



# INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

READING JOHN'S GOSPEL

**SESSION 8:  
PROSTITUTED RELIGION**

**BY GEORGE STAGG**

Interpreting the Signs Study Guide: Reading John's Gospel, Session 8  
© Twin Cities Church, 2009

Published by:  
Twin Cities Church  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
[www.tccmn.org](http://www.tccmn.org)  
612-866-5848

All rights reserved. Reproducing and distributing copies in any form and by any means is prohibited without written permission from Twin Cities Church.

All Bible references and quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

# **PROSTITUTED RELIGION**

## **SESSION 8**

### **SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE**

1. Spend some time talking about the various traditions people have come from. If they left it, why did they leave it? If they have not, why?
2. Why do you think it's so easy to lose sight of Jesus and his death and resurrection? Why is our faith so untrustworthy? Is it supposed to stay that way?
3. Discuss what people do to keep their focus on Jesus and his death and resurrection. Draw up a list of habits or disciplines that can help people keep this focus.

# PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

All institutions and organizations run the risk of eventually losing their original focus. After a generation or two, when the original founders and builders of the organization are gone and the zeal of starting something new has faded, other people with different motivations, causes, and agendas come in and things change. Sometimes it's for the worse. Sometimes it's for the better.

In this passage, we're going to see that the nation of Israel lost sight of its original focus. As we explore what happened to Israel and what Jesus did to draw attention to the nation's condition, we'll explore the state of Christianity today and consider what Jesus would do if he were to walk into our churches and evaluate their condition. Has Christianity lost sight of its original focus? Have our churches lost sight of their original focus? Have we who profess to believe and follow Jesus lost sight of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Maybe Jesus needs to come into our hearts and stir things up a bit.

## STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

### Read the Passage:

1 Kings 8:1-11; 2 Chronicles 7:1-3  
John 2:13-25

### Think Through the Questions:

1. What was the purpose of the temple? What would you expect to be going on in the temple?
2. Why was Jesus so upset by what he saw?
3. What do the reactions of the Jews to Jesus' actions tell you?
4. Why would Jesus refer to his own body as "the temple?"

### Respond to the Questions Below:

---

---

---

---

---



## COMMENTARY

As in the previous passage, this passage requires some basic information about Jewish traditions. Passover (v.13) was an annual event in the nation of Israel that memorialized Israel's escape from slavery to Egypt. In the final of ten plagues, God sent the "destroyer" to Egypt with the task of killing every first-born person and animal because of Egypt's stubbornness in releasing the millions of Israelites, whom Egypt had submitted to harsh forced labor. To spare the Israelites, God told them to sacrifice an unblemished lamb and to put its blood on the doorframes of every Israeli house. God would not allow the "destroyer" to enter those homes whose doorframes were marked by the blood of the lamb. The Passover was one of Israel's most significant defining events and it was to be remembered as a memorial event honoring God's deliverance of the nation from slavery in Egypt. (Exodus 12:1-51)

The temple served as the place where God's people, Israel, would offer sacrifices, pray, worship, and speak to God. Before the original temple was erected by King Solomon, the Son of King David, the nation used a tent for hundreds of years. King Solomon's temple was destroyed by Babylon when they conquered Israel. Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple when Persia allowed Israel to return from exile and King Herod built upon Zerubbabel's work, enlarging and expanding it to the temple that existed in Jesus' lifetime. The most important aspect of the tabernacle/temple was that the spirit of God dwelt there. God dwelt with his people by residing in this place and they could speak with God. It was the place where sacrifices were made for the forgiveness of sins of the people. The temple was a solemn and serious place. The temple embodied everything the nation of Israel was to stand for—a people blessed by God through His presence, forgiven through His mercy, and set apart as a priestly nation in order to bless the nations of the world.

