

‘DEEP CHANGE OR SLOW DEATH’

Johannine Critique and Ignatian Resolution

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‘Deep change or slow death’ has been adopted by writers on both Christian spirituality and church leadership. This paper suggests that the Gospel according to John sets out an understanding of death and its relationship to change which is markedly different from the ‘deep change’ paradigm. It further suggests that the re-appropriation of a traditional Christian spirituality, that of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, offers the possibility of achieving the desired outcomes of ‘deep change’ within a Christian framework.

IT MAY HAVE taken some time, but the incorporation of management studies into church life and practice is increasingly accepted: an increasing array of resources is available for those interested in the field.¹ Part of this cross-disciplinary fertilisation includes the writing of Robert E. Quinn, the Margaret Elliott Tracey professor at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business. His book *Deep Change* has become increasingly influential not least because of the maxim, ‘deep change or slow death’.² It describes the significant degree of change which institutions and individuals may need to undergo to avert decline or stagnation:

The process of deep change differs from incremental change in that it requires new ways of thinking and behaving. It is change that is major in scope, discontinuous with the past and generally irreversible. The deep change effort distorts existing patterns of action and involves taking risks. Deep change means surrendering control.³

Quinn’s theories have been appropriated by writers on psychology,⁴ and found its way into discussions about leadership within the church, at both personal⁵ and institutional⁶ levels. Yet it may be worth pausing to reflect on whether the phrase, although

initially enticing, may actually be at odds with Christian thinking, and promote a different set of values. While some argue that there is a great correspondence between the theories of modern business and church practice, this cannot be simply assumed in every case.⁷ Work is needed to ensure that the gap between the worlds of church and business is bridged effectively.⁸ The adoption of phrases or terms from non-Christian traditions is no novelty (we need only think of the patristic and medieval use of Platonic and Aristotelian categories), but history shows that they can distort what they are meant to explicate: for some, the use of Platonic categories led to a distortion of the gospel.⁹

‘Deep change or slow death’ raises precisely such issues in considering the applicability of management theory. Whilst neither disputing the need for change, nor, indeed, change at a significant or deep level in both individual and institutional behaviour, the phrase itself raises issues which are contrary to those found in a core Christian text, namely the Gospel according to John. For ‘deep change or slow death’, by its own internal logic, embraces three claims: first, that death may be avoided, second, that death is not desirable, and, third, that change and death are

mutually exclusive. The adjectives, after all, serve only to reinforce a basic choice: change or die. The hope of avoiding death through change panders to a long-held Christian tendency,¹⁰ with the added irony that this occurs within a faith which claims that death is not an end (e.g., Romans 8:38-39). The maxim may serve to perpetuate rather than eradicate such a false hope. A study of John offers an alternative configuration. of change and death.

John and the Inevitability of Death

Whilst ‘Deep change or slow death’ implies that death may be avoided (by change), John has no truck with such ideas, stressing the inevitability of death as a physiological process. Four episodes in the narrative support this claim. The first of these comes from the controversy in the Temple at the feast of Booths.¹¹ The others come from more eirenic narratives, often with those identified as disciples; the Lazarus narrative (John 11:1-44) and two from the epilogue (John 21): the exchanges with Peter (21:15-19) and the Beloved Disciple (21:20-24).

In John 8:21, 24, at the beginning of an angry exchange, Jesus argues with his opponents that they will die in their sin. In so doing, he is challenging the fullness of their faith and practice, and suggesting that it is inadequate. The exchange which follows is hyped up by the polemic style of the day.¹² The exchange shows that even the paragons of faith are subject to the inevitability of death. Jesus uses the question of descent, citing his opponents’ reference to Abraham as their spiritual and physical ancestor (8:39-47). Jesus adds a further identification, bitterly arguing that their true ancestor is the devil (8:44).¹³ However, the sting is in the tail. Even if their claim to be descendants of Abraham is conceded by Jesus (8:37. 56), their death would still be inevitable. For in John 8:53, the facts are put bluntly by the opponents themselves: ‘Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died.’ In attempting to remind Jesus of his own susceptibility to death,¹⁴ a



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point which he would not argue (3:14), they have unwittingly pointed to their own mortality. By their own admission, Jesus’ opponents, who cannot claim to be superior to ancestors like the patriarchs and prophets, given that this is precisely the charge they are bringing against Jesus,¹⁵ must concede that they too will die.¹⁶ The claim that Abraham saw Jesus’ day does not soften what is going on by referring to his post-mortem existence: the passage may have the sense of foreseeing, anticipating, or being given a vision before death.¹⁷

The second, and most detailed discussion is found in John 11 which recounts the raising of Lazarus, and a number of significant dialogues. These touch on the place of death. The first would seem to imply that death is illusory but this is not so. Death is neither an end, nor dissolution (11:4); rather it leads to God’s glory. The verse does not say that death is avoidable.

