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A STUDY OF “BELIEVING” AND “LOVE” IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

An Essay Submitted to
The Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
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By
Patrick Sullivan

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The essay of Patrick Sullivan is hereby accepted:

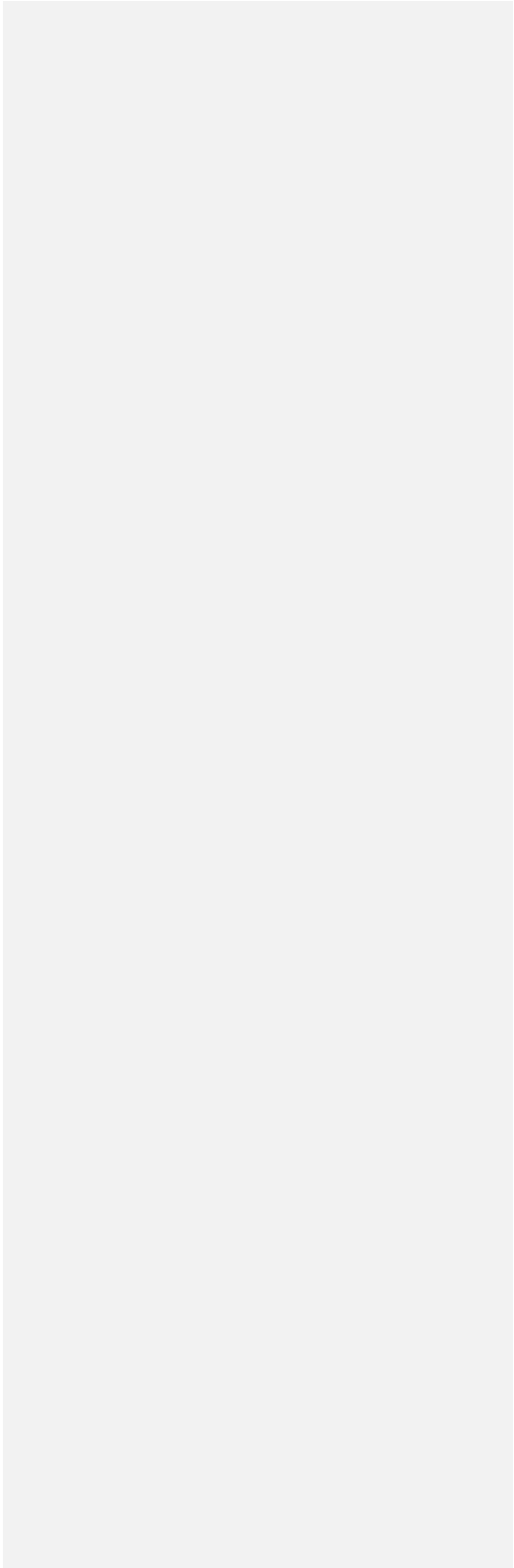
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Date



If one reads the Gospel of John through a contemplative lens one can discern a very useful dynamic interplay between the evangelist's treatment of the words "believe" and "love."

This paper will investigate this dynamic. It will begin by identifying the relevant perspectives that a contemplative brings into an encounter with scripture. After this, there will be a short section exploring John's use of the word love, and how this understanding of love is uniquely useful to the contemplative. A similar introductory look at belief will follow, including a proposed definition for belief that is specific to its use in the gospel of John. This will be followed by a longer, detailed examination of the motif of believing in the gospel.

A Contemplative Reading of Scripture

It is necessary, then, to give some description of exactly what is meant here by a contemplative reading. This paper will understand a contemplative reading to indicate the following points of emphasis:

First, a contemplative reading of the gospel looks for motifs of movement directed towards an ambitious and noble goal. The contemplative life is devoted to the pursuit of ever-increasing intimacy with God. Movement towards this intimacy is imprinted as a motif upon scripture in many ways from the longing of the Song of Songs to the journey motif of Luke to the challenges of the New Law in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21–48). A contemplative lens finds value in scripture that utilizes this motif.

Secondly, a contemplative reading looks for clues that serve as *direction* to this movement and *prodding* to continued movement. We begin our pursuit of realization and intimacy with God with poor spiritual vision navigating a hazardous maze in the dark. It is very easy to fool ourselves into thinking we are moving toward intimacy with God when we are

moving toward justification of our own egos. It is also easy to fall into a static practice that is content with our latest insight into some attribute of the Divine; thinking we have found truth, our search becomes less urgent. Scripture is an invaluable tool for the practitioner in its abilities to identify these hazards and to offer perspectives for resolution.

Thirdly, a contemplative reading will insist (based on the testimony of contemplatives and mystics of the past, as well as scriptural teaching) that the movement through these challenges outlined by scripture leads to an intimacy so profound that it must be called union. Furthermore, this union initiates such an earth-shaking transformation of the practitioner that it renders useless all old paradigms and lexica. “Entering the darkness that surpasses understanding, we shall find ourselves brought, not just to brevity of speech, but to perfect silence and unknowing.”¹ This requires the creation of a new paradigm, a complete redefinition of self and reality, and a new reading of many sacred terms and symbols as they appear in sacred writing. A contemplative reading, then, looks for ways that the gospel seems to be forcing a redefinition of terms to accommodate this radical transformation.

It is worth specifying that this paper will not limit the contemplative life to the pursuit that is undertaken during formal prayer and meditation. Nor will contemplation be understood as a purely interior pursuit. In fact, turning away from the world to a purely interior life of prayer and meditation is identified as a hazard to be resolved.

Structurally, love and believing will be treated differently because of the different presentations of the two terms within the gospel. Love appears sparingly in the fourth gospel until the Great Discourse (John 1317). The treatment it receives in that section is packed and

¹ Dionysius the Areopagite in *The Teachings of the Christian Mystics*, Andrew Harvey, ed., (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), 51.

revealing. Its presence up to that point is primarily noticed in retrospect: there are numerous references to the obedience that will come to mark Jesus' revelation concerning love, but it is only connected explicitly with love later. Therefore, this short introductory piece will be adequate until the paper attempts to elucidate the dynamic between love and belief at the end. This is not the case with belief, which will require a more detailed investigation of its own before it can be tied in with love at the end of the paper.

Because the narrative employs a long and dense motif around the word believe (*pisteuw*), and because this paper proposes a gospel-specific reading of this term, it will be most helpful to examine each occurrence of the word in the gospel, and see how useful the proposed reading proves to be in each case. If it proves useful, then it will be appropriate to examine it in dynamic relationship with John's understanding of obedient love as this relationship comes into focus at the end of the gospel.

On Love and John's Gospel

The one who answers a call to a contemplative life commits to a life of ever-deepening surrender of one's will to God. It is this surrender of one's will to God that forms the foundation of Christian love. Love in turn motivates and illuminates the journey.

The ways that love both motivates and illuminates the journey are manifold. Love creates in the practitioner a deep thirst for union and the promise in faith that such deep union is possible and awaits the sincere and devoted practitioner. Love empowers the practitioner during the darkest, most arid points in the journey. Love subtly brings an awareness of God into the lives of those around the practitioner. Love faces and heals the wounds that are dredged up from the depths of the psyche during vigorous practice. Through a disciplined practice of constant love,

one can push the boundaries of one's experience of love to depths that justify the importance that both secular and sacred writings have given it.

But love is also a reality that we all experience, feel, and understand to some degree, on our own terms. It is often one of the first several words our infant ears will hear, and may be among the most common words we hear during our formative years. So we tend to assume that we can trust our understanding of love. We think that we know what love is, even if we are not able to define it as such. This obscures the ever-deepening aspect of love, tempting us to accept our current understanding rather than challenging it.

Furthermore, our attempts to acquaint ourselves with Love as the engine of our spiritual quest is obscured somewhat by the combination of the importance scripture places on love, and the reluctance scripture shows to clearly express what it is. There are, to be sure, a few expositions of love in scripture, but they are very few in light of the weight attributed to love as a force in creation (both act and product).

Consider the two love commandments in the synoptic gospels. They are identified in each as being the keys to one's entry into the Kingdom of God. They are also drawn out in some way that is unique to each gospel after this identification. But there is nothing of an explicit description of what it means to love.

We are told we ought to love God with our whole hearts, minds, and being. Since I believe myself to know what love is from my human experience of it, my own self-inventory might look at this command and, in all good intention, say, "Boy, yes, I really love God. I mean I cannot find anything in my heart that is *against* God or God's plan as I understand it, so, I love God with my whole heart and mind." I might even keep God in my heart and mind through prayer and inclusion of God in my thought train throughout the day, asking God to forgive the

idiot people who disagree with God and me, or who just cut me off in traffic. I might include God in my thoughts during my interactions with a world that just needs God to transform it to make it more like how I see the world. This sort of stasis, which insists on accepting sacred realities on one's own terms, is very dangerous to the contemplative, though very easy to fall into, especially in the early stages of practice.

We are also told to love neighbor as self. But scripture does not ever command us to love ourselves. By now our culture is becoming more and more aware of how elusive genuine and healthy love for self truly is. Yet scripture links it fundamentally with love of neighbor, and gives no explicit clarification about what love means in this context.

Nonetheless, we often remain convinced that, armed with our personal experience of what we understand love to be, we must know what it means to love God with our entirety, and neighbor as self. In believing ourselves to understand, we risk complacency and stasis.

John's gospel does not include the two love commandments that appear in the Synoptics (quoting the Hebrew Scriptures). It does, however, give a "new" love commandment (13:34, 15:12). And while it does not define love *per se*, after unveiling this new commandment, the Fourth Gospel gives a detailed and revealing description of what love does, and how to begin exercising it in one's search for union with God. Further, it does so in a way that respects the elusiveness of sacred love, and acknowledges that in fact we do not understand what love is until we have been completely transformed in Christ's death and resurrection.

This attempt to describe love's operation is one of the most useful elements of the gospel for a contemplative. Both occurrences of the commandment say to "love one another," and the second specifies, "as I have loved you." As one grows in one's ability to love as Jesus has loved, one grows closer to union with God. If one's growth leads one actually to be able to love as Jesus

has loved, one is brought into union with God and is transformed. One then believes as Jesus has called us to believe; one is then realized.

That the commandment directs the disciples to love “one another” rather than to love one’s neighbor or one’s enemy as is prescribed in other places in the bible is significant. This significance will be explored later in this paper, after an investigation of belief, in terms of how this nuance serves the dynamic between love and belief. For now, it is most useful to address love in light of Jesus’ call to love “as he has loved.”

What, then, is this new love in John? Francis Moloney takes the commandment to mean, “The disciples are to love one another with an unconditional love, matching the love of Jesus for them.”² For the purposes of this paper, love indeed must strive for unconditionality to be love, but describing love as unconditional only discourages conditions; it does not describe what love is or how we may grow into this unconditionality. Further, throughout the gospel, the evangelist emphasizes the uniqueness of Jesus as the Incarnate Word. That the disciples should *match* Jesus’ love does not seem consistent with the rest of the gospel’s treatment of Jesus as uniquely unified to the Father in love.

In the Discourse itself, love may not be defined as such, but it is associated with obedience and indwelling in covenant terms. And this association with obedience and indwelling comes alive as it is applied to all that has come before and all that is coming together for the disciples in this scene. Love is exactly that relationship with God and Creation which Jesus has been embodying and exhibiting in his actions and words throughout the gospel. This is the

² Francis J. Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 117.

foundation of John's gospel. The whole narrative is designed to demonstrate what it means to love as Jesus has loved, through what Jesus does in obedience to God's will.

In multiple passages beginning rather vaguely in chapter 5 and continuing through Jesus' more explicit responses to Philip and Judas (not Iscariot) in chapter 14, Jesus asserts that his relationship with the Father and with humanity is such that, because Jesus does not act according to his own will but rather acts in obedience to the will of the Father, the Father dwells in him; hence, if one properly believes in Jesus, it is not the words of Jesus one hears, but the words of the indwelling Father. One does not see Jesus; one sees the indwelling Father. Jesus comes back to this over and over again (e.g., 6:35–40; 7:14–17; 8:19; 8:47; 12:44–45).

I will use the word “surrender” to describe Jesus deferring his own will to the will of the Father, even though it is not a Johannine word, because when Jesus speaks about this obedience, he uses phrases like “not my words but the Father's” or “not on my own, but according to him who sent me.” This gives Jesus' obedience a strong sense of letting go of his own will in surrender to the will of the Father. To the contemplative, it is useful to recognize the combination of the active and the passive that the word connotes, the activity of letting go and allowing God to guide our activity.