As sacrifices required animals and since money was required to purchase animals and since many Jews came from other nations to worship, retail shops selling animals and exchanging money were necessary for the hundreds of thousands of Jews traveling to Jerusalem to participate in Passover. Jesus wasn't upset that animals were being sold and money was being exchanged. Nor was Jesus upset because the vendors were over-charging their customers. Jesus was upset because they made His Father's house a house of trade (v.16). The temple was not the place

for buying, selling, and exchanging. It was the place reserved for the forgiveness of sins and for communing with God. Jesus was angered because Israel had desecrated the temple and made it a common retail outlet. In his consuming zeal, he drove the vendors out of the temple with a whip.

The Jews' response to Jesus is curious, but telling. They didn't surround him and physically abuse him. They asked him a question, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" There were two specific things that prompted this response. First, Jesus had told them, "Do not make my Father's house a house of trade." In this statement, Jesus was declaring God the Father as His father. Jesus was declaring that He was the Son of God. Second, Jesus' actions in driving out the vendors and his response to the Jews meant that he possessed the authority to cleanse the temple. The Jews knew that their desecration of the temple was wrong, and that the Jewish leaders and high priest of the time permitted their continued desecration. They wanted to know by what authority Jesus performed these actions and went against the Jewish leaders. Who made him ruler and caretaker of the temple?

Jesus' response, just like his response to his mom in Cana, is strange and mysterious. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." confounds the Jews because of the monumental scope of the task of building the temple. As the text says, Jesus was not talking about the building, but his body. Neither the Jews nor Jesus' disciples understood what he was talking about at the time. However, the text mentions that upon Jesus' resurrection, the disciples believed when they remembered this event coupled with Jesus' words and the Scriptures concerning Jesus' resurrection. This point of "belief" was not how we think of a point-in-time "belief" when people "get saved." As "they believed" after seeing Jesus' miracle at Cana (2:11), this was another point of belief. Disciples of Christ always move from belief to belief, from faith to faith. Our faith grows deeper, more comprehensively, and more maturely as we follow Jesus.

## **Prostituted Judaism**

So, what is going on in this passage? A central point of the passage is clear. Jesus is equating his own body with the temple. Jesus is the dwelling place of God. Jesus is one through whom we have access to God. Jesus is the sacrifice that atones for the sins of not only Israel,

but the entire world. Jesus is the Passover lamb whose shed blood protects those who seek shelter in Jesus' death. These conclusions are fairly clear with some understanding of Israel's history. But why does John locate this passage right here? Why spill the beans on the ending of the story about Jesus' resurrection at the beginning of the story?

The Beloved Disciple is not concerned with us being surprised by Jesus' resurrection. It seems like John assumes we already know about Jesus being raised from the dead. The point John is making is that Jesus knew he would die and be raised in three days well before it happened. The disciples didn't figure it out until after it happened and they remembered this event and the Scriptures. The fact that Jesus knew what would happen to Him highlights several important conclusions to this point:

1. Jesus knew what "his hour" would entail. His coming hour, in which he would purify (remember the purification jars) the world through his blood (remember the water turned to wine) and bring celebration and life to those who drank it (remember the party), had not come yet at the time of the Cana miracle.
2. Jesus' hour would come when his blood would be as that of the Passover lamb, his body would be sacrificed to atone for the sins of the world, and he would be resurrected from the dead three days after his death proving that he alone was the Messiah, the savior of the world, and the only way to God.
3. Jesus' foreknowledge of this event indicated that he knew that the Scriptures identified him as the Messiah, the one who must die but not undergo decay (Psalm 16:10).

By far, the most important point of this passage is that the Jews were entirely missing the point of their tradition. They were missing the point of Passover. They were missing the point of the temple. They were missing the point of sacrifices. They were missing the point about God and what it meant to be his people. With Jesus' act in clearing the temple of retail vending and with his mysterious response to the Jews, Jesus is saying that HE is the point of all of these things and that his hour will reveal and seal that truth, which had been revealed in the Jewish Scriptures.

How do we know they were missing the point? We know because the very place of God's dwelling (temple) during the very time of

remembering God's deliverance from Egypt (Passover) is characterized not by worship or prayer or sacrifice or thanksgiving, but by mundane retail vending. Financial transactions have replaced spiritual ones, and the Jewish leadership, well aware of what was going on, did nothing to stop it, because in their hearts, their concern was less about the heart and spirit of following God, but in their own selfish ambition. The Jews had sold out. They had prostituted their faith for material gain.