The dialogue with the disciples, as Jesus prepares to travel, stresses the reality of death: the language of sleep is a euphemism¹⁸, death is a fact (11:13-14).¹⁹ The dialogue with Martha continues to explore the theme that death may be avoided: she thinks that the presence of Jesus, a known healer, would have prevented her brother’s death (11:21).²⁰ Jesus’ reply does not address this hope, but turns the focus to resurrection: that death is not an end, but is followed by a further stage. This question is repeated in the dialogue with Mary (11:32).²¹

The earlier answer is not repeated. Instead, Jesus asks to be taken to the tomb (11:35). The pious hope that would deny death is countered

by the literal, physical reality. The conversation with Martha at the tomb will re-iterate this: he has been in there for four days- and stinks (11:39).²² Like it or not, social niceties force Martha to acknowledge verbally the reality of her brother's death.

The theme of denial is continued in the dialogue with the Jews, but now with a critical edge (11:37).²³ Both the conversation with Mary and that with the Jews provoke strong emotional responses from Jesus (11:33, 38).²⁴ While traditionally these responses have been taken to indicate Jesus' grief, something else is more likely to be going on. Jesus, after all, has already stated that death is not as people usually understand (11:4), but for the glory of God²⁵, and the actions to come will confirm this (11:41-44). It makes no sense, given Jesus' awareness and understanding of what is going on, for him to weep for Lazarus in the conventional way of a mourner.²⁶ On the other hand, it does make complete sense for him to be greatly disturbed in the sense of being increasingly frustrated by a battery of complaints by those who hope to deny the reality of death (and somehow connect this to his absence),²⁷ all of which indicates a lack of right faith.²⁸ It is also possible that John continues to stress the inevitability of death through his lack of interest in the resuscitated Lazarus (only 12:9-10), but this may read too much into the silence.

Whilst Maurice Casey has argued that the paucity of information about the post-mortem Lazarus indicates that the story is fiction²⁹, a similar lack of interest in those resuscitated is found across the Synoptic accounts (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43; Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 7:11-17, 8: 40-3, 49-56; also John 4:46-54). This has a ready explanation: too much interest in them might have placed a false emphasis on the nature of post-mortem existence. This would obviously have appealed to critics who would have been able to point to the absence of a resuscitated Jesus or resuscitated Christians to claim the falsity of Christian claims to new life. It would be much easier to criticise

the real absence of a physically resuscitated Jesus or Christian on earth than the existence of a risen Christ or Christian in the heavenly realm.

The third account which stresses the inevitability of death concerns Peter: the saying pronounced in 21:15-19 is presented as a prophecy about Peter's martyrdom.³⁰ Even if the fourth gospel is given an early date,³¹ this serves as a reminder to John's audience of their own mortality based on their awareness of Peter's fate: the disciple shares the fate of the master.³²

This view is re-inforced by the fourth passage (21:20-24). This involves Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, still considered by many to be the source, and possibly the editor or writer, of the gospel³³. The passage records a tradition which circulated within Christian circles connected with the gospel, namely, that the Beloved Disciple would not die (21:23). The text presents the writer as denying this account, and, in so doing, re-iterating the inevitability of his own death, unless preceded by the eschatological coming of Jesus (21:23).³⁴ Should that coming be delayed, the death of the Beloved Disciple in no way indicates any failure of God's plan.³⁵

These episodes serve to illustrate the inevitability of death as a physiological fact. As such, they indicate that approaches to life and behaviour which would claim to avoid death are alien to John. The astute reader will note that so far the discussion has not touched on the death of Jesus. John will stress the certainty or reality of Jesus' death, quite likely as a response to Docetic interpretations of his life and death³⁶, but takes great pains to emphasise that Jesus' death is something which he chooses to accept. His death is better explored for what it reveals about the desirability of death.