Other terms are also useful in this regard, such as “emptying oneself,” or “despising oneself,” not in a self-loathing way, but as Thomas à Kempis uses it when he says, “Blessed is he that understandeth what it is to love Jesus, and to despise himself for Jesus' sake.”³ But “surrender” seems appropriate to a study of John's Gospel in that it helps to capture the recognition and acceptance of a new relationship with reality that we will see to be important in John's narrative. Further, in chapter 15, Jesus specifies that the greatest love possible for us is to

³ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 129.

lay down our lives for our friends. While it is most likely that the evangelist included this as a way to encourage the community in the face of persecution and possible martyrdom, this cannot be the only way to read this passage. It is too contingent upon a circumstance that does not arise for everyone. Even in times and places where persecution and the threat of martyrdom have been great, not every Christian has had the “opportunity” to lay down her/his life for his/her friends in this way. In times and places that enjoy some degree of religious freedom, there may never be a threat to my health or life brought on by my Christianity. Certainly this cannot deprive me — or any other Christian fortunate enough to live in such circumstances — of the opportunity to participate in love at its greatest.

But if love comprises the obedient surrender of one’s own will to God’s will in order to bring God to one’s friends, then this surrender at its deepest levels can indeed be seen as laying down one’s own life for one’s friends. Such an analogical reading does not dilute the power of the gift at all. This reading becomes useful to the contemplative, then, by noting that the greatest degrees of surrendering to God’s will are so profound that they deserve to be described as laying down one’s own life for one’s friends.

One section (14:9–15:17) of John’s Great Discourse gives a rather detailed expansion of the theme of abiding in love, which Jesus introduced in chapter 5. In this section, Jesus explains that, because of his love for God, which he further describes as obedience to the Father’s commandments and will, the Father abides in him and he in the Father. Jesus’ perfect surrender to the Will of the Father has allowed for a union that is so real, so unblemished, that when one sees Jesus, one sees the Father, and when one hears Jesus, one hears the words of the Father.

This union is given an added dimension in the prayer for the disciples (17:20), as Jesus explicitly states that this same intimacy is available to the disciples, and even those who believe

because of the disciples' testimony, as long as they *do* the same in obedience to Jesus' commandments. It is made clear that if one loves Jesus, obeying his commandments, God will abide in that person, just as Jesus' obedience to the will of the Father allowed for the Father's abiding in him.

It must be emphasized that this does not define love. One cannot read "If you love me you will keep my commandments" (14:15) in a way that suggests that "keeping or obeying commandments" is a definition of love. There would be a fatal flaw in the logic of John's presentation. The new love commandment in chapter 13 instructs the disciples to love one another as Jesus has loved them. If love is *defined* as keeping or obeying commandments, then this love commandment would read, "keep each other's commandments, as I have kept your commandments." This reading, of course, would present several problems. Instead, "love and obedience are mutually dependent. Love arises out of obedience, obedience out of love."⁴

Besides, obedience does not have to be rooted in love. It is important to acknowledge the difference in loving obedience and obedience out of fear, propaganda, or other motivations. "Many live under obedience, rather for necessity than for love; such are discontented, and do easily suffer. Neither can they attain to freedom of mind, unless they willingly and heartily put themselves under obedience for the love of God."⁵ So our understanding of love must be such that it respects the emphasis that Jesus puts on obedience to commandments, while distinguishing this kind of obedience from obedience that is blind or otherwise bound because of the circumstances or motivations behind it. This paper will address this distinction through the

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John* (The Anchor Bible Commentary; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1966), 681.

⁵ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 37.

ways that John's presentation of "believing" challenges the reader to refine his or her recognition of what or whom he or she is obeying.

So Jesus, who has perfectly heeded the call of the Father (loved God by obeying God's commandments), then perfectly embodies the presence, the call, of God to the world. If the disciples perfectly heed the call as perfectly embodied in Jesus (love him by obeying his commandments), they will then similarly embody this dynamic, beckoning presence to the world. This is how the world will know that they are his disciples (13:35): the world will see the presence and know the call of God embodied in the disciples as it is in Jesus, so long as the disciples heed the call of Jesus (to love one another as he has loved — surrendering to the will of the Father in order that his love may be the Father's love).

To love another, then, is (again without reading this as a definition, but as an operation) to bring God to that person, by surrendering in obedience to the will of God. When I love, I invite God into the moment through a deferment of my own will in favor of God's will, in order that God may reach out to my beloved through God's presence in me. My awareness of God's dynamic presence in the moment allows my beloved to encounter God through an encounter with me.

"The disciples are to love one another with a love that is continuous and lifelong ... the command is expressed in the present tense in a subjunctive mood."⁶ Having invited God into an encounter in a moment, one must continuously, moment-to-moment, surrender one's own will to God. It is not a matter of thinking about God's presence but rather of embodying God's presence through emptying oneself of one's own presence. God's presence is continuous, so one's surrender and emptying must be as well.

⁶ Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John*, 117.

Since Jesus lived perfect union moment-to-moment, everyone who encountered him who was open to God's movement would perceive it, because that is what Jesus embodied. We will see later (after an exploration of "belief") how this fits with the Johannine understanding of belief and why Jesus inspired belief wherever he went.

The disciples can realize this same union with God by loving Jesus, which he further describes as obeying his commandments. And not only that, but just as Jesus' perfect embodiment of the presence and movement of the Father catalyzed in those around him a recognition of the presence of the Father, if the disciples love Jesus and obey his commandments, other people will recognize the actual real presence of Jesus in them.

This, again, does not actually define love. It describes love of God as obedience to God's commandments, and love of Jesus as obedience to Jesus' commandments. This would almost serve as a definition except that in John there are no other explicit commandments to follow except the love commandment, and a promise that part of the experience of the Advocate will be to discern Jesus' commandments (14:26). But by the time this appears in the narrative, as we will see, the evangelist has fleshed out a motif with the word *pisteuw*, which illuminates this description of love, and love illuminates belief in return. This mutual illumination becomes more useful to a contemplative than a definition.

On Believing and John's Gospel

John's gospel uses the word *pisteuw*, which we translate as "to believe," over 100 times. This accounts for almost half of the occurrences in the entire New Testament.⁷ There are only two chapters in the Fourth Gospel (15 and 18) that lack some form of the word.

⁷ www.biblehub.com/greek/strongs_4100.htm - accessed 12/15/2015

When one examines how *pisteuw* is used throughout the gospel, with an eye to the dynamic of the narrative as a whole, it seems that what the evangelist means by the word is not necessarily served best by a traditional English language understanding of “believe,” with connotations of acceptance of a claim, whose opposite might be doubt or skepticism.

For instance, there are many instances, as we will see, where belief is a central question of the exchange between Jesus and another character, but the intellectual assent to or acceptance of a claim that we usually associate with belief is not. And, as we will also see, there are numerous instances where acceptance of a claim (the opposite of which would be doubt, suspicion, or skepticism) is described with different words.

The gospel speaks on several occasions of the utter importance of believing in Jesus, and often tells of people coming to believe, but also spends a *great* deal of time describing a lack of true belief in characters who think that they believe. In fact, not only do many characters think that they believe; often these characters have demonstrated some degree of acceptance and recognition already and in many cases the *reader* would be inclined to think that the particular character believed. But Jesus challenges the belief of these characters.

Since the character thinks that he or she believes, when Jesus challenges the character’s belief, he is challenging her or his understanding of what belief is. It is not simply a matter of the content of one’s belief, it is an understanding of what it means to believe and how we can assess whether or not we truly believe. It is this progressive aspect of belief that leads St. Catherine of Siena to speak of God as “light beyond all light who gives the mind’s eye supernatural light in such fullness and perfection that you bring clarity even to the light of faith.”⁸ God works with us

⁸ *Teachings*, 122.

upon the faith that we have to illuminate and bring this faith to greater clarity. The illumination of our existing faith constitutes a moment of recognition, of believing.

To a contemplative, this is a wonderfully useful motif. Thomas Keating observes, “the spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound.”⁹ These humiliations of the false self come in moments where our recognition of God is such that we also recognize that what we *thought* we knew, and what we *thought* was true, was deeply inadequate. This, then, is “a humbling process, because it is the only self we know.”¹⁰ What could be more useful in this practice than a motif in scripture that involves a word whose meaning everyone thinks they know, but only the incarnate Word *really* knows what it means? “Contemplative prayer is a deepening of faith that moves beyond words and concepts.”¹¹ So Jesus keeps correcting characters on a word that everyone has heard and used thousands of times. It is this recognition of our own misunderstanding of the basics that accompanies our progress along the path, and the reason that it is thought of as a humiliating process. But it also helps to make sure that progress happens; each correction Jesus makes to a character believing is designed to encourage continued movement toward the goal of union.

Yung Suk Kim notes that *pistis* is often translated as “faith,” while *pisteuw*, translated as “believe,” does not have the same sense of faith, and as such he wants to endow *pisteuw* with more of a connotation of faith, like *pistis*. In the absence of a neologism to capture this subtlety, he first emphasizes the distinction between the sense conveyed by *pisteuw* followed by *eis* and a

⁹ Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (Snowmass, CO: St. Benedict’s Monastery, 1999), 38.

¹⁰ Keating, *Human Condition*, 20.

¹¹ Keating, *Human Condition*, 25.

person as the object, and *pisteuw* followed by *en* and a non-personal object. He says that usually *pistuew eis* followed by a person as the object is best translated as “I participate in ...” or “I trust in...”¹² He then suggests that, “In this context, believing in Jesus means following his teaching.... Thus believing in Jesus is about true discipleship that is based on constant abiding in Jesus’ word.”¹³

This paper will take a different approach from this for the following reasons:

(1) This only addresses those occurrences of “believe” that are a form of *pisteuw* + *eis* followed by Jesus as the object of *eis*. It does not, for instance, address those occurrences that present a form of *pisteuw* + *en* followed by a non-personal object such as “the works.” This is an important aspect to address because of how these two presentations often appear in relation to each other, such as in 10:37–38 when Jesus tells the authorities to believe in him, or if not in him, to believe in his works.

Furthermore, with over a hundred occurrences of some form of “believe,” the gospel is giving the motif a life of its own, and this life of its own seems to stress something not easily captured by our traditional understanding of believing.

(2) Jesus explicitly connects his presentation of *love* with following his teaching, and does so very emphatically during the Great Discourse. But, except for 3:36, which explicitly connects *believing* with obeying (in the testimony of the evangelist, not the words of Jesus), this connection is made only indirectly, secondary to a primary connection between love and belief. In a contemplative reading, one reads the gospel as if the evangelist is trying to lead the

¹² Yung Suk Kim, *Truth, Testimony, and Transformation: A New Reading of the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 6 **fn 16**.

¹³ Kim, *Truth, Testimony, and Transformation*, 7.

practitioner through a particular navigation of the path, and in this light, as will be seen in detail throughout the paper, the evangelist's presentation seems to be: love consists of surrendering in obedience and following the teachings of Jesus, love and belief form a dynamic relationship which allows them to inform each other. So belief shares in love's obedient surrender, but it is primarily the operation of love to obey in this way.

(3) This understanding of believing in Jesus, basing it on "constant abiding in Jesus' words," does not seem to hold up because there are many instances throughout the gospel, when the narrative tells that someone came to believe, or someone saw and believed, there is no reason to think that this belief constituted true discipleship or constant abiding. In some cases, as we will see, the narrative demonstrates the fleeting nature of the belief that come to followers along the way, and points to the need for belief to deepen.

William Countryman has noticed this fleeting nature of some occurrences of belief in John. In his reading, belief is not an easy thing to define in John's gospel. "If we look at the way John has used the verb, at the very least, 'believing' covers more than one stage and that it is subject to refinement and growth."¹⁴ In *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel*, Countryman outlines a progression in the narrative that he sees as a nine-part pathway toward mystical union with God. Countryman reads that the evangelist takes the reader down a path through gates of conversion, baptism, eucharist, enlightenment, new life in the cosmos, and four distinct stages of union. Furthermore, he sees this progression displayed twice in the gospel: one pattern is spread out through the gospel as a whole, and a smaller version of the same pattern, beginning again

¹⁴ William Countryman, *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel: Crossing Over Into God* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 140; henceforth cited as *The Mystical Way*.

with conversion, begins in Chapter 12, where the first stage of union is about to begin in the larger pattern.