## **Prostituted Christianity?**

At the time of Jesus, Judaism was hundreds of years old. The ancestors of the nation of Israel, who were the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived about 1800 years before Christ. Its authoritative texts, the Law of Moses, was written about 1500 BC. If ancient Judaism had lost the point after 1500 years, how has Christianity fared?

Biblical scholar, theologian, and historian Hans Küng identifies five Christian traditions that have developed from Christianity's historical roots and continue to this day. Küng's summary of these traditions' contributions and dangers provides a lens through which to understand Christianity in our day.<sup>1</sup> The following is a synthesized perspective of Küng's analysis and my own conclusions. As Küng can be liberal, some of his suggestions would eventually fail to sustain a Christianity that remains true to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

1. Orthodox traditionalism. Orthodox traditionalism is seen in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The strengths of the orthodox tradition is a substantive theology, a vibrant liturgy that speaks to both spirit and emotion, and a strong and unified fellowship of churches. Its dangers are that its isolated liturgical forms have swept away much of the simplicity and sincerity of the early patterns, particularly in the simple focus on Jesus and remembering his death and resurrection in the Lord's Supper, which Küng has described as becoming a form of "temple worship" in the Orthodox church.<sup>2</sup> Put simply, the Orthodox Church runs the risk of losing their focus on Jesus to liturgical tradition.
2. Roman Catholic authoritarianism. Küng believes that much can be admired within the Roman Catholic tradition. The Catholic church provides much historical continuity to the early centuries of Christianity and in its global scope, provides much to the identity

of Christianity. Küng admires its “efficient organization, the well-ordered structure of offices, the liturgy with its rich tradition, and the contribution to secular culture without which Europe would be the poorer.” Küng also recognizes the countless Catholic Christians all over the world that live out their faith through service, ministry, charity, and generosity not only to those in the Catholic Church, but especially to the poor, marginalized, and underprivileged throughout the world, often despite the problems and corruption that exists within the Catholic system. Its dangers are significant and most seen in its authoritarian leadership and the absolutist papacy. To Küng, its authority stretches far beyond authentic Christian authority. It has often, and still does, extend its authority beyond Christian truth and contradicts it. The papal system at times and to some almost becomes the focus of worship and service, which is idolatry, becoming what Küng calls “papolatry.” The scandalous news of Catholic cover-ups and deceptions to protect child-molesting priests is a powerful example of thinking too highly of the papal system and not highly enough of the thousands of lives that were forever affected by the sexual abuse. The papal system is “not part of the essence of what is a Christian.”<sup>3</sup> Put simply, Catholicism runs the risk of losing their focus because of their commitment to systems of power that are corrupt.

3. Protestant fundamentalism/evangelicalism. The Protestant Reformation brought Christianity back to its core and fundamental essence—the gospel of Jesus Christ. It contended for the gospel and because of that, drew the Catholic Church along with it and with Vatican II, affirmed the centrality of the common confession of Jesus Christ once again and the importance of constant reform. Because of the Reformation, Christianity developed a new appreciation for the Bible, the participation and importance of non-clergy, a non-centralized church, and an emphasis on holiness. The dangers of Protestant fundamentalism/evangelicalism are significant. One of its biggest weaknesses is its tendency to separatism. Additionally, many of its streams strongly oppose modern science and culture, which at one level is necessary to keep focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, on another level, these oppositions often lead to naive, unnecessarily withdrawn, and ineffective engagements in culture. In many cases, these oversights do as much harm to the gospel as those undermining it modern liberalism. To Küng, Christianity can build a Jesus-centered foundation without literal-

ist fundamentalism. Christianity can build a Jesus-focused identity without the sharp exclusivism and Pharisaism of fundamentalism. Christianity can establish a certainty of faith without militant fanaticism.<sup>4</sup> Put simply, fundamentalism and evangelicalism run the risk of losing its focus through its naïve simplicity and separatist attitudes.

