

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Seven Reasons Why the Gospel of John is So Special

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“One of these things is not like the others.” That was a classic segment on Sesame Street, as well as the title of a popular children’s book. It proves again that everything you need to know in life you probably learned in Kindergarten.

After all, when it comes to the four gospels, it has been long recognized that “one of these things is not like the others.” There are three Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—with very similar content, tone, and pacing. And then there’s the gospel of John.

From the very beginning, the church fathers even recognized that John was notably different than the others. In fact, Clement of Alexandria famously referred to John as the “spiritual gospel,” as opposed to the more “earthy” Synoptics.

Ok, but what exactly makes John so different? Given that John loves the number seven—as one example among many, his gospel is structured around seven “signs”—let me offer seven things that makes John so special.

1. *John is the last gospel.* Most people may not realize that the canonical order of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) was seen by many church fathers as the order

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in which they were written. And leaving aside modern debates over whether Mark was first, and how he might have been used by the Synoptics, virtually everyone agrees that John was last. Why does this matter? Because John offers an appropriate culminating vision of the person and work of Jesus, with more developed theological reflections.

2. *John is the most personal gospel.* Unlike the authors of the Synoptics, John inserts himself into the story of the Gospel in more direct ways. He is most likely the enigmatic figure known as the “beloved disciple” who is one of the twelve. He has a special relationship with Jesus, even laying his head on his chest at the Last Supper (13:23). And, even more importantly, the beloved disciple tells us at the end of the Gospel that he is the one who wrote it (21:24).

3. *John is the most beloved gospel.* If you were to ask someone today which Gospel was their favorite, chances are they would say the Gospel of John. That’s not a slight on the value or inspiration of the other three, it’s just a recognition that the fourth gospel resonates with people in a special way. And this also seems to have been the case in the early church. In terms of the manuscript fragments left behind in the first few centuries — a data point that reflects the popularity of a writing — we have more copies of John than any other gospel.

4. *John is the most distinctive gospel.* As already indicated, everyone recognizes that the Gospel of John is different. But what makes it unique? Many things are part of that answer, but most notably John is unique because of the stories he tells that the Synoptics don’t tell. And these are some of the most beloved: Jesus changing the water into wine (2:1-12); Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus (3:1-22); Jesus and the woman at the well (4:1-45); the resurrection of Lazarus (11:1-44); the washing of the disciples’ feet (13:1-20); and the entire garden discourse (chapters 14-17).

5. *John is the most theological gospel.* Just to be clear, all the gospels are theological in their own right. But scholars have noted that John’s Gospel is distinctive in regard to the more direct, and more developed ways, that he affirms a number of important theological truths. At the top of the list, of course, is the divinity of Jesus. John wastes no time on this point because the very first verse says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

6. *John is the most “Old Testament” Gospel.* Ok, this one’s a toss-up. Matthew has a lot of Old Testament roots too (and so do Mark and Luke in their own way). But, a case can be made that John’s Gospel is the most Jewish. It starts with a new Genesis (“in the beginning”), roots the story of Jesus in unique OT stories (Jacob’s ladder in 1:51; serpents in the wilderness in 3:14), presents Jesus as fulfillment of Israel’s festivals (1:29; 7:37-38), and tells us Jesus is the new and better Temple (1:14; 2:21).

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7. *John is the most “plain” gospel (about the message of eternal life).* Again, all the gospels have the same message, namely that Jesus is the way to heaven. But we have to acknowledge that John does this in some of the most memorable ways. It is in his gospel that Jesus tells Nicodemus a person has to be “born again” (3:3). John is the one who records the most famous line in the Bible: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son . . . (3:16). And John even tells us this was his whole purpose: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

To be clear, all four of our gospels are special, inspired, and unique in their own ways. But, John offers a unique contribution to our vision of the ministry of Jesus. And he proves that Jesus’ person is so deep, so multi-faceted, so profound, that there are always more things to say about him.

Indeed, John said as much in the very last verse of his gospel: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25).

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