Countryman places “believing” in a prominent role in this movement. His conclusions center around the ways that each of the first eight stages are defined by the inadequacy of the belief with which a character responds.¹⁵ He sums up this role, and the dynamic movement of the gospel itself, by saying, “The aim of John’s writing has been to encourage the reader along the path of believing in order to arrive finally at its end (union). Believe that Jesus is the anointed, the son of God — that is to say, recognize that all things, absolutely without exception, come from God through him and return to God through him. And thereby you will have life in his name, for returning to the father with him, you become one with him and with God and with all who have acknowledged that they belong to him.”¹⁶

For this paper I would like to suggest a way to read *pisteuw* in John’s gospel that accepts that the evangelist is trying to do something different with the word, and that the nuance he is trying to sculpt into the word is uniquely Christian, with the word *pisteuw* being re-cast specifically in terms of Jesus and the new reality he ushered in. As we review the occurrences of *pisteuw* in its various forms in the fourth gospel, I will read “believe” as “recognize the presence and movement of God in the moment.” In some ways, it is inescapable that this means recognition of the presence and movement of God in *Jesus*, for at least two reasons. First, of course, is that most of these instances revolve around some kind of encounter between Jesus and another character in the story. Secondly, there are several places in the gospel where Jesus or the narrator really seem to emphasize that it is only in Jesus that we recognize the presence and

¹⁵ Countryman, *The Mystical Way*, 139–43.

¹⁶ Countryman, *The Mystical Way*, 143.

movement of God in the moment, even for those who did not share earth time with Jesus. But I will tend more toward using the word “moment” in my investigation because of how this will clear up some difficulties that come from reading “*pisteuw*” as acceptance of a claim or the opposite of skepticism.

The various forms and contexts, then, of *pisteuw* will be understood as a clarification of this recognition of the presence and movement of God in the moment. “Believing *in Jesus*,” for instance, reads, “Recognizing *in Jesus* the presence and movement of God in the moment.” When we read after a miracle story that many “came to believe,” we read that many recognized God’s movement and presence in the moment. This does not mean that it carried over to other moments, nor that the recognition was particularly clear, only that what they experienced, they recognized at the time as the presence and movement of God, not magic or illusion or anything else.

This recognition is passing, though it is likely to inspire lasting changes in the believer. St. Theresa of Àvila, describing the lasting union as a spiritual marriage, nonetheless feels it very important to note that the difference between this spiritual marriage and other unions is that “even though it is the joining of two things into one, in the end the two can be separated and each remains by itself. We observe this ordinarily, for the favor of union with the Lord passes quickly and afterward the soul remains without that company; I mean without awareness of it.”¹⁷ Therefore, this paper will treat belief as a glimpse of recognition that can pass quickly and can be misunderstood, and which requires great dedication and growth for belief to ripen into something more lasting.

¹⁷ *Teachings*, 124.

This proposed definition contains four important components: recognition, God's presence, God's movement, and the moment. Different aspects will come to the fore as applied to different occurrences. But it would be helpful at the beginning to explore each element briefly, beginning with recognition. I use this word hoping to accommodate and illuminate the inaccurate assessments that so many characters make of their own belief, and the instances when Jesus rebukes one or another of his closest followers for not believing. If *pisteuw* connotes recognition, it can imply being led to a deeper engagement with something that has been right in front of and within the believer the whole time, something with which he or she already has some degree of engagement.

Like a coach trying to evoke greater effort out of athletes who think they are giving everything they can, Jesus tells the *believer* that he or she must *believe*, that whatever he or she thinks believing is, it is not, and so it must be challenged. In the Fourth Gospel, believing is a breakthrough that moves a person past the limitations of the old way of thinking about belief and about God and the whole of existence and moving into a deeper relationship with God in the moment.

This reading is very useful in a contemplative pursuit. Pursuing union with God requires committing to an ever-deepening intimacy that develops moment-to-moment. Complacency is the enemy. The narrative supplies a motif that involves the repetition that one's present understanding is not sufficient even if it is very convincing. Reading *pisteuw* as "recognize" elucidates this deepening aspect of the intimacy we pursue, while placing what we pursue right before our eyes the whole time.

I emphasize recognition of God's *presence* because, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus repeatedly directs those who encounter him to see not him but rather God present through him,

and to hear the words he speaks not as his own words but as God's words. Belief involves recognizing God as present, not as an abstraction or an idea, but as actually, vividly present in the encounter with Jesus.

It is easy for any Christian to underestimate the magnitude of this presence and the unlimited places we may find it in our encounters with the sacred. For the contemplative, it becomes critically important to appreciate how fundamentally and ubiquitously present God is, and to avoid framing it as an insight or abstraction. A practice that includes a great deal of meditation and contemplation leaves a practitioner vulnerable to stasis caused by the new perspectives which we are drawn into, and the temptation to think that this perspective or insight is the truth, when the truth we seek is not in any perspective or insight, but in God's actual, real presence within us and imbuing every phenomenon and event around us.

I emphasize recognition of God's *movement* to stress the dynamic nature of God's presence. We do not live in the presence of God's attributes, as if these attributes enforce the way that God statically *IS* in encounter with creation. Rather, we live in the presence of Godself, the Creator still involved in our world and our lives. Recognizing God means recognizing God as God manifests Godself at the time, not as we think God should or would manifest Godself. Recognizing God's movement means listening to what God wants to accomplish with God's presence in the moment. Jesus' sensitivity to God's movement, for instance, allowed him to recognize when God wanted to manifest in a sign. As Jesus says repeatedly, he obeys the Father's will. He does not think to himself, "I want to perform a sign so that these people will believe in me, so I will ask the Father to do what I want." Rather, he recognizes what it is that *God* wants to do with the moment and obeys this call.

I emphasize the moment because this is the only place in time that we can hope to encounter God's real and dynamic presence immediately enough to be granted union with God, and to thus recognize God's movement clearly enough to see what God wants to do with that moment. Looking backward, such as to past glimmers of recognition, implies that God must stay the same, so that we can find God in the same places and ways. Looking ahead in search of God's presence betrays an expectation that God's presence will be manifest in some other way than how it is manifest in the present. This demonstrates the practitioner's attempts to fit God's presence into a standard that he or she has contrived.

As an example of these four elements coming together, I would like to visit a curious moment in Chapter 6 as the about-to-be-fed multitude is gathering. The gospel tells us that, seeing the crowd that had gathered, Jesus asked Philip where they would buy bread for them to eat, to test him (vv. 5–6). Considering the context, and the role that *pisteuw* will come to play in the extended encounter with the multitude, it is reasonable to think that what Jesus wanted to test was whether Phillip believed, though the text does not specify this. Phillip's response demonstrates that he clearly does not recognize God's will in the moment, nor even that God was particularly in Phillip's awareness at all. He answers in entirely human terms that place the resolution of the problem well out of his reach. The narrative then confirms that Phillip missed the mark, as Jesus takes an entirely different approach to solve the problem.

But the scene raises the question, what would have been an appropriate response? How should Philip have believed? What should he have recognized that he missed? Jesus does not ask Philip if he thinks that God would intervene; he simply asks how they should feed the group. Besides, it would be totally inappropriate for Philip to think that God *should* intervene or to *expect* Jesus to perform a sign. This is apparent every time anyone, including Jesus' own

Commented [SM1]: Why?

mother, asks Jesus to perform a sign. He rebuffs these requests, sometimes with a rebuke of the one who made the request. So whatever it is that Philip is failing to recognize, it is not a static trait of God or Jesus that would lead one to be able or willing to extrapolate a course of action for God to take, or hold God or Jesus to a standard of action.

Jesus is testing Philip to see if he recognizes not that God *ought to* do something, but that God *is trying to do* something with the moment. He is seeing if Philip is sensitive enough to God's actual presence right there and then to see that God is moving. Because Jesus recognizes it. Jesus' sensitivity to God's will allows him to feel God moving him. Jesus' surrender of his own will to God's allows God's will to be done through him, and allows God to move him as God wills.

It is not, then, a matter of accepting or understanding something about God or Jesus. Belief through love is a matter of recognizing God's dynamic presence moving in real time. If one recognizes that presence with enough clarity to surrender to it and be moved by it, then one really truly believes. In recognizing God's movement *within* us, we are able to discern God's will, that is, the particular direction God is moving us, what God wants of us in that moment. One must surrender to it before one can be fully aware of it, but it is an observable experience to the one being moved.

Richard of Saint Victor provides a powerful, though not hyperbolic description of this. He describes love in several distinguishing categories, each divided into four stages. It is noteworthy that each grouping that he constructs is arranged as a progression into deeper engagements in Love. Generally, the third stage involves entering into union with God, and the highest levels involve bringing this union to the world to do God's will. These highest levels are

marked by insatiability that keeps the soul diving still deeper into the Divine Presence even while at pinnacle stages (n). For example:

In the first degree (of violence in the passion of love) the soul thirsts for God; in the second she thirsts to go to God; in the third she thirsts to be in God; in the fourth she thirsts in God's way.... She thirsts in God's way when, by her own will I do not mean in temporal matters only but also in spiritual things, the soul reserves nothing for her own will but commits all things to God, never thinking about herself but about the things of Jesus Christ, so that she may say "I came not to do my own will but to do the will of my Father in heaven." ... In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends below herself.... When the soul ... has been reduced in the divine fire, softened to the very core and entirely melted, nothing is wanting except that she should be show God's goodwill ... even the form of perfect virtue to which she must conform. Just as metal workers, when the metals are melted and the molds set out, shape any form according to their will and produce any vessel according to the manner and mold that has been planned, so the soul applies herself in this degree, to be ready at the summons of the divine will; she adapts herself with spontaneous desire to every demand of God and adjusts her own will, as the divine pleasure requires. And as liquefied metal runs down slowly wherever a passage is opened, so the soul humbles herself spontaneously to be obedient in this way, and freely bows herself in all acts of humility according to the order of divine providence. In this state the image of the will of Christ is set before the soul so that these words come to her: "Let this mind be in you, which is also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, and took upon himself the form of servant and was made in the likeness of man. He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross." ... He that is in the fourth degree can truly say: "I live yet not I, Christ liveth in me." ... That which

he hopes of God, what he does for God and in God and effects with God is more than merely human.¹⁸

Because God's will is not predictable at all. Sometimes what God wants us to do in order to accomplish God's will is as simple as encountering others with God fully alive in our own hearts. Sometimes what God wants in the moment is for us to feed the hungry and take care of others through charity and generosity. But *sometimes* what God is seeking in the moment is entirely illogical, and it may even seem crazy to us. Sometimes what God wants in the moment is something bonkers like someone taking a few loaves of bread and some fish and breaking it so that God can feed a great multitude and have leftovers. Sometimes what God wants in the moment is for someone to roll away the stone from a tomb where a human being has been lying dead for four days so that God can raise that human from the dead.

Sometimes what God wants is something unfathomable, like letting people nail you to a cross, and dying so that God can raise you from the dead.

We close ourselves to this unpredictable call if we try to fit God's will into an understandable paradigm. Even though this unpredictability is noticeable in the Hebrew Scriptures as well, the Pharisees still look to fit God's movement into the paradigm presented by their knowledge of the law and Jewish tradition. As a result they are unable to even see the unpredictable will of God being carried out right before their eyes (e.g., 5:9–18; 7:52). We must not decide what God's will is. When we are empty enough, we will discern it without deciding. We will discern it by *being* it.

Our task is to offer ourselves up to God like a clean, smooth canvas and not to bother ourselves about what God may choose to paint on it, but, at every moment, feel only the stroke of his (sic) brush. It is the same with a piece of

¹⁸ *Teachings*, 74–76.

stone.... As blow after blow rains down on it, the stone knows nothing about how the sculptor is shaping it.... We may ask it: “What do you think is happening to you?” And it might well answer: “Why are you asking me? All I know is that I must stay immobile in the hands of the sculptor. I have no notion of what he is doing, nor do I know what he will make of me. What I do know, however, is that his work is the finest imaginable. It is perfect.”¹⁹

With great sensitivity, awareness, and surrendering love, one can discern God as real and dynamically present, even moving oneself to accomplish God’s will in the world. That Jesus would ask Philip to test him shows that this degree of sensitivity is available to those who seek well and love deeply.

How to seek well is revealed gradually throughout the narrative in motif of deepening belief. How to love deeply is demonstrated in Jesus’ actions, and then described in the Great Discourse.

At this point, this paper will go through every instance of *pisteuō* or its related forms in the gospel and apply this definition to these occurrences.

Chapter 1

The prologue does not contain any occurrences of *pisteuō* until the seventh verse with the introduction of the character of John the Baptist. However, the beginning of the gospel does a lot to set up a reading of belief that is based on recognition of God’s moving presence in the moment through the introduction of the Incarnate Word. The pre-existent Word points to a relationship between Creator and creation wherein God wants to be recognized by creation and has wanted this from the beginning. Part of this comes through in the use of the word Logos, or “word.” As Brown notes, “The very title “word” implies a revelation — not so much a divine

¹⁹ Jean Pierre de Cassaude in *Teachings*, 146.

idea, but a divine communication... The fact that the Word creates means that creation is an act of revelation.”²⁰ Similarly, the claim that everything was created within this Word, and nothing apart from it suggests that this revelation of Godself and the hope to be freely recognized and loved is the very foundation of creation.