4. Modern Liberalism. Modern liberal theology is theology empty of a personal God that steps into the lives of people. To the modern mind, true knowledge can only be determined through scientific and material means. Therefore, the supernatural acts of God described in the Bible could not be reliable sources of faith. To the modern mind, the Bible simply tells of the experiences of the people of God in the ancient texts. The foundation of modern liberal theology is experience. There is an emphasis on the individual religious experience rather than belief in an historical, world-impacting saving event centered around the death and resurrection of Jesus. Modern liberal theology finds much of its origins in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. To quote Nancey Murphy,

*Liberal theologians since Schleiermacher have followed him in taking human religious experience or awareness as a universal feature of human life and in supposing that this religious self-consciousness was the starting point for theology.*<sup>5</sup>

Modern liberal theology acknowledges the existence of God, but not the exclusivity of Christianity. The modern era produced decades of scholarship devoted to the biblical text. While much of it has contributed to the undermining of the Scriptures and Christianity by liberals, a great deal of biblical scholarship by conservatives has produced an abundant source of historical, archaeological, literary, grammatical, lexical, sociological, and cultural material that have not only strengthened Christianity, but have countered undermining influences of liberal theologians. The dangers of modern liberal theology cannot be understated. In the first real shift from biblical and ecclesiastical authority, liberal theology rejects the gospel's claim that only through Jesus Christ can one find and know God and experience the transformed Christian life. Küng argues that the weakness of the modern liberal tradition is that it fails to address the "real experiences of negativity" that exists in the world, which is consistent with the biggest problem in the

modern liberal tradition—the failure to “give central place to the scandal of the cross and the hope of resurrection which are fundamental to the New Testament writings.”<sup>6</sup> Without the scandal of the cross and the hope of the resurrection, the negative experiences of reality fail to sufficiently find any hope in the liberal subjective experience of the divine. Real human suffering needs concrete resolution and hope—resolution and hope that is only found in the suffering Messiah and in His resurrection in power from the dead. It is for these concerns that modern liberal theology has been and continues to significantly wane. Put simply, modern liberalism is all but faded away because of its loss of focus on the historical work of Jesus on the cross.

5. Ecumenical Postmodernism?. Modernism can best be described as having a uniform interpretation of the world. Modernism emphasized reason, progress, and nationalism. With these things called into question as a result of our war-stained 20th and 21st centuries and the social, political, and economic globalization that continues to rapidly expand, modernism is long gone. The world is full of many nations and many religions, and the West no longer dominates the world. Küng believes that Christianity, in its three thriving traditions—Orthodox, Catholic, and Fundamentalist/ Evangelical, can learn much from each other as long as there is a common ecumenical commitment to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Whether the three traditions unfold as Küng would like remains to be seen. Many vibrant churches today are intermixed with people from all of these traditions. The important point that Jesus establishes in the temple in this passage is that Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection remains the center and starting point for all churches and traditions claiming to be followers of Jesus.

In most cases, all Christians find their roots in one of these traditions. These traditions have strengths and weaknesses—weaknesses that threaten their ongoing viability in the generations to come. Regardless of the tradition, Jesus is calling all to believe in him as the Messiah and to continue to believe upon him and follow him for eternal life. How can people, churches, and traditions do this? The gospel of John will continue to help us answer this question. Additionally, the book of Revelation, also written by John offers a template for churches to use to evaluate themselves in regards to their faithfulness to Jesus. The following is a summary

of the seven churches in Revelation 2:1-3:22. Each church is listed with its corresponding strengths and weaknesses. In each case the weakness of each church is a potential cause leading to unfaithfulness to Jesus and the loss of their faithful witness.

