

# *Expository Articles*

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## *John 10:22–30*

**T**HE FIRST TIME I heard the question, I was amused, irritated, and stimulated all at the same time. “Pastor, how much are the dues to belong to your church?” It was amusing to hear the question put so wrongly. It was irritating to hear Christian commitment reduced to the category of “dues.” Yet, it was a provocative question. What is required of me to belong? The question poses the issues of what it is that is expected of Christians and expresses the fundamental human desire to “belong.” As irritating as the question was, as wrong as it is, it is the question *I* have asked: What must I do, God, to belong?

Oddly enough, our text pivots around the issues so naïvely raised in the question—“dues” and “belonging.” The text addresses how and why we believe and how we become related to something of ultimate value. The centrality of these questions becomes clearer when we examine the structure and movement of the passage in its context. Having done so, we can turn to the significance of the passage for “the dues for belonging.”

John 10:22–30 is part of the major unit 7:1—10:42 which describes the conflict and opposition with which Jesus was met in Jerusalem. The opposition increases ceaselessly from the end of chapter 6 to the climactic plan to take Jesus’ life (11:45–57). Chapter 9 dramatically portrays the blindness of the religious establishment. The metaphors of 10:1–21 depict the role of Jesus in relationship to those who usurp that distinctive role. 10:22–42 makes explicit the polemic implied in those metaphors. The raising of Lazarus in chapter 11 serves as the offense that the religious establishment cannot bear and occasions the plot on Jesus’ life. The passage, 10:22–30, is strategically positioned at the center of the tidal wave of opposition.

The specific setting for the passage is stated in verses 22–23 which provide the time and place of the subsequent discussion, as well as the tone of the entire pericope. It is a dramatic tone, for Jesus is found in the heart of the opposition to him and his ministry—the temple in Jerusalem (cf. 7:1). It is also an ironic tone, for this One who is to replace the temple (2:19–22) walks within it on the very occasion of the celebration of its rededication. As the scene begins, the atmosphere is tense with ironic circumstance.

The scene itself is comprised of two parts: the request made of Jesus (v. 24) and his response (vs. 25–30). The irony of the request resides in the fact that it expresses more than the inquirers know. Jesus is indeed the Christ but far more. The question implied in their request is very much like the question, “What are the dues to belong?” It is both right and wrong. It is right, for it is indeed Jesus’ identity which is the crucial question around which all else revolves. Yet it is wrong since it has been answered again and again—it ought not need to be asked. Moreover, it is wrong because the identity of Jesus cannot be contained within the title, Christ. Ironically the wrong question is the right question.

The second part of the passage (vs. 25–30) is Jesus’ response to the demand made of him. Like most of his responses to questions and demands in the Fourth Gospel, this one is not really a response at all and bursts the seams of the inquiry. Similarly, the setting and the situation posed by verses 22–24 are not adequate to contain the words of Jesus. His response explodes beyond the confines of the narrative setting, as if to say that settings can no more contain this One sent from God than titles can capture his identity.

Within the response to the demand made of Jesus there are two interrelated movements. The first harshly but accurately describes the reality of the unbelief of those who would at least pretend to be genuinely seeking to know Jesus’ identity. The content and structure of verses 25–26 drive home the actuality of the stubbornness of human unbelief:

*I told you who I was . . . and you do not believe.*

*I do the Father’s work . . . and you do not believe.*

Words and deeds have answered the question of who Jesus is, but they have not evoked faith. The request for clarity, then, is a smoke screen, a pretense for an unwillingness and/or inability to accept the answer. “Tell us plainly” (v. 24) can only mean “Take away the necessity of faith!”

The second and larger part of the response of Jesus focuses on belief. There is, then, a contrast in the passage between unbelievers and believers. The pivotal clause between the two parts of the contrast is “because you do not belong to my sheep” (v. 26). The “non-sheep” provide the occasion to describe the sheep and in particular their “dues” and their “belonging.” Verses 27–30 are an intricate description of what is required of those who would align themselves with Jesus and what that means in terms of their belonging. It may be helpful to see the strategy of the verses in this way:

<i>What the sheep do:</i>	<i>What Jesus does:</i>	<i>What God does:</i>
They hear.	I know them.	
They follow.	I give them eternal life.	

No one snatches them away.

God gives them to Jesus.  
No one can snatch them  
away from God.

Verses 27–28 describe the responsibilities of the sheep interlaced with those of Jesus. Verse 29 climaxes this description of responsibility with the role of God in the creation of the faith of the sheep. As if to stress the incomparable role of God in the process of bringing humans to faith and holding them secure, the divine responsibility is set off from that of the sheep and Jesus. While the role of Jesus and the sheep are interwoven with each other, the role of God (v. 29) stands by itself.

The climax of the passage comes in verse 30, which at once concludes the discussion and brings closure to the topic raised by the request of Jesus in verse 24. Because Jesus gives his sheep eternal life and has the power to hold them against the efforts of others to snatch them away, he is “one” with the Father, both doing what only God can do (giving eternal life) and having the power reserved for God alone (notice the parallelism of vs. 28*b* and 29*b*). Hence, belonging to Jesus as one of his sheep is belonging to God. Yet the verse also corrects the concern of those in verse 24, who want to know if Jesus is the Christ. He is more than the Christ. His identity is found not in any traditional messianic title but in a unique, unparalleled relationship with God. The response to the request posed in verse 24 is Jesus’ claim of oneness with God. That identity is transparent to the sheep through Jesus’ words and deeds, but it remains concealed from those who are not his sheep.

In form the passage resembles the pronouncement stories of the Synoptic Gospels in which someone comes to Jesus, raises a question or problem, and Jesus (sometimes after a short dialogue) issues a definitive declaration on the matter (e.g., Mark 2:23–28). The Johannine form, however, concentrates the attention of the reader almost exclusively on the words of Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus is made to speak at length not on the explicit issue raised by the initiators of the conversation but exclusively on belief and his own identity. No human query distracts the Johannine Jesus from the central theme of this Gospel—who Jesus is and what the proper response to him is.

The significance of this typically Johannine discourse resides in our strange question, “What dues are required for me to belong?” The *dues* expected of the Christian involve the mystery of faith. One might suppose that the dues are faith—belief in Jesus. That is, however, a simplification which misses an essential point of the passage. Faith cannot be reduced to what one does as one’s “dues” to become aligned with Jesus. More is

involved and less is involved. Nor are the dues comprised of a theological inquisitiveness that asks even the right question, "Are you the Christ?"

The dues are paid, Jesus suggests, by God's act, not ours. The faith response roots in what God does in making us sheep and "giving" us to Christ. It is not human will, trust, or determination which finally pays what is required. It is rather the divine activity which does what we cannot be asked to do. Even the act of belief itself is done for us.

The Johannine view that faith or unbelief is predetermined by one's "affiliation" is difficult for the contemporary Christian. We do not like to think that the capacity to believe is really beyond our control. In this sense, the message of the text stands over against us, challenging our pre-suppositions and inviting some clever manipulation which will force a more palatable sense out