This communication and ongoing revelation of God is central to contemplative practice and has been from very early on. As Merton notes, “It is significant that, among the minority of Christians who stood with Athanasius [against the Aryans], the contemplative Desert Fathers formed a solid and unyielding phalanx of believers in the divinity of the Second Person and the Incarnation of the Word. For they believed, with all the orthodox Fathers, what St. Athanasius succinctly declared in the formula, borrowed from St. Irenaeus: ‘God became [human] in order that [humans] might become God.’”²¹

7 — There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, that all might believe through him.

Through John, all might recognize the presence of God, his movement in the world. This does not mean they would recognize with full clarity the presence of God as they would come to see it: embodied perfectly in the person of Jesus. However, it contextualizes this recognition in a way that is important for the contemplative. It is a message of preparation.

John’s message was to prepare the way of the Lord. Preparing to receive God is essential. This is true partly because it is the movement that is within our jurisdiction. We cannot draw

²⁰ Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 24–25.

²¹ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 38.

God into us as God draws us into Godself, we can only do our best to prepare for the moment when God sees fit to break through to us.

It is especially true for the contemplative because the journey to union goes through the unconscious and the subconscious. And if we are graced with a glimpse of intimacy with God, this glimpse pulls the rug out from under everything our egos had relied upon for security in the cosmos. Without preparation, it can present too great a challenge to the psyche. Thomas Keating points out that “a generation ago, in the psychedelic era, people opened themselves to the unconscious before they had the humility or the devotion to God to be able to handle it.”²² And even as our practice matures, preparing the way of the Lord, in our hearts and in our world, moment to moment, is how we praise the God we slowly come to recognize.

But this also serves as an illustration of the progressive nature of coming to awareness of God. John’s message was preparation, but verses 6 and 7 say that he was sent from God so that all might believe through him. It is made clear in vv. 8 and 9 that John’s mission is not the same as Jesus’, but it is worded here as if it were. The resolution of this is, of course, that preparing for God’s arrival *is* recognition of the presence and movement of God. In order to even start on the pathway to union with God through *deepening* recognition of his presence, one must feel some spark of recognition. In the case of John, the recognition he offered to his followers was indeed deep. He drew a following who, as the gospel will later tell us (1:19–28), suspected that he may be a prophet, or even the Messiah himself. But the gospel, while identifying John’s mission in the same belief-centered terms as Jesus’, will emphasize belief through Jesus as a fulfillment of belief through John.

²² Keating, 19.

12–13 — ... but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

This verse is important to this paper for two reasons. One is that it emphasizes reception of Jesus as part of belief. One might think of this reception as being the full recognition of God in the moment, receiving this presence into one's heart. This would be one way to observe a progressive element to belief. If one thinks, for instance, of Nicodemus, one sees a person who recognized God in Jesus enough to seek him out, and try to understand more fully, but could not understand the subtleties of what he recognized. He believed, but not enough to receive. Deeper belief would be required for reception.

In this reading, then, “receiving” serves as a gateway along the path of belief, where recognition of God in the moment becomes more sustained and less of a momentary glimpse, and the effect that it has upon our lives is more consistent. This is why Yung Suk Kim's assessment, that “power to become children of God” is ... made possible by accepting the Logos and living with it,” is not in conflict with this paper's understanding of belief that is rooted in momentary glimpses of recognition that deepen through exacting practice.²³ At a certain point of maturity in one's practice, one “receives” what one recognizes, and this empowers him or her to become something new, a new way of being children of God. What Merton attributes to faith may apply to this paper's understanding of belief and reception when he says, “Faith in this sense is more than the assent to dogmatic truths proposed for belief by ‘the authority of God

²³ Kim, 35.

revealing.’ It is a personal and direct acceptance of God Himself, a ‘receiving’ of the Light of Christ in the soul, and a consequent beginning or renewal of spiritual life.”²⁴

Also, these verses connect belief with a transformation associated with will. One who believes is granted power to live not by the will of man but of God. Later, in the Great discourse, this will be how Jesus describes love to the disciples. This verse, then, ties belief to love as related progressive movements.

49–50 — Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.”

It is easy to think of this exchange as suggesting that Nathanael’s belief was shallow. Jesus’ response seems unimpressed with Nathanael’s reason for believing, and if the reader is familiar with the rest of Jesus’ story, then he or she will be unimpressed with Nathanael’s reason for believing as well.

Countryman focuses on the inadequacy of Nathanael’s belief as well, seeing this as an example of “conversion” stage belief: “when we first encounter it (*pisteuw*) ... it seems little more than conversion, the first faith-recognition that Jesus is significant for one’s life. As such it is weak and fallible and even, at moments, comic.”²⁵ Certainly, at least, one would hesitate to emulate this belief as if it were the deep and abiding.

But if we start with Nathanael’s claim, and apply this paper’s understanding of belief, things look different. Nathanael has, in fact, recognized the truth! Whether it came to him through this small exchange, or through a greater sign later, or through some other route,

²⁴ Merton, 15.

²⁵ Countryman, 24.

Nathanael has just recognized the presence and movement of God in the moment, in Jesus. It has already been noted (v. 47) that Jesus can read Nathanael's heart, so Jesus' response could easily be read as impressed (in almost an amused way) that Nathanael has come to this recognition, howsoever incomplete, so easily. His response could be seen as saying, "Wow! All it took was that and you recognized it? Well, hang on, friend, because it gets bigger than that." It is almost a way of saying, "Welcome aboard."

But more importantly, it acknowledges belief while pointing to its maturity. As Brown says, "John is capsulizing a longer process: the disciples will see Jesus' glory to the full only when they have seen ... the supreme work of the death, resurrection and ascension, and it is only then that they will fully believe."²⁶

Chapter 2

11 — Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

This occurrence further illuminates the progressive nature of belief in this gospel. By this point in the narrative, Jesus had already gathered a group of disciples around him. They are, in fact, called his disciples in verse two, when it says that they were there with him at the wedding. These people had, to some extent, already committed themselves to what they recognized in Jesus. They already believed enough to be there, as his disciples.

But a miraculous sign presents a challenge to one's existing paradigm. If this is magic, it is just magic. But if this sign is coming from the presence and movement of God in this present moment, if this water had changed to wine by God's power, then God's immanence would have to be even greater than any of them had imagined. Elsewhere in the gospels, the question arises

²⁶ Brown, 88.

as to whether Jesus' signs were the work of God or not. The disciples, who were there, "believed in him," i.e., they recognized that what they were witnessing was the movement of God, present to them and acting in the immediate moment.

22 — After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

This verse illustrates belief manifesting after the event. This occurrence shows that recognition of God's presence in the current moment can come from a past moment. And further, it can come from the application of scripture to the words and mission of Jesus.

23 — When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because of the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and ... what was in everyone.

If we apply this paper's understanding of belief to this verse, we see again that belief is a progressive movement. Each step in the right direction simply gives you the hope of taking another step in the right direction. Recognizing God's presence through signs is still belief. The people at the festival recognized God moving among them because of the signs that Jesus was performing. But what these signs say about God's presence to those people may still only be part of the real story of God's presence. Recognizing God's presence in signs allows one to see the providential care of God, Who wants us to be whole and healthy. But it also allows one to see God's movement primarily in the exterior world. This does not mean one is ready for what God's presence means in terms of the transformation of one's own heart.

Jesus would not entrust himself to them, not because he was not compassionate or because he was suspicious of them, but because he knew exactly what was in their hearts, and he

knew that if all the intense, transforming power of God's immediate presence was revealed to them, it would be too much. They were not adequately prepared yet.

Chapter 3

11–12 — to Nicodemus — Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Here is another passage that makes the connection between receiving and believing. Applying this paper's understanding of *pisteuw*, Nicodemus has recognized God's presence in Jesus to some degree, as is evidenced by Nicodemus' seeking out Jesus to ask him questions about God. But it is obvious that Nicodemus has not completely opened himself to all that this recognition implies, because he is still so confused by the claims Jesus makes. Jesus, having framed his assessment in terms of the reception which marks deep belief, tells Nicodemus that he does not believe. Despite trying and catching a glimpse, Nicodemus does not truly recognize God in the moment.

The reason for this seems to be that Nicodemus is not looking at what is in front of him. He cannot recognize God's presence in the earthly things that greet him. He is stuck trying to find God in "heavenly things" such as the law, which came to humans from heaven and God's will, before he can deeply recognize God in the moment. The reader ought not be impatient with Nicodemus. After all, the "earthly things" that Jesus was telling him about had to do with a grown person being born again. It is an absurd idea that only makes sense if one is able to live that absurdity in order to be transformed in the moment.

18 – Those who believe in him are not condemned but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Again, belief begins by recognizing God's presence in what is right in front of us in the present moment. God sends his Son to the world to embody God's presence right in front of us. If we believe (recognize God's presence before us), we are not in the dark anymore, with God's presence hidden from us. This is important to me, in that if *pisteuw* is understood as the opposite of doubt, then condemnation implies a punishment. If it is understood as recognizing God in the moment, then it is a simple and rather obvious statement to encourage the disciple to move forward and grow: If you recognize God's presence and movement in the moment, then God's presence and movement in the moment is not hidden from us any longer. Those who do not recognize God's presence in the moment are condemned "already," that is, God's presence remains hidden from them, like it was before.

32 — This verse is notable in that it uses "accept his testimony" rather than "believe," because it describes something whose opposite is doubt or skepticism.

36 — Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life.

From a contemplative view, eternal life is experienced in union with God. When the practitioner surrenders to God's will fully, and God grants deep intimacy, it is in this intimacy that he or she "has" eternal life. So this paper's contemplative take on *pisteuw* reads simply here: if one recognizes God's presence and movement in the moment deeply enough, God may grant an intimacy that brings an experience of eternal life.

The second half of the verse is notable in that it implies a connection between belief and obedience. The Great discourse will show an unmistakable connection between love and obedience. So as this paper examines the dynamic between belief and love, it will be valuable to note that they have a common root in obedience that goes back to this early in the narrative.

Chapter 4

21 — “Woman, believe me the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”

This occurrence, spoken by Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well, sounds like it could be a use of *pisteuw* which suggests acceptance of a claim. It is easy to read it as “woman, take my word for it.” But an examination of how belief is used throughout this pericope affirms the usefulness of reading *pisteuw* as recognition of God’s presence in the moment. This reading then, would not use *pisteuw* for emphasis, one may say “take my word for it,” but rather, Jesus encouraging the woman to look more deeply, to follow the glimmer of recognition that she has, and to recognize God in the moment, speaking to her in the person of Jesus. “Recognize God before you and around you right now ... the day is coming when that is how we will worship, not on a mountain, not in a city, but in our real true recognition of God in our immediate experience.”

39 — many Samaritans believed in him because of the woman’s testimony

When the woman goes back to her city and tells the people what has happened, her “testimony” is this: “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” If this testimony induced belief in the people, then this belief was based on more than what she said. The recognition of God in her encounter with Jesus had left her changed, and the people saw this change in her in her testimony. They recognized God’s movement in Jesus without seeing Jesus because they saw the effect it had on one who had had an immediate encounter. They saw it strongly enough in her that they followed her out of town to see Jesus, based on her “testimony” that he read her heart He couldn’t be the Messiah, could he?

41–42 — ... and many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

When the people of the town encounter Jesus personally, they no longer recognize God’s movement simply because of the change it made in someone else. They have come to a more intimate and immediate recognition through their own encounter with Jesus and his word.

48 — (to an official beseeching Jesus to heal his son) “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

The fact that the official has come to Jesus indicates some degree of belief. He has recognized God’s presence in Jesus and has sought him out to heal his son. So when Jesus answers that unless he sees signs and wonders, he will not believe, it is clear that belief is not the opposite of doubt or rejection. This official has demonstrated some sort of belief in Jesus by approaching him.

He demonstrates this belief, this recognition of God in Jesus by not being swayed by Jesus response. He recognizes the movement of God in the person of Jesus, and, by his insistence, brings the issue back away from the miraculous aspect and back to the life-saving action of God among us.

50 — The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him

Despite the admonishment against believing through signs, Jesus grants the request and the official recognizes that God has just moved. His belief has deepened and it rests in the immediate moment. Jesus tells him his son will live, and the official recognizes that God lives and moves among God’s people and calls them to intimacy in the moment.