<b>Church</b>	<b>Weakness</b>	<b>Action Steps</b>
Ephesus	lost “first love”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Remember former “first love” experience.</li> <li>2. Repent (change course).</li> <li>3. Do the works did at first that focused on Jesus.</li> </ol>
Smyrna	no weaknesses	
Pergamum	lazy in truth and sin	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Confront and correct the idolatry, sin, and false teaching.</li> </ol>
Thyatira	lazy in truth and sin	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Confront and correct the idolatry, sin, and false teaching.</li> </ol>
Sardis	living in the “glory days”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Wake up!</li> <li>2. Build on the strength that remains.</li> <li>3. Remember the teaching and practice of the earlier faithful generations.</li> </ol>
Philadelphia	no weaknesses	
Laodicea	worshipping possessions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Turn to Jesus as the giver of true abundant life.</li> <li>2. Be zealous in repentance.</li> </ol>

The weaknesses that threaten the church are the loss of love for Jesus and others, devotion to things other than Jesus (idolatry), unrepentant sin, false teaching, a dependence upon past successes, a failure to pass the faith onto the next generation, and the worship of material possessions, which is greed and idolatry. We would do well to heed Jesus’ warning to the churches in order to keep our focus on him and his death and resurrection.

The final three verses of John 2:12-25 reveal Jesus' perception into the hearts and minds of those who believed in him and shows us Jesus' integrity. At this point, their faith was untested and untrustworthy. Jesus kept his mind and heart to himself and did not place his hope or optimism in the easy-come-by faith of those who were believing in his signs. Jesus was not selfishly ambitious like the Jews and was not out for the attention and praise from others.

## **THINK THROUGH THE ISSUES**

As the Beloved Disciple will continue to demonstrate in his gospel, religion has a tendency to blind people from the weaknesses and sins within their religious tradition. Many of us would do well to evaluate our own traditions afresh not only through the lens of the Bible, but also with the help of those who have maintained their focus on the person of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection. Perhaps when we challenge ourselves with a continual reading of the Bible and interaction with other faithful Christian traditions, we will find ourselves increasingly faithful in the eyes of Jesus Christ instead of having prostituted our faith for riches and selfish ambition.

### **Issue: Maintaining a Faithful and Fresh Focus on Jesus and His Gospel**

1. Which Christian tradition was your family a part of? What are your opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the particular expression of this tradition?
2. How much did your tradition focus on the person of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection?
3. If you have had the opportunity to participate in various churches within a tradition or that have belonged to different traditions, what are some strengths of these churches and traditions? What are some of their weaknesses?
4. If you were to simply evaluate yourself and your family, what are your weaknesses and strengths when evaluated in light of the Bible? How well do you maintain a focus on Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection as something that you continue to believe in on a daily basis?





# **DINNER TABLE DISCUSSION GUIDE**

## **MEAL #1: THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD IN ISRAEL**

Read Exodus 40:34-38 and 1 Kings 8:1-11

After reading these passages, talk to your kids about what it must have been like to have the very presence of God existing in a tent or temple close to where you lived. Ask them how that would make them feel about their fears, about whether there was going to be enough food, or whether or not they would be safe from their enemies, or if that would give them a greater sense of God's presence when they were doing something wrong. Spend some time simply talking about God living close to you.

## **MEAL #2: THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD NOW**

Read John 1:29-34; Ephesians 1:13

Definition – Baptize: to dip; to immerse into

This passage teaches that Jesus would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit. Talk to your family about what it means to be dipped into and sealed by the Holy Spirit. Talk about the truth that God now lives in the hearts of people who believe in Jesus the Son of God. Talk about the issues from the night before. What does it mean that God lives inside of us?

## **MEAL #3: YOUR FAMILY'S CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

Tell the stories of your family's Christian tradition. Do you know the first Christian generation in your family? Did your family belong to a different Christian tradition than the one it is in now? Was your family once Catholic, or Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox, or Fundamentalist, or Evangelical? If so, why did you switch?

## **MEAL #4: YOUR CURRENT CHURCH**

Read John 2:12-25

Talk your children through this passage and explain why Jesus upset the vendors. Discuss why you selected to participate in your current church. Use the following questions.

1. Why do you think we are at the church we are?
2. What do you like about our church?
3. What do you think Jesus likes to see in his people and his churches?

## **FAMILY PRAYERS**

# SERMON NOTES

1. Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, Continuum, 1996.
2. Küng, 278-280.
3. Küng, 517-522.
4. Küng, 644-649.
5. Nancey Murphey, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, Trinity Press International, 1996, 23.
6. Küng, 717.