John and the Desirability of Death

'Deep change or slow death' makes it very clear that death is something to be avoided: it gives every impression of making this an ab-

solute value. John, on the other hand, takes a very different view of death in regard to Jesus. If Jesus is truly human, it is inevitable that he will die: this claim is even made by those who claim that his tomb has been found, in Palestine, RozaBal in India, or Shingô in Japan. However, John makes it clear that Jesus is no puppet, the powerless victim of either circumstance or some theological necessity. John’s Jesus is always in control of his own destiny (6:15; 7:8; 8:20, 59; 10:39; 12:27; 13:27; 16:32; 17:1; 18:11, 36; 19:11).

Because of this we may say that Jesus desires death, not in the sense of actively seeking it, but in allowing himself to die. What makes him do this is his love for, and obedience to, the Father. These provide the absolutes in John’s gospel, and death is relativised. Death is desirable to the extent that it is the way in which God may be obeyed, and love lived out in that obedience. In ethical terms, we might say that doing the Father’s will is the absolute and makes death into an *adiaphora*, something which has no intrinsic value, good or bad, in itself. This means that death is not to be sought in its own right as a good, or avoided as an evil.

This attitude is most clearly seen in the parable of the grain of wheat (12:24-26). Although this is likely a proverb³⁷, it is also presented as an example of *parrhesia* (frank speech) introduced by the phrase, ‘Very truly, I tell you’ (12:24 NRSV). Frank speech, stripped of rhetorical flourishes, expresses core beliefs, truths stripped of all adornments³⁸. The nature of Hebrew *mashal*, which includes proverbs, also suggests it be read as a commentary on the action around it³⁹: Jesus is talking of what will befall himself and his followers,⁴⁰ not just making a general utterance. Death becomes not only necessary,⁴¹ but desirable because of its linked behaviour (love—3:16) and consequences (eternal life—3:16, 15:25).⁴² Given that John’s gospel invites both the historical disciples and its audience to enter into a right relationship with God by imitation of Jesus’ example, death is something

which is not to be avoided, but which is desirable in the right circumstances, or with the right motivation. That motivation is not the instinct of the individual for self-preservation, but the glorifying of the Father.

John, Change and Death

‘Deep change or slow death’ views change and death as mutually exclusive. John’s Gospel links change and death intimately. Instead of death as disaster, it is the point at which change becomes truly transformative and life-giving. Nowhere is this clearer than in John’s account of Jesus’ death. Being ‘raised up’ embraces both the raising of crucifixion and glorification⁴³: it is a life giving event which brings salvation (3:14-16).⁴⁴ In John, death, resurrection, ascension and giving of the Spirit (Pentecost) all are contained proleptically within the Crucifixion: ‘it is finished’ (19:30-NRSV) is not a cry of despair or resignation, but of triumph⁴⁵, even of fulfilment⁴⁶. Jesus does not just die on the Cross: ‘gave up his spirit’ (19:30—NRSV) implies death, but also means ‘passed on his Spirit’⁴⁷. Such dying, in conformity to the Father’s will, gives life to others as well as self. In John’s gospel we are given a picture of change and transformation in which death is the gateway to life, that is, eternal life (3:15), something considered superior to this level of existence.

The later example of Peter (21:15-19) provides a reminder, in the starkest sense, that the way of the Messiah is also the way of the disciple. But there is an additional outcome. While the one who dies in this way gains eternal life, death also contributes to the glorifying of the Father (17:1-5).

‘Glorifying’ is one of those church-y words which may be used without really considering what it means: it implies the recognition and acknowledgement of God’s rightful place in relation to the world, and living out the respect that it entails in obedience to both his plans and his nature. This marks a further difference from ‘slow death or deep change’

whose aims and objectives do not necessarily contain this dimension of glorifying another (to use the Johannine terminology), but are concerned solely with the results achieved by the one who is changing: there is nothing to prevent ‘deep change’ occurring in a very different worldview or context, even a theological vacuum. This is impossible in the Johannine dispensation which must be played out in the context of the relationships made between the Father, Christ, the Spirit and the disciple.

In contrast to ‘deep change or slow death’ John offers a picture in which ‘Change is death is life’. It is completely at odds with the conventional wisdom of the world, but profoundly Christocentric. It further embraces the consequence of glorifying another (God) as an objective rather than one’s own continued existence or presence, a factor which is absent from the deep change paradigm. John puts forward a teleology with a markedly different emphasis.