53 — ... so he himself believed along with his household.

The official already believed before he got home and found that the boy had recovered. The reason the word is used again is because *it happened again*. The official got home and found that the boy had recovered and was brought, again, into a deeper recognition that God is with us, alive and moving and calling us closer.

Chapter 5

24 — Very truly I tell you anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life....

This comes on the heels of a Sabbath healing (5:1–9), the objections of the authorities (5:10–18), and a response by Jesus in which he begins to explain the unity through love which exists between himself and the Father. The culmination of this response comes here, which, given this paper’s understanding of belief, affirms that when one encounters Jesus, one encounters the Father who abides in him through love, and that anyone who hears Jesus’ words and recognizes them as the words of the Father present in the moment is granted an experience of eternity in life.

38 — You do not have (God’s) word abiding in you because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

The connection that will become explicit in the Great Discourse is being fleshed out more and more as we now have a connection between belief and God’s word abiding in the person who believes. Later this abiding will be explicitly associated with love and obedience, and the dynamic between love as method and belief as measure will start to crystallize.

43 — Uses “accept” rather than “believe” because it is talking about the opposite of rejection.

44 — How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God.

Here, the dynamic and progressive nature of belief is again emphasized through a contrast between two places one may find glory. However, this paper's understanding of *pisteuw* comes out more clearly if the reader sees this contrast not primarily in terms of the place one finds it (one another/the one who alone is God) but rather primarily from the verb that precedes each. One *accepts* glory from one another. One *seeks* glory that comes from God. Accepting implies settling, and it implies that one is no longer seeking glory because one thinks that one has found it. Such a view of glory is static and no longer moving with God. Seeking is dynamic. It acknowledges the potential, the need, even the thirst for greater intimacy. Our recognition of God in the moment is only valuable if it leads us to seek deeper recognition.

46–47 — If you believed Moses you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?

Moses, graced with a deep and keen recognition of God in relation to him in each moment, was able to make an entire people more deeply aware of God's movement in their immediate lives. What Moses wrote about through the law was this immediacy, and how one may structure one's life to be open to the recognition of God's movement in one's immediate moment. Jesus accomplishes this same communication of God's presence through his perfect love, and the Father perfectly abiding in him through this love. It is the same method of communication, with the subject of communication perfectly embodied in Jesus.

Therefore, if they recognized God in the moment through Moses and the law, they would recognize Jesus as the perfect embodiment of the heart of the law, which is God's immediacy and love, and they would recognize God in Jesus, and in the moment. But if they do not

recognize God's presence to them in that immediate moment through what Moses (on whom they have set their hope) wrote, thinking that the closeness of God through Moses was of that time and place, then how will they be able to answer Jesus' call to recognize God's presence as a current and immediate presence, one more powerful and real than they could possibly imagine.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 does not use the word *pisteuw* until verse 29, but understanding the way belief works into the narrative should take into account the way the feeding of the five thousand sets up what belief is not. At the beginning of the story, it is stated that the crowd had gathered because they saw the signs he was doing (v. 2). It is not explicit yet that they think of their belief (as they understand it) as contingent on a sign. When the people see that Jesus has miraculously fed the multitude, the text does not say that they believe. However, it attributes to them a claim that Jesus is the "prophet who is to come into the world," (v. 14) and says that they wanted to make Jesus king.

Following another sign to the disciples (walking on the water), Jesus is approached by the same crowd as the day before. Jesus calls them out and says that they have not sought him out looking for a sign, but because they are drawn to him by a hunger that the bread from the day before could not help (vv. 26–27). The first instance of the word belief comes after the crowd asks Jesus what constitutes the works of God, and Jesus responds in v. 29, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." Applying this paper's understanding, then, this means that it is the work of God to recognize God's movement and presence in the moment (for that group, in the earthly Jesus before them).

After this, there is an interesting exchange that, through a contemplative lens, illustrates the crowd's inability to identify the moment. The crowd responds to Jesus' identification of

belief as the work of God with a request for a sign (v. 30). The request, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?” even makes their belief (what they think belief is) contingent on the sign. They support this request by citing Moses and the manna in the wilderness.

Of course, looking for God in the past (Moses) or in the future (what sign are you *going to* give us), is not belief. Belief must recognize God immediately present in the very moment. Jesus even suggests this by his use of tense in his reply that it *was* not Moses who gave bread, but it *is* the Father who gives bread (v. 32). Jesus speaks in all present tenses as he describes the bread of God coming from heaven and giving life to the world (v. 33).

The crowd still does not understand, and asks Jesus to give this bread. Jesus explicitly responds, “I am that bread! That bread is right here in front of you! If you recognize God right here, moving and calling you right now, you will never be hungry or thirsty again! You are looking right at the presence of God, but you are not recognizing it!” (vv. 35–36)

For this paper, the next section is important because it identifies Jesus’ surrender of his own will to the will of the Father as the means by which Jesus embodies God’s presence and movement (v. 38), and connects the will of the Father with recognition of God’s presence (*pisteuw*) in v. 40. In chapters 14 and 15, when love is identified as obedience to God’s will, this section becomes a snapshot of Jesus’ love for the Father as well.

47 — Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.

Coming off the long metaphor of nourishment that began with the feeding, Jesus states the lesson succinctly: whoever recognizes God here has life in eternity, right here and now. Referring back to the Jews murmuring in verse 46, Brown says, “If the Jews desist from their murmuring, and indication of a refusal to believe, and will leave themselves open to the

movement of God, He will draw them to Jesus.”²⁷ To the contemplative, of course, this same assessment could be made of any of us.

64 — “... But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe ...

Of course, Jesus would recognize who saw God moving in him. He would be there to see each person’s transformation, or lack of transformation. And his recognition of God moving in the moment would allow him to see the people’s hearts as God sees their hearts.

69 — We (the twelve) have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God.

If a person recognizes the actual presence of God embodied in another, how can anything else seem more important? The twelve are progressing in their recognition, and it is deep enough now that there is no way they can just ignore it.

Chapter 7

5 — ... for not even his brothers believed in him.

This verse is interesting as an illustration of an understanding of belief as recognition of God moving in the moment. This is because of the preceding verses in which his brothers’ words are uttered, which draw the evangelist’s assertion that they did not believe. The festival of Booths was near, and his brothers suggested that he go to Judea to spread his reputation. It is an entirely reasonable suggestion. But the reader is challenged to read this and find how this represents a lack of belief.

The answer seems to be in Jesus’ response that his time has not yet come (vv. 6, 8). The strategizing and planning that his brothers are suggesting are not representative of Jesus’ relationship with the Father. And the inability to recognize it in Jesus constitutes unbelief. Jesus’

²⁷ Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 277.

relationship of union with the Father is made possible by Jesus perfect recognition of the Father moving in the moment, and his surrender in obedience to that movement. And it is in this awareness that he perfectly embodies the Father's presence, so that the world may encounter the Father through him. To submit to a human plan for a way to bring this encounter to the world is to deny God the role that is God's — to draw people to Jesus as God wills, and to lead Jesus in the moment in his encounter with those people.

Jesus does not respond by saying it is not a good idea. He does not even respond that he does not want to go because there are people trying to kill him (as v. 1 says). He responds that going to Judea is not what God is leading him to do yet. It is not his time yet.

31 — (after festival of booths confrontation) ... Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, "When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?"

At first glance, it seems like it would be difficult to see this occurrence of *pisteuw* as referring to an actual recognition of God in the moment because it seems as if their claim to believe is based too strongly upon signs, and, even more sketchy, on the *number* of signs Jesus performed. However, the verse does not explicitly assert this causality. It says that they came to believe in him, and were marveling at his many signs. This simply means that Jesus *did* perform many signs, and that many people were attributing those signs to the presence and movement of God. And in the murmurs and debates in the crowd, it would be easier to refer to the signs and the belief that one came to upon witnessing a sign than it would be to talk about the intuitive recognition of God's presence in the man. Signs are useful. They challenge witnesses to rethink what they thought about the world around them. They force a resolution of these challenges, and give the witnesses the opportunity to recognize God moving in the moment in a way that perhaps

they had not expected. If a person takes advantage of this opportunity and attributes the sign to the movement of God, then they have grown in their belief.

37–38 — Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’

This occurrence is a foreshadowing of what Jesus will explain in more detail to the disciples at the Last Supper. The first part of it, with this paper’s reading of belief, is a call. Indeed, in the narrative, Jesus calls out these verses to the assembly where he is teaching. It is a call to those who feel the thirst for God to come to Jesus and witness him. If this person recognizes God in the moment through this encounter with Jesus, let that person drink and have this thirst quenched.

The second half begins to formulate the dynamic whereby one who fully recognizes God through Jesus will similarly embody the presence of God to the people who encounter them. If you believe in Jesus, rivers of living water will flow out of your heart to the world around you, and God, through *you*, will quench the thirst of others who are thirsty for God.

39 — Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive ...

This occurrence supports the connection to the Great Discourse, where Jesus promises the Spirit to the disciples.

48 — Has anyone of the Pharisees or the authorities believed in him?

The authorities do not entertain the notion that their own authority is what is blinding them to recognition of God in the moment. Following this rhetorical question, Nicodemus speaks up on behalf of Jesus’ right to a hearing, and the Pharisees respond to him with a ridiculous theoretical abstraction about Jesus’ region of origin. While belief is rooted inextricably in the

immediate moment, they are looking for God's presence in their own authority and in interpretations of their tradition which are static and closed.

Chapter 8

Pisteuw occurs a handful of times in chapter 8, which is a chapter which is fueled by the motifs of indwelling through surrender to God's will (16, 19, 26, 28–29, 38, 42, 54–55) and recognition of this indwelling in the moment (27, 43–47).

24 — ... you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.

In the context of this chapter, which includes a call from Jesus that the truth he brings will set them free from the slavery of sin, this does not seem to be an accusation or a threat, but rather a wake up call. It reminds me of an evening prayer chanted at some Zen monasteries that says, "Let me respectfully remind you: life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Let us strive to awaken. Awaken! Take heed! Do not squander your life."²⁸

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Unless our recognition of God in the moment, moving within and without us, is strong enough to free us from our slavery to sin, we must strive for deeper recognition. Time is passing whether we are striving or not, and our life span is limited. If we do not recognize God's presence in the moment, it will be a natural result of this that we die in our sins.

30 — As he was saying these things (i.e., that he does nothing on his own, but speaks as the Father instructs), many believed in him.

²⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/CenterforSacredSciences/posts/10152722965275313>; accessed December 15, 2015.

This offers strong support for the understanding of belief that I have proposed. As he was speaking about his union with the Father through his obedience to the Father, many recognized God's presence in the moment through their encounter with him.

31 — Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples..."

Any moment of recognition must lead to continued practice. Recognition can always grow deeper, even, as the next verse says, to the point that it frees one from one's slavery to sin.

45 — ... but because I tell you the truth you do not believe me.

How can the truth stymie belief? How can speaking the truth to someone prevent them from recognizing God in the moment? Hearing the truth in words means hearing a formulation of the truth. A listener who is familiar with these formulations because he or she has grown up hearing about God, and the promises God has made to the children of Abraham, must fight through his or her familiarity with these formulations in order to grow within them. And if members of Jesus' audience are too attached to their existing understandings of God's presence and movement in the world, then those attachments will keep that person from actually recognizing this presence and movement in the moment.

46 — If I tell you the truth why do you not believe me?

It is interesting and useful to read this occurrence in light of Jesus claim that the words he speaks are not his own; rather, they are the words the Father instructs him to say. This, then, would be a question coming straight from the Father, about the communication the Father is trying to accomplish with the people. "I am speaking the truth to you.... Don't you recognize me?"

Chapter 9

Pisteuw does not appear in this chapter, the story of sight being given to the man born blind, until verses 35–38. English translations usually use the words “did not believe” in verse 18, but this is in fact a different word, an understanding that is indeed the opposite of doubt but is not *pisteuw*.

But later in the story, after all of the confrontations between the man and the authorities, Jesus finds the man and has an exchange with him:

[Jesus] said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered “Who is he? Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus answered, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

One interesting detail about this exchange is that, on the heels of an encounter with the Pharisees and the Jews who had believed in him in which Jesus uses first person pronouns in his descriptions of his relationship with the Father, here Jesus does not answer the question “Who is he?” with any usage of first person. He focuses on the man who had been healed, and refers to himself in terms of that man’s experience and his newly healed relationship with the world. He uses second and third person pronouns and a descriptive phrase to identify himself.

