and conclude the work, what to include and what to omit. Finally, each gospel is theological. That is, each author intended to interpret the meaning of God's act in Jesus Christ and to express it in ways it could be understood and claimed in the writer's own time.

The gospels, they continue, do not tell the story of a hero or "great man," but narrate the central segment of the story of God's dealing with humanity from creation to the eschaton, when God brings history to its final goal. Moreover, "the central figure is not dead but alive, accompanying his disciples through history and still calling people to discipleship as he speaks through the pages of the gospel." Thus, the gospel narratives are to be read "at two levels—the there-and-then account of what Jesus said in his pre-Easter ministry, and simultaneously the here-and-now address of the risen Christ." As an example of this characteristic of the gospels, they point specifically to John 17, where Jesus both looks forward to his impending death and looks back on his life in this world as a past event, noting in particular vs. 11 where Jesus says "I am no longer in the world."

Boring and Craddock assert that the task of interpreting a gospel is to interpret the text before us. Although they note that, as Luke relates, there were apparently various written texts previous to our gospels, and before these written texts, there was presumably an oral tradition, "Biblical interpretation means attending to this final meaning, not reconstructing previous events and meanings, though awareness of these will often help us understand the final meaning of the text before us."

Who was the author of John? Boring and Craddock state that as with the other gospels, the gospel of John is anonymous. In other words, we don't know. The titles given to the gospels late in the second century express traditions current at the time, and represent the church's claim that these texts contain the apostolic faith. From around 180, but not earlier, the fourth gospel was known as the Gospel of John, and was understood to be the composition of John the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples. The gospel itself never refers to the disciple John. Moreover, for Boring and Craddock, the question of authorship is theologically unimportant, as the book, regardless of who was responsible for its current form, represents the faith of the early Christian community which transmitted the apostolic faith.

Sources? Boring and Craddock note what any careful reader of the gospels would observe: John does not incorporate material from Matthew, Mark and Luke. Rather, this gospel uses other sources and traditions not used in the other New Testament gospels.

**Process of Composition:** A careful reading of the gospel suggests that it was not composed all at once, but grew by a series of expansions and revisions. For example, the end of the Last Supper narrative, 14:31, connects seamlessly to 18:1. Thus chapters 15-17 may represent an insertion into an expanded edition.

Intended audience: The earliest audience appears to have been a church which included Jews who had been excluded from the synagogue after they became Christians. This makes the hostility to "the Jews" so evident in this gospel more understandable—though not excusable—and helps explain the Jewish focus of the gospel. Boring and Craddock

note that "the Jews" in this gospel does not mean the whole of the Jewish people, but the leaders of the synagogue who oppose faith in Jesus as the Messiah. This church also seems to have included Gentiles, thus the frequent efforts to interpret what was originally a gospel conceived in Jewish terms to people who did not have that background.

**Place and Date:** The earliest tradition, which is late second century, locates the Gospel and the Letters of John, as well as Revelation, at Ephesus, on the west coast of Asia Minor, or modern Turkey. The earliest evidence of John is a papyrus fragment of the 18th chapter that has been dated to around 125. If the genre of John—that of a gospel—was modeled on Matthew, Mark and Luke, which are dated between 70-90, and if, as mainstream scholars believe, John also reflects decisions within Judaism that were occurring around 80, the gospel, or at least a version of the gospel, might have been written as early as 90. Bottom line: it would appear to be the last of the gospels to achieve its current form.

So, what do contemporary Disciples of Christ hear in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John? We hear the earthly Christ turning to the Father in prayer, after having told his disciples in chapters 15-16 that in order to bear fruit they must abide him, that they are to love one another he has loved them, that the world will hate them because of him, and that he is going away, but that he will send the Advocate or Spirit who will guide them into all truth. We hear him praying first for himself and the fulfillment of his mission as the Son:

17:1-5 --- Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

In verses 9-19 we hear him praying for his original disciples: vs. 11 "Holy Father, protect them in your name that . . . they may be one, as we are one. Vs. 15 "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." And, vs. 17 "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

Then—and then—in vs. 20-26, we hear the risen Christ praying for us: I ask not only on behalf of these [his first disciples] but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word [that would be us, right?], that they may all be one [again, that would be us, right?] As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I am in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father I desire that those also [I think the "also" here is meant to include us], whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made

your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

For contemporary Disciples of Christ John 17 is an endorsement of the call to Christian unity and a word of encouragement to all who would answer that call. For in this text we hear the risen Christ praying that all who believe in him on the word of the Apostles may be one that the world may believe that the Father has sent him. And, so we find ourselves in line with Thomas Campbell, who wrote the following in his Declaration and Address of 1809:

Should we speak of competency, viewing the greatness of the object, and the manifold difficulties which lie in the way of its accomplishment; we would readily exclaim, with the Apostle, who is sufficient for these things!-But, upon recollecting ourselves, neither would we be discouraged; persuaded with him, that as the work in which we are engaged, so likewise our sufficiency, is of God. . .The prayers. . .of Christ himself, John 17, 20, 23. . .are with us. . .Not that we judge ourselves competent to effect such a thing; we utterly disclaim the thought: But we judge it our bounden duty to make the attempt, by using all due means in our power to promote it; and also, that we have sufficient reason to rest assured that our humble and well-meant endeavors, shall not be in vain in the Lord.



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