Moving Beyond ‘Deep Change’

If ‘deep change’, or its equivalent, is to be effected, the Johannine dispensation indicates that it needs to be done *through* death, rather than by avoiding it.

It is appropriate at this point to note a concern voiced many years ago by Thomas C. Oden in a study of pastoral care: he found that modern writing had come to dominate the field, and that the riches of Christian pastoral tradition had been almost completely discarded⁴⁸. Following his lead, it is worth asking if there are older Christian practices which might allow the goal of deep change without the avoidance of death.

A study of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, *The Path of Interior Knowledge* by Parmananda R. Divarkar, suggests that there is indeed such a resource⁴⁹. The value of his study lies in its interpretation of the exercises in light of modern psychology. *The Path* also, and this is significant for our

concerns, includes much reflection on John and particularly the implications of the Farewell Discourses (13:1- 17:26) for discipleship⁵⁰. Divarkar is not alone in finding parallels between John and Ignatius. David Stanley notes that both

...make the startling pledge of leading the believer to the life-giving experience of intimacy with the tri-personal God through the contemplation of selected narratives of the life of Jesus.⁵¹

Indeed, they share a desire to ‘seek the will of God’, a phrase found only in John 5:30 in the whole New Testament.⁵²

As the First Annotation puts it, The *Exercises* are meant to guide the exercitant:

...to rid oneself of all inordinate affections, and being so rid to seek and find the divine will in the ordering of one’s life for the salvation of the soul.⁵³

Divarkar offers a translation of this into language and sentiments more appropriate to our own time:

...becoming aware of a deeper level of reality in oneself and of God’s presence and activity there, responding totally at that level, establishing oneself in that openness of attitude to God after the pattern of Christ, letting that openness permeate the whole of oneself, till one is wholly responsive to the whole reality of God- to God as he really is.⁵⁴

Thus the *Exercises* share much with ‘deep change’: an identification of, and break with, old behaviour, radical change, and surrender to God’s will. However, where ‘deep change’ in its reduced form is necessarily self-centred and has no further considerations, the *Exercises* offer a theocentric approach to change, focussed on the other, not the self: it is the glorifying of God which is paramount. They offer an approach which allow the exercitant to focus on this end, by identifying her/his own inordinate attachments, a term which embraces

...not just sinful attachments but also certain rigidities of character, and a whole range of inhibitions and narrow ideas, including theological prejudices, that come in the way of a total

openness to reality.⁵⁵

However, rejecting inordinate attachment is not simply to seek the opposite, but rather 'an attachment liberated from the power of things, from the disorder introduced by their power'.⁵⁶ The exercitant is intended to develop behaviour which intentionally focusses on the differences between personal wishes and preferences, and those of God, and opt for the latter. The First Annotation and the Meditation on the Two Standards⁵⁷ are pivotal in this regard. The Two Standards demands significant change in attitude, priorities and orientation⁵⁸, or, in more traditional language, conversion, intended to bring the exercitant's priorities into line with those of God:

Conversion in us means moving out of, or being torn out of one mind-set and being placed in another; the first is that of fallen human-ness, the second is divine.⁵⁹

The potential of the *Exercises* is not limited to effecting change in individual participants in directed retreats. The 18th, 19th and 20th Annotations⁶⁰ offer flexibility in engaging with the Exercises: the 19th offers the possibility of this being done in everyday life, not just the confines of a structured retreat.⁶¹ The impact of Ignatius' thinking is not, however, limited just to individual spirituality.⁶² A number of writers explore the potential for this in public life: Elizabeth Liebert sets out a process for social discernment within postmodern contexts,⁶³ Elinor Shea the application of the *Exercises* to social consciousness,⁶⁴ John Veltri the social and com-

munal dimensions of the 1st Annotation,⁶⁵ and Gerard W. Hughes a fictional depiction of the *Exercises* in an everyday group setting.⁶⁶ The *Exercises* offer the possibility of change in individual, corporate and institutional life.

The net effect, which in Divarkar's presentation focusses on the events around Jesus' death, are essentially identical to those envisioned by 'deep change' in breaking with addictive, damaging and compulsive behaviours to provoke the radical transformation of both individuals or institutions. Both are asked to break from their inordinate attachments in their behaviour. Planning and praxis are re-orientated towards the glorifying of God, not just the potential benefit to the individual or the institution—benefits which may remain ultimately self-serving. Indeed, they demand that personal gain or preference be put aside. It is worth asking whether the potentially self-centred teleology of 'deep change or slow death' might not ultimately undermine its own programme, as well as whether its avoidance of death is a significant misdirection.