From a contemplative standpoint, this exchange is loaded. We sit in prayer, trying to *find* God that we may affirm our belief in him. We enter the stream of culture in *search* of God’s presence in our experience, in order that we may be graced to be able to affirm that yes, we recognize God in this moment. I would gladly make a leap of faith off of any leaping point I am shown.... Just show me where to leap. Where are you, God? Show me that I may recognize you and worship you.

The evangelist’s story here sets this searching hunger in two contexts:

(1) A man who has just been given sight by Jesus. The analogical value of the miracle is made explicit at the end of the story in verses 39–41. Jesus has restored the man’s physical sight in a story that addresses spiritual blindness. This man has been given a restored ability to recognize God’s presence in the moment.

(2) A call to the man to recognize God in the moment. Jesus *asks* him if he believes. This is the first time he asks someone this in the gospel.

For the contemplative, we feel and answer the call to find God in the moment, and for a long time, we are rewarded with a frustrating search, feeling and knowing that if only we could find God, we would run into God’s arms and never think twice about what we may have to sacrifice. But we see no arms to which to run.

Jesus answers the contemplative here, “You know God. You have felt God’s call. God is the One Who is calling you. God is the one before you right now, filling your experience of creation with a desire to know God.”

That the man recognized God in Jesus is verified by his worship.

Chapter 10

25 — (asked directly if he is the Messiah) Jesus answered, “I have told you and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep.”

The works should testify to him because they are God’s works being accomplished through Jesus, and so these works are deeply immediate opportunities to recognize God’s movement in the moment. In verses 3–5, Jesus has already set his own call (i.e., God’s call through him) in the context of a shepherd’s call to his sheep, so a reading of this occurrence would indicate that God is calling the people through Jesus and through God’s works performed

through Jesus. This call, coupled with the works performed through the obedient son, would be enough to answer their question if they were open to God moving in the moment.

37–38 — If I am not doing the works of my Father then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

This occurrence supports this paper’s reading of *pisteuw* because Jesus gives the option to “believe the works” that he is performing on behalf of the Father. “Believe the works” only makes sense if we understand belief as being recognition of something through those works.

42 — And many believed in him there (across the Jordan where John had been baptizing).

Jesus retreated across the Jordan, and people came to him there. They feel the call, and many of them recognize God’s presence in their encounter with him.

Chapter 11

14–15 — Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

During this entire story, belief is used to describe a very deep recognition. It is a recognition that is distinct from a flash recognition that might come from a sign, because it requires the believer’s recognition of God moving in the moment to be deep enough to be prepared for something extraordinary. Here in this verse, it is clear that belief does not mean acceptance of a claim. For one thing, no claim has been made except that Lazarus is dead. Secondly, the disciples are travelling with him, they have already confessed their commitment to him (6:68–69), so the reader can be confident that on some very significant levels they have accepted the claims that Jesus has made to them. Belief here then is about recognition of God *in*

the moment. Jesus recognizes that Lazarus' death affords the opportunity for God's movement to be witnessed. What he calls belief in this story seems to be a similarly profound recognition, as he challenges the disciples and Martha to recognize God's presence with such openness and confidence that they are prepared for the extraordinary in God's movement.

25 Jesus said (to Martha), "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

These three occurrences in one verse could keep a contemplative busy for decades. Among the notable details are:

(1) The middle sentence is, at first, a contradiction; then it is a repetitive assertion. At first one might question how a claim like this could be made that includes a believer who has died and nonetheless lives and the assertion that a believer who lives will never die. The first part of the sentence describes a believer who has died, while the second part of the sentence says that would not happen.

But it becomes a repetitive assertion if one realizes that both speak about a foundation of the human consciousness that persists beyond death. If in one's life one is able to recognize God's movement on this earthly plane, then when one dies, that part of the consciousness that remains will be familiar with the ground of existence that greets that consciousness upon death. And if during one's life one recognizes God's presence and movement strongly enough, so that one embodies God's presence to the world, then death will not even seem like an end to that person. So both parts of the sentence say that for the believer, the moment of death is not an end.

(2) Once again, Jesus asks someone, in this case Martha, if she believes. Given what comes before it, it is quite a question. Using this paper's understanding of *pisteuw*, this question

then becomes, “Do you recognize that God is here, moving, right now?” Does Martha recognize it in Jesus himself? Does she recognize it in the radical challenge he is giving to her in his words? Does she recognize it not as an abstraction but as immediate truth?

26 — She said to him, “Yes lord I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Martha offers a beautiful answer, but she is still struggling with the profundity of what she has said. She words her belief in a claim. It is an accurate claim that speaks of recognizing God’s presence in the moment, but it is a claim *about* that recognition. She thinks she believes, when she is accepting a claim rather than *recognizing* God’s movement.

But this is not the story of Jesus having to deal with a person of weak faith; rather, it is an illustration of the enormous depth of the transformation that comes when recognition of God’s presence becomes deep enough to approach union with God (as Jesus will prescribe in the Great Discourse). The transformation that needed to occur within Martha to truly believe is this radical and complete: if one were truly transformed, one might recognize through Jesus that God would will to raise a dead man from the tomb. The careful and committed reader ought not think, “Come on, Martha. You’ve got to do better.” Rather, the careful and committed reader would do well to take the cue from Martha’s interaction and push for deeper union and more complete transformation, even until by “belief” one means living within the Will of God so completely that one is prepared for the miraculous.

Then the careful reader might note that this episode of the belief motif is not even the end of the motif. There will be further episodes in the gospel where the term “belief” is further re-invented to accommodate even deeper experiences of union and even more radical transformations. This gospel-long treatment of the word belief serves to shake listeners off the

idea that their current understandings are sufficient. Even Martha, friend, follower and beloved of the earthly Jesus, didn't make it past an intermediate "belief" challenge.

39–40 — Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

Here we see that Martha has not grasped that God is moving in the moment. Jesus gently rebukes her, reminding her that belief means recognizing God's movement *now*. It does not have to do with the future or the past or a static idea of what God is, it is recognizing God's dynamic presence right now. To deeply behold God's dynamic presence in the exact immediate moment is to see God's glory.

42 — (to the Father) I know that you always hear me but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.

Saying this out loud makes explicit to anyone witnessing the event that it is not Jesus the carpenter's son from Nazareth performing magic. Rather, since Jesus has perfectly surrendered in obedience to God's immediate call, it is God, present and moving in the moment, that accomplishes the extraordinary.

45 — Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.

This means, according to this paper's understanding, that they recognized that what happened, happened through the presence and movement of God in Jesus, not the individuated action of Jesus the man.

48 — If we let him go on like this everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.

This demonstrates that despite the Pharisees' deep knowledge of Jewish traditions, they have not grasped that these very traditions speak of God's movement and presence to the people of Israel. There are so many times in the Old Testament where the people's recognition of God's presence with them fortified them to victory over a stronger foe. Rooted in this tradition, the Pharisees are nonetheless afraid of the response from the Romans should the people come as a unified group to recognize God's dynamic presence in Jesus.

Chapter 12

10–11 — So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

The people had come to the festival to see Jesus and Lazarus as well. Through a contemplative lens it is useful to read this in terms of the new, restored life that Lazarus represents. People see this new life and want to be around it. And it can be *because* of this new restored life that Jesus brings to a follower and friend of his that other people may come to recognize the Father moving in Jesus. This will become even more lucid as the Great Discourse ties belief in with love in a way that calls the disciples to utilize this exact dynamic in the days that follow his death and resurrection.

37 — Although he had performed many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.

These may be the same signs as others saw, and some others *did* recognize it as God's presence and movement in that moment. For these people, however, the same sign did not spark recognition that what they were witnessing was the Father, the Creator of everything, moving in the immediate moment through the obedient Son, in and through Whom all things were created.

For them it was a point of interest, but also a point of contention, not because they denied the signs, but because they did not recognize them for what they were.

38 — quoting Isaiah — Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed.

Here Isaiah writes of belief in terms of God's revelation. God's revelation in the context of John is the perfect revelation in Jesus, the one he has sent. Belief is recognition of what God is revealing. Without it, revelation is just a happening. With it, all that is happening is revelation.

39 — and so they could not believe because (further quote of Isaiah) "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not look with their eyes, and understand with their heart and turn — and I would heal them."

The idea that God would harden the hearts of some so that they could not recognize God's presence is difficult to imagine. It seems to me, in its wording, to be emerging from a question of how God's attempts at revelation could possibly go unheeded by some people while witnessed confidently by others. To the contemplative, then, it becomes useful by spurring one to question what may be hardened in one's own heart, even if one doesn't know how it got that way. What are the hidden ways that our hearts are deceived and we are prevented from fully recognizing God's dynamic presence and our participation in it in the exact present moment?

42 — Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him.

And to make sure that everyone knows what this gospel means by that, in the next verses, Jesus focuses this belief very clearly:

44 — Jesus — Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me.

There it is. The NRSV heads this section "Summary of Jesus' teaching," and this paper would agree with this assessment. By this point, this gospel has been trying to draw out further

and further, in a more clear and explicit way, that Jesus perfectly embodies the Father's presence because he has surrendered in obedience to the Father. Not only does this earn the passage the right to be considered for the title "summary of Jesus' teaching," what will come later in this regard, in the Passion account that is about to begin, will make this an even more important theme.

46 — I have come as light into the world so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in darkness.

Jesus has come, sent by God, to illuminate God's dynamic presence all around us in the here and now. Anyone who recognizes this presence through Jesus will live in this new illumination, and see all of creation in this new light.

Chapter 13

19 — I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.

This passage occurs after the washing of the feet at the beginning of the account of the Last Supper. It is, to me, an oddly placed occurrence, where *what* Jesus tells his disciples before it occurs must be referring to the presence of the betrayer that Jesus had acknowledged in the previous verse. That verse itself seems oddly placed in the middle of a call to serve each other in accordance with Jesus' example.

It also offers a brief challenge to the idea of reading belief purely in terms of the present moment, because the verse itself points to believing at a future time when events unfold and the disciples are challenged. However, in the context of the Last Supper and the Great Discourse which is about to begin, it fits rather naturally. There are so many instances in this section (chapters 13–17) where Jesus speaks of the challenges that the disciples will face because of the

passion and death that this projection of belief does not stand out. The way to contextualize this future projection in terms of the belief that is understood specifically in the immediate moment is to read it as Jesus saying that there will be a time coming soon when God will seem very far from you, and your understanding of God will be shaken to the point that it will be difficult to recognize God in that moment. But God is in every moment. I will tell you now, so when the time comes you can recognize that God is with you then too.

Chapter 14

1 — Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe also in me.

This occurrence is interesting in its insistence on dividing this into two statements. Recognize God's presence there with them right at that moment, and *also* recognize God's presence in Jesus, who is there right at that moment. Why would it be necessary to say both? In the context of this discourse, it seems that Jesus is setting up the nuanced movement of abiding and love which he is about to illuminate. Jesus will be revealing to the disciples their own participation in *his* union with the Father.

That the Logos would become flesh already has meant "God can be known and experienced through the form of human life ... as a locus of divine revelation."²⁹ Jesus is about to reveal that this is not true only of the Incarnate Logos, but of any human being who believes and obeys God's will. And while the language that is used emphasizes that it is union with the Father, it also emphasizes that the union in which they are participating is through Jesus. Jesus instructs the disciples to obey Jesus' commandments as Jesus obeyed Father's commandments. The evangelist is very careful to discourage a reading which empowers a disciple to say, "If Jesus can do it so can I," and to instead encourage a humbling kind of empowerment which

²⁹ Kim, 35–36.

surrenders in obedience to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and thus seeks to embody God's continuing movement and presence in terms of the pre-existent Word, the encounter between the Father and Creation which was intended from the beginning. "What Jesus promises and brings to light repeatedly in chapter 14 is the active, dynamic, and abiding presence of Jesus and the Father through the dwelling of the Spirit-Paraclete with and in the disciples ... who are faithful to the covenant commandments of Jesus."³⁰

10 — Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

This comes on the heels of Philip's errant request to be shown the Father. Jesus rebukes the request, and seems disappointed that there is still a lack of recognition. Philip is still looking for the Father somewhere else, not only spatially (somewhere besides Jesus) but temporally (making the request is looking to see the Father in the near future, not the immediate present). This comes in the context of six verses (6–11), which are steeped in descriptions of the mutual indwelling of Jesus and the Father. Jesus responds to Philip's request by saying, "Don't you recognize me? The Father is right here in front of you right now."

11 — Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

The works, as has been repeatedly emphasized, are not Jesus' works, but rather the works that the Father accomplishes through Jesus because of Jesus obedience to the Father's will. Therefore, if the whole reality of mutual indwelling is too much for the disciples to grasp, then it may be more tangible to start with the works that they had witnessed, and recognize those works not as Jesus' but as God working through Jesus.

