

What's in a Full Stop?

John 7:37-39 ³⁷ On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, ³⁸ 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.’” ³⁹ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive. (NRSV)

Those of you who know me well will know that I love teasing out hidden meanings from verses in Scripture that appear at first sight to offer a single, simple interpretation. I was once asked why I had five or six commentaries on **John’s Gospel**. I explained that it was partly because my competence in literary analysis lagged far behind what I’d learned from my study of history, and partly because John’s Gospel contains so many ‘layers’ as it were, which allow us to read his narrative on different levels and gain different spiritual insights each time we approach an ostensibly familiar passage. In other words, John is full of surprises!

One such example which I’ve found intriguing is the passage I’ve cited above – especially verse 38. If you’ve access to different translations (and I can recommend *Bible Gateway* as a very useful tool for Bible Study – it’s also free online!) then you will notice a very small variation. Some translations have the full stop after the word ‘drink’; others leave it out – and the sense of what Jesus is saying is changed. The English translation of the Greek is as follows:

a) **Without the full stop**, the verse reads thus:

“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me; whoever believes in me, let him drink, as scripture says, ‘Streams of living water will flow from within Him.’”

This suggests that the streams of living water will flow out from **Jesus himself**, which reminds us perhaps of the water that flowed from our Lord’s side on the Cross. You may well be thinking of that old hymn by Robert Robinson: *Come thou fount of every blessing (Singing the Faith 494)* which speaks of the blessing which the believer receives on coming to Christ, the provider of living water.

Your thoughts might also have turned to an earlier story in Chapter 4 of John’s Gospel where Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman at the well, because in verse 10 we find him saying to her (about himself) “*he would have given you living water*”.

b) **With the full stop** in verse 38 however, we have a more ‘existential’ interpretation, because it now reads slightly differently, i.e.

“If anyone who is thirsty, let him come to me; whoever believes in me, let him drink. As scripture says, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

This now suggests that the streams of living water will flow out from the **believer** – that communion with Christ (being “*in Christ*” as Paul so often puts it), results in the awakening of prevenient grace within the heart of the individual – allowing God’s Spirit to penetrate us and work within and through us.

Also, if you look at John 4:14, Jesus says that “*the water that I shall give will become in **them** a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*”

Which is the right version, and – more importantly – does it actually matter?

The commentators seem to be just about equally divided on the issue, and you'll know that I'm one of those people who like to have his cake and eat it! So, my answer to the first question (which is the right version?) is that "I don't know", and to the 2nd (does it matter?) is an emphatic "Yes".

I say this – and this is the reason for my writing about this subject in this letter to you – is that it reminds us that John's Gospel often contains a number of levels of meaning, and that we would be foolish to take a simplistic, one-dimensional approach to his writing, or that of any other author in the Bible, for that matter. This is why I could never be a literalist!

Both interpretations speak to us of wonderful truths. We are all invited to come to Jesus and drink, to find in him the source of living water. He is not just the pattern for our own living; he is the 'very source of our new day'. But when we do have faith in Christ, the slow but sure process of transformation (Wesley called it 'sanctification') takes place. By God's grace we ourselves can experience the life-giving power of his Spirit helping us to grow ever closer to God. Perhaps **Jesus himself** meant us to understand living water in *both* senses: that he is the fount and source of all life, but that by being 'in him' eternal life and love can spring up within each one of us.

At least one can never say that Bible study is ever dull! But let **Charles Wesley** have the last word, because in his hymn *Jesu, lover of my soul* (StF 355), he manages to combine *both* senses of this verse, which has puzzled so many Christians over the centuries. The last four lines of the last verse of this hymn read as follows:

Thou of life the fountain art;	
freely let me take of thee;	(version a: Christ the source)
spring thou up within my heart,	
rise to all eternity.	(version b: the Spirit within us)

What a genius!

A Prayer: Loving God, we thank you that you have revealed yourself – and are constantly revealing yourself – through the passages we read in Scripture. Help us always to have open hearts and mind as we study your Word, so that in its pages we may discover more of the truth and beauty of our blessed Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every blessing to you all,

Barrie Tabraham

Resources/Good News

A Justice-Seeking Church?

What does it mean to be part of a justice-seeking church today? The Methodist Church has agreed a new framework to help churches seeking to act justly in their communities and the wider world. This film describes how Methodist Principles, Priorities and Practices for justice can help us to be more focused, effective and God-focused in our justice-seeking.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZ5WfzAkiYY>