Instead of changing to avoid death, change comes by embracing death, dying to self and being transformed by the process. Such views find a rich and unique expression in the parable of the grain of wheat (John 12:24):

Following Jesus in death in order to share also in his victory and his perfection sets the Christian message apart from all myth.⁶⁷

To which we might add, 'even that of deep change'.

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¹⁰ Dottie Escobedo-Frank & Rudy Rasmus, *Jesus Insurgency: The Church Revolution from the Edge* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011).

¹¹ This timing assumes that the passage of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53-8:11) is a later interpolation which interrupts the continuity of 7:1-8:59, see Brant, *John*, 141-42, Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 507-08. Unqualified numbers in the main text refer to the Gospel according to John.

¹² Luke T. Johnson, 'The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/3 (1989), 419-441.

¹³ Note that the rhetorical rather than literal claim of such a remark must be balanced with Jesus' later identification of his opponents as children of Abraham (8:56), thus Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 417. Brant, *John*, 148 cites a translation which offers 'our father Abraham', but the SBL NGT text reads *ho patēr humōn* (your father) with no reference to manuscript variants.

¹⁴ Jo-Ann A Brant, *John* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 147.

¹⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Black's New Testament Commentaries, London: Continuum, 2005), 275 For the role of ancestry and ancestors in defining honour and status, see Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: WJKP, 1998), 15-16, 97-99.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Bishop Brian Farran, the retired bishop of the Anglican Diocese on Newcastle, for pointing out the significance of John 8 to the discussion of 'deep change or slow death', though he would reach very different conclusions about the value of 'deep change or slow death' from the reading presented within these pages.

¹⁷ Brant, *John*, 148. The idea of an immortal vision before death is seen in Apoc. Abr. 21:3-29:21. Morris, *The Gospel*, 417-18 notes a similar variety of explanations, but concludes that the text itself does not point to any one in particular.

¹⁸ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, Volume 2* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 840-41.

¹⁹ Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John Volume 2: Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 486.

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²⁶ Moloney, *The Gospel*, 331.

²⁷ Moloney, *The Gospel*, 340-41 has argued convincingly for this interpretation which indicates frustration rather than grief.

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³² Keener, *The Gospel*, 1238.

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³⁵ Von Wahlde, *The Gospel*, 906.

³⁶ Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

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³⁸ Brant, *John*, 134.

³⁹ John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1985), 8-20; David M. Stanley, ‘I Encountered God’: *The Spiritual Exercises with the Gospel of Saint John* (2nd Ed., St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Resources, 1986), 183.

⁴⁰ Keener, *The Gospel*, 873.

⁴¹ Brant, *John*, 192-93; Brown, *The Gospel*, 475.

⁴² Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel According to John Volume 1: I-XII* (Anchor Bible, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988-repr), 475.

⁴³ Brown, *The Gospel*, 146.

⁴⁴ Keener, *The Gospel*, 563; Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science*, 85.

⁴⁵ Keener, *The Gospel*, 1147; Moloney, *The Gospel*, 508.

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⁵⁰ Divarkar, *The Path*, 42-43, 60-61, 82-87, 104-105, 108-109, 126-129.

⁵¹ Stanley, ‘I Encountered God’, 5.

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⁶² Elizabeth Liebert, (#1) *Contemplative Listening and Spiritual Conversation*, San Francisco Theological Seminary/ Faculty Academic Resources. Available at: http://sfts.edu/faculty/liebert/essays/contemplative_listening.asp (Accessed 27 December 2012).

⁶³ Elizabeth Liebert, ‘Discernment for our Times: A Practice with Post-modern Implications’, *Studies in Spirituality* 18 (2008), 333-55.

⁶⁴ Elinor Shea, ‘Spiritual Direction and Social Consciousness’ in Philip Sheldrake (ed), *The Way of Ignatius Loyola* (London: SPCK, 1991), 203-15.

⁶⁵ Veltri, *Orientations*, 77-78.

⁶⁶ Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 143-45.

⁶⁷ Schnackenburg, *The Gospel*, 386; see also Stanley, ‘I Encountered God’, 183.