³⁰ Rekha M. Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006) 106.

12 — Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

Here, Jesus begins to illuminate to the disciples the unfathomable depth of intimacy with the Father, which is offered to his disciples through their belief in him. Because the disciples have recognized the immediate and dynamic presence of God in Jesus, they now may pursue an intimacy that is deep enough to allow the Father to move through them as effectively, and even more effectively than the Father has moved through the earthly Jesus.

From the contemplative standpoint, a practitioner must take this claim seriously. It is easy to pass it off as hyperbole and poetics. But a serious appreciation of this verse can endow the contemplative with an important litmus test of one's progress. If we do not strongly recognize the Father moving effectively through us in the moment when we ask for something in Jesus' name, then we have not recognized and interpreted God's will, and we have not surrendered our own will fully enough. Because if we recognize God's movement in the present completely clearly, we become open to discernment of God's dynamic will, and how we are called to respond. And if in our clearer recognition of this will, we surrender our own will completely enough in love, God's will in that moment will be accomplished.

29 — And now I have told you this before it occurs so that when it does occur you may believe.

This is similar to the occurrence in 13:19, and it serves a similar purpose, warning the disciples that in the near future, it will seem like God is absent. It will be important then to recognize that God is present and moving in every moment, even when it does not seem so.

The narrative steps away from *pisteuw* for a little while at this point, and a detailed exposition of love that began with the new commandment completely takes over with the last

verse of the chapter:” ... but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.” (14:31) As Brown notes, “Verse 31 is the only passage in the NT that states that Jesus loves the Father. What this loves consists in is made clear by the second line, for the ‘and’ that joins the second line to the first is epexegetical — the love consists in doing what the Father has commanded, just as the Christian’s love for Jesus consists in doing what Jesus has commanded.”³¹

Chapter 15 does not contain any occurrences. It does contain a detailed and elaborate explanation of love and indwelling. In a contemplative analysis of this as literature and narrative, the absence of *pisteuw* in this context offers some useful nuance. The Gospel of John does not speak of love very much until the Great Discourse. There are a few occurrences, but the word love is largely confined to this section of the gospel. *Pisteuw*, on the other hand, is ubiquitous. If there was not an elaborate detailed exploration of love which did not involve belief at all, it would be easy to think that the evangelist thought that love was an aspect of belief, one of the elements that make up our recognition of God’s presence. The dynamic between love and belief would then be lost because they would not be distinct and of equal importance. As will be addressed later, the most useful way for a contemplative to understand love and belief is as distinct and equal, precisely because of the dynamic that this sets up.

Therefore, this section, which addresses love in terms of obedience and indwelling but not in terms of belief, really sets up the circuit between them that will begin to take over in chapter 16.

³¹ Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 656; commenting on Bultmann, 488.

Chapter 16

9 — (The Advocate will prove the world wrong) about sin, because they do not believe in me.

The world which does not recognize God's immediate and dynamic presence in Jesus will come to know God's immediate and dynamic presence in the Advocate which the Father and Jesus will send. This recognition will show the world that they were wrong about what sin and separation from God means.

27 — For the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

This passage offers a challenge to reading love as surrender unless we are willing to accept that this "surrender" is different yet still somehow appropriate when used to describe the Father's love. The Father's love for Jesus was illuminated in 5:20 (verifying the evangelist's assertion in 3:35), where it is seen in a context of the Father desiring union with Jesus in order to bring God's presence into the world. This desire to share God's presence with the world and move within creation is a surrender of sorts, a humble movement from the purely Divine to the Creator in Divine Love with creation. Regarding the motif's development within the Great Discourse, Chennattu notes that, "the metaphor 'indwelling' ... underscores the descending movement of the transcendent God to the human realm in general and to the believing community in particular (*cf.* 1:14, 51)."³² This "descending movement" into union with creation and creatures can be seen as related to what humans experience as emptying or surrender.

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³² Chennattu, 102.

This passage, then, would point to God's desire to reach creation through union with the disciples because they have recognized God's immediate and dynamic presence in Jesus, and have surrendered in obedience to him as the embodiment of God's presence.

This passage begins to shed light upon the dynamic between belief and love, recognition and surrender in obedience to what one recognizes. This link begins to become clear during a part of the narrative when the evangelist's Jesus is hammering out the details of a new covenant that fulfills the covenants between God and the people of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. As Chennattu points out, "The OT covenant texts place the promises of God's dwelling presence and Israel's knowledge of God as mutually inclusive pronouncements.... These promises share a dialectic relationship as one leads to the other."³³ So, in this paper's reading, after a long motif setting up belief as recognition of God's movement in the moment (a more specified form of knowledge of God), and a detailed description of God's dwelling presence in those who obey Jesus' commandments, the evangelist unites these two elements in the context of Jesus initiating a new covenant which fulfills the OT covenant texts. "This new covenant was to be interiorized and to be marked by the people's intimate contact with God and knowledge of Him [*sic*] — a knowledge that is the equivalent of love and is a covenantal virtue."³⁴

30 — (disciples) — Now we know that you know all things and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.

Here we see that the disciples may believe strongly, but do not fully believe because they do not see God's movement, only God's presence. Their belief is rooted in Jesus' knowledge of all things, not in a recognition through Jesus of God's immediate movement. That they have

³³ Chennattu, 106.

³⁴ Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 614.

erred in their thinking is illustrated by their claim that he has no need to be questioned by anyone, when in a few hours he will be questioned thoroughly by two sets of worldly authorities, and will not use his knowledge of all things to elude being killed by these worldly authorities.

31 — Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe?” He goes on to foretell the scattering of the disciples at this crossroads.

Jesus questions their belief now in light of an imminent event that will cause the disciples’ recognition to be shaken. It does not necessarily devalue the belief that they have, but by foretelling that it will fail them, it does suggest that it is not complete and perfect belief yet.

Chapter 17

7–8 — Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

Now the disciples recognize that what they are witnessing in Jesus is the presence of God, and they have, through Jesus’ preparation and their own recognition, opened themselves to the implications of this dynamic indwelling presence (received them).

There would be a redundancy in saying the, “know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me,” if belief were not distinguishable from verifying a claim. Since this paper is treating belief in terms of recognition in the moment rather than acceptance of a claim about the past, this is not redundant. They acknowledge that God has sent Jesus, and recognize God actually present in the moment.

20 — I ask not only on their behalf but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.

This shows again the nuances of abiding and indwelling that the disciples will pursue and manifest. If we read belief in terms of recognition, then this passage shows that others will recognize God not directly through the words of the disciples, but through the encounter with Jesus which the disciples will initiate. The encounter with Jesus will then be what makes them recognize God as a moving presence in that moment. Again, applying Merton's use of "faith" to John's use of "belief,": "[we receive Christ] by faith ... by the commitment of our whole self and of our whole life to the reality of the presence of Christ in the world. This act of total surrender ... is an act of love for this unseen Person Who, in the very gift of love by which we surrender ourselves to His reality, also makes himself present to us."³⁵

21 — As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so the world may believe that you have sent me.

This prayer acknowledges explicitly that the same indwelling which enabled the disciples to encounter the Father through him is now going to enable others to recognize the Father and the Son through the disciples. "This ongoing revelation of God's active presence is actualized by the spirit of truth abiding with the disciples and being in them permanently after the departure of Jesus."³⁶

Chapter 18 — There are no occurrences in Chapter 18, nor in Chapter 19 until after Jesus has died on the cross.

Chapter 19

35 — regarding details of crucifixion — He who saw this has testified so that you too may believe.

³⁵ Merton, 44.

³⁶ Chennattu, 103.

To fully appreciate all that is implied by God's immediate moving presence, the evangelist found it important to know the details of the crucifixion, which seem to emphasize the actual suffering and death of Jesus and the ways that this fulfilled scripture. That the writer says "you too may believe," suggests that it was through these details (and the resurrection to come) that he himself (the author or an editor of the text) came to recognize God as immediately present and moving. He hopes these same details and those to come will open the doors of recognition for the reader.

Chapter 20

In the narrative, somewhere between the end of chapter 19 and the beginning of chapter 20, Jesus has risen from the dead. This, of course, changes everything, including how a contemplative lens would read *pisteuw* after this point in the narrative. To recognize God's presence and movement in the moment is deeply challenged when the person recognizing it has to somehow resolve that the perfect embodiment of God's presence had been crucified and actually died. It comes to mean something entirely different when God's presence and movement in the moment is so deeply involved with creation that the Father has raised the Son from the dead. Something that defies the expected order this drastically and challenges every static concept about God, presence, movement, and the moment means that one's three day old recognition of God in the moment must be almost completely overhauled.

8 — Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first also went in and he saw and believed.

Peter had gone in first, but it does not state that he believed. This disciple went in, and upon seeing, believed.

Maybe Peter believed at that point, but maybe not. It is more surprising to me that this disciple would believe so readily. After all, they ran to the tomb upon hearing Mary Magdalene declare that the body had been taken and she did not know where they had taken it. This is all the information that Peter or the other disciple had. If Peter went into the tomb first and did not immediately recognize it as God's movement and presence, but the work of Jesus' human enemies or supporters, this would not be surprising. But that the other disciple would see the wrappings laid out as they were and recognize that this was not the work of humans, but the moving hand of God, still present in the moment. Whether he knew that this movement involved raising Jesus from the dead or not is not made explicit, only that he recognized it as God.

25 — [Thomas] said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

This paper, reading through a contemplative lens, will give special weight to this pericope, for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, it is a post-resurrection use of the word belief, and this story contains the last uses of the word belief except for a concluding sentence at the end of the chapter. Since the motif has been so ubiquitous to this point, and has manifested a certain pattern of growth through its uses in the public ministry, through the uses in the Great Discourse, through to these post-Resurrection uses, it is reasonable to think that it may be useful to see this story as pointing to a pinnacle of belief, and that somehow, the story of Thomas' recognition of God's presence and movement in that moment demonstrates a perfecting truth about the search for this recognition and for the union which it brings.

Secondly, this story has become known as the story of doubting Thomas, and several translations, including the NRSV which this paper has been using, employ the word doubt in

Jesus' offer to Thomas in verse 27. It will remain the contention of this paper that belief in John is not most useful when seen as the opposite of doubt, so a case will have to be made that resolves this.

Because of its similarity to Jesus' rebuke in 4:48, Thomas' response to the apostles that unless he touch the wounds he "will never believe," is often read with a tone of stubborn dismissal. It is understood as being doubt. Or, worse within the context of John, it is understood as making his belief contingent on a sign.

But this "I will never believe ..." is a very different statement than its second person counterpart in 4:48. A rebuke of a person that is in fact asking for a sign is different from someone making this assessment of oneself, particularly if we keep in the front of our minds the traumatic events of the previous several days that forms the setting of the story.

Belief, as we have seen, plays a central role in John's narrative. Coming to a new understanding of what belief means in terms of Jesus, and through this belief, receiving life in Jesus and God has been a recurrent motif from the very beginning of the gospel. This incident is the first time that a character in the narrative acknowledges that he or she does not yet believe. There are times when a person does not understand, and seems unwilling to accept based on this lack of understanding, and there are times when a character thinks he or she believes only to have that assessment shaken by an unexpected and perhaps unforeseeable manifestation of God's presence. But Thomas is the first to volunteer that he does not believe.

If the way the story continued were that Thomas went off on his own again and continued to miss encounters with the Risen Christ, one may see this response as being dismissal. But that is not how the story goes. This is a story of a person trying to resolve the unresolvable on his own who comes back to the community and finds them overflowing with the sacred joy that only

transformation in God can bring. Verses 21–23 even contain a transmission ceremony in which Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples. The disciples are now embodying the presence and movement of God in the moment. They tell him the reason for their joy: while they were all together, Jesus appeared to them. They were filled with the confident joy of realization and the spirit that had been breathed upon them.

These were Thomas' companions. He knew them. He undoubtedly saw the change in them and knew exactly what had happened. His response is not stubborn dismissal, but rather an honest self-assessment of someone who sees the "belief" pattern. He recognizes that all along there have been people who thought they believed only to find out that belief means something different in the Jesus experience. He recognizes that one must grow into a new understanding of the term. And he recognizes the importance of acknowledging that he does not yet believe in this elusive perfected way. He sees it in his own lack of resolution and in the other disciples' transformation. He recognizes where the disciples have received their realization, and why he has not yet gone through that gate. And he admits it. He acknowledges in all humility that without having this encounter that the others have had, he will never graduate, and that he will not have this encounter away from the community. This is verified by the fact that a week later, he is with them. He has not been stubborn, he has accepted the testimony of the disciples and is among them.

This is not to understate the role of solitude in contemplative practice, but to acknowledge that the usefulness of solitude is to lead us to a more intimate engagement with the community. As Merton says, "It would obviously be fatal to seek an inner awakening and self-realization purely and simply through withdrawal. Though a certain movement of withdrawal is necessary if we are to attain the perspective that solitude alone can open up to us, nevertheless

this separation is in the interests of a higher union in which our solitude is not lost but perfected....”³⁷

In this story Thomas moves from isolation to engagement, from pursuit of union with God through his own self to pursuit of this union through Jesus and the community, and from “unbelief” to belief. Furthermore, it hinges on his own ability to recognize that he does not yet believe and to make a change in his pursuit. This is entirely admirable. To suggest that Thomas is painted as stubborn or dismissive is to miss that this is the story of his perfection, his transformation. His recognition of the imperfection of his belief and his coming back is a heroic narrative development, like the prodigal son having his moment of clarity in that parable and coming back to a Father who ran with joy to meet him in Luke (15:11–32).

27 — Then Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

There are other ways to translate the end of this verse that do not involve the word doubt, but some form of doubt is very common. It is less common but not uncommon to see it worded as being faithless or unbelieving. These translations of *genou apistos* do not treat the dynamic nature of *genomai*, which means to become. Young’s literal translation reads “And become not unbelieving but believing,” but that is an exception.

My suggestion would be to recognize that *genomai* has been used before in the prologue to describe the power to become children of God, and also that it is related to *gennethu*, to be born. This is the word Jesus used to in chapter three in his conversation with Nicodemus, when he spoke of the necessity of being born again. I would suggest that one reads *genou apistos* in this sort of spirit of becoming. We must be born again, and in that new birth, we may yet be born

³⁷ Merton, 24.

as one who does not truly fully believe, who recognizes only part of the picture. But it is in our *becoming* that we are realized because it is only in this that we are graced with the power to become children of God.

Through a contemplative lens, then, Jesus gently reminds Thomas that God is moving in an ever-blooming, ever-becoming moment, and that if we are to enter into this moment, this bloom, it must be as one who *becomes* and whose becoming happens in recognition of God's moving presence. "The external word of God is designed to awaken the presence of the word of God in us. When that happens, we become, in a certain sense, the word of God." (Keating, pg. 27) It would be difficult and awkward to capture this nuance in a translation, but as grist for contemplation, it is quite useful.

Thomas responds with his beautiful confession. Merton says, "...the mystical life culminates in an experience of the presence of God that is beyond all description, and which is only possible because the soul has been completely 'transformed in God'"³⁸ In John's gospel, this indescribable nature of this culmination of the mystical experience is captured in the humbled confession in v. 28.

29 — Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen me but have come to believe.

Jesus then acknowledges that the disciples' belief has come from their encounter with him in glory, and that it is he that future believers will be encountering when they seek union with the Divine. John has claimed the transformation of Creation through union with God, the

³⁸ Merton, 17.

very reason for Creation, in the name of Jesus, the incarnate Logos. To Brown, “His last words bear the mark of the timeless Word who was spoken before the world was created.”³⁹

31 — But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing in him you may have life in his name.

The book’s purpose is summarized as an attempt to allow others to recognize God’s presence and movement immediately present to them through their encounter with Jesus through the gospel. He also affirms that this recognition of God brings the believer life, even if the person is sure that she or he already has been born.

Conclusions

As one might imagine, the dynamic between love and belief that emerges from a contemplative reading of the fourth gospel is not easy to concretely define. If it were, the contemplative would not need the gospel’s nuanced presentation for illumination. Rather than a definition, the contemplative is blessed with illumination of a process which one strives to master through exacting practice. This process can be described, but really only becomes clear through long and devoted application and practice.

The first and most easily identifiable dynamic is that seeing belief as recognition and love as obedient surrender affords the contemplative a paradigm for assessment and adjustment of one’s practice as one proceeds. Belief in John is seen as culminating in union with God through Jesus. Jesus describes this union not only in intuitive terms such as indwelling and abiding, but also in terms of the effectiveness of one’s works performed in this union. For the contemplative, this means that if one’s practice has not led one to a closeness with God that is so profoundly intimate that it deserves the word union, then there is still work to do to deepen one’s recognition

³⁹ Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 1051.

of God' immediate dynamic presence. Further, if it seems that the intimacy is as close as it can get, but one's attempts to bring God's presence to the world are not fully effective (as effective as Jesus' works) then one's recognition is still somehow lacking, even if one's nearness to God seems as intimate as it can be.

Assessing one's progress through belief in this way then allows the practitioner the opportunity to adjust his or her practice, and identifying love as obedient surrender to God's will affords the practitioner a ground for making this adjustment. As Keating describes it, "If we have not experienced ourselves as unconditional love, we have more work to do, because that is who we really are."⁴⁰ While it is true that our understanding of what this surrender entails grows and develops and is easily fooled in its young stages, it is also true that simply identifying our next move as letting go of our own desires and plans in the moment in order to allow God's will to take over is very useful.

Indeed, it is not only useful to the contemplative; it is necessary for anyone who takes seriously the commitment to do God's will. If we understand love as obedience to God's will, there is a great danger inherent in this if one also understands love or God's will as being static. There must be a check for this, such as a view of belief that shakes a person out of his or her own existing recognition into a deeper one. If we are not aware that for every new recognition only leads us to a need for a deeper recognition, then it is too easy to think we understand God's will, when we are merely projecting our own desires for the world into God's will. And current events show that people are often ready to do horrific acts or say damaging things in the name of doing God's will as they understand it. If a person has grasped that belief, and the sensitivity to God's will which it brings, is a continual process of shaking oneself out of one's existing recognition of

⁴⁰ Keating, 45.

God's presence in order to find more immediate recognition, then that person will be less likely to define God's will in terms of their present depth of recognition.

The dynamic between love and belief, then, goes much deeper than simply checking belief for the authenticity. This paper's understanding of love necessitates not only a surrender of one's own will, but an ability to recognize God's will and God's call in the moment in order to obey this will. Belief can help define love, and love can help define belief. This is a key challenge for many contemplatives, who feel ready to surrender at any given moment, but don't know what to surrender to. Those of us who would take the leap of faith joyfully if we only saw the leaping point can use the dynamic between belief and love to slowly illuminate what is (and what is not) God's will in the moment.

This is easy to see if we note that belief is *deepening* recognition, and love is continual surrender in obedience to *what we recognize* as God's presence in the moment. If a practitioner truly commits to both of these, they must facilitate each other. In striving to continually surrender in obedience to God's will, we must recognize God's movement in that moment. As our recognition grows clearer, it illuminates an aspect of God's presence that had been hidden from us earlier. This illumination allows for a clearer picture of what we are surrendering to and what God's will is that we should obey. As this surrender allows God to draw us closer, we are graced with recognition of God's presence that is even clearer.

This relationship, as if love and belief were diodes on a battery powering one's movement towards union with God, requires great effort to move past one's existing paradigms and formulations. But it also exposes the need for this effort by centering the activity in surrender and setting the assessment on an attempt to recognize something where recognition is

elusive. And further, allowing the two to illuminate and facilitate each other allows for a focus of effort that could make the efforts more effective.

Thirdly, recognizing God's immediate and dynamic presence *within* us is recognizing the indwelling presence of God which is promised through love. The more clearly we recognize God's movement within us in the moment, the more we are empowered to cede our power to God and be moved by God's will. This opens us up to the deep abiding that Jesus promises in the Great Discourse.

Finally, it is very valuable to note that this reading of belief and love carves out a profound and inescapable role that we play for each other in our quest for union with God. As Merton says, "In a word, the awakening of the inner self is purely the work of love, and there can be no love where there is not 'another' to love."⁴¹ This has been demonstrated in the narrative in Thomas' return to the community, but it is also elucidated in Jesus' commandment to love "one another" as he has loved them. If we read love in terms of obedient surrender, as the fourth gospel continually suggests, then loving each other as Jesus loved them does not mean surrendering in obedience to each other, but rather surrendering in obedience to God's will in order to bring each other awareness of God's presence in the moment. According to Jesus' promise, this obedient surrender to God allows God to abide in us, and our surrender allows others to recognize God's presence through us. At the same time, of course, others who are striving to surrender to God's will, through this striving, allow God to abide more deeply in them, and we will be able to recognize God's presence through their surrender. Believing becomes how we recognize God's presence in others; love is how we facilitate others' recognition of God's presence in us.

⁴¹ Merton, 24.

In John's gospel, the Logos has been present since the beginning, but it was when the Logos became flesh as a human that other humans were most able to recognize God's moving presence, and to receive deepening awareness of what this immediate dynamic presence means. God's presence has imbued creation all along, in every sound, tree, wind, event, mountain, birth and death, but creation became most aware of this presence when humans encountered another human who, through perfect obedience to God's will rather than his own, embodied God's presence.

In other words, God's immediate dynamic presence in the world around us is going to be most accessible to us through those other humans who are heeding the same call to love. Their surrender allows for abiding, and this abiding becomes the most accessible way to recognize God's immediate call to union. The disciples have witnessed, and we have received their testimony that the perfect abiding union, enabled by Jesus' perfect surrender, made God's presence known to them. And John's gospel promises us that this same abiding union, and its effectiveness in revealing God's presence, is available to Jesus' followers through Jesus. Without finding God in other people who are devotedly trying to allow God's presence to cut through, our recognition of God's presence in other elements of our world will be incomplete and elusive, even if it is sometimes convincing.

Concluding Reflections

The usefulness of these readings of love and obedience to a contemplative search could only be truly assessed over the course of years of devoted and disciplined application and practice. Further, any assessment of the usefulness of these readings could only be truly valuable

coming from someone who is far more adept at contemplative practices than this author.

Nonetheless, a few observations about these readings in practice might be appropriate.

Regarding Love

Earlier in this paper it was noted that a healthy love of self is elusive. Since the synoptic love commandments link love of neighbor to love of self, and further describe love of neighbor as one of the keys to entry into the Kingdom, developing a healthy and appropriate loving relationship with one's own self is theologically important. Still, for many people, self-loathing, shame, guilt, depression or a variety of other blinders present a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to developing a healthy relationship with one's own self. These things can assault a practitioner during his or her encounters with the exterior world, and can be especially difficult during the deeply psychologically charged twists and turns of prayer and silent meditation.

If we apply John's description of love to love of self, it becomes: Surrender in obedience to God in order to bring God to yourself. It does not mean that a person has to like himself or herself, or admire who he or she has been in their past, or any other such attachment. It means to get out of your own way so that what the world gets from you is *not* the you that you may or may not like, but rather is the presence of God, made recognizable in you because you have facilitated it through your surrender. In this context, those things that stand in the way of a healthy love for one's self become entirely peripheral, unrelated attachments which are best swept away because of their uselessness. Because "the spiritual journey is more than a psychological process. It is of course primarily a process of grace."⁴² John's understanding of love, then, can be a reminder that it is not about you, it is about God, so really, in a way, who cares if you *like* yourself? *Love*

⁴² Keating, 12.

yourself by getting out of your own way for God. Once one accomplishes this, *liking* oneself becomes much more accessible.

Regarding Belief

Contemplatives practice keeping God in their awareness. If this awareness can be clear, focused, and deep enough, we may be drawn into union with God through Jesus. And so we practice the exacting method of constantly reminding ourselves of God's presence: noticing when our awareness has drifted to something else, and drawing it back to God's presence. Because this practice is based on nudging one's attention back to God, it is easy to get into a rut where we simply remind ourselves, "Oh, yeah, ... God." And we accept the same *depth* of awareness and the same degree of intimacy as we had the last time we said, "Oh, yeah, ... God." The exercise then becomes focused only on maintaining awareness and not deepening it.

Reading John's use of *pisteuw* in terms of recognizing God's immediate dynamic presence is useful because of how the motif portrays Jesus as challenging different people to believe more deeply in that exact moment. If one applies one's familiarity with this motif to one's practice, then drawing one's attention back to God is accompanied by a challenge to seek a *deeper* recognition of God's real, actual, moving presence right here, right now.

Regarding the Dynamic Between the Belief and Love

We look for God's presence in what we encounter. God is so vividly present in all we encounter that a clear recognition of it will leave us speechless.

We embody God's presence to those that we encounter through our obedient surrender to God's will. We can embody this presence so vividly to the world that God's will working through us can be as effective as God's will working through the earthly Jesus.

Look for God's presence.... Embody God's presence.... Keep going.

One informs, illuminates, and motivates the other.

It has been useful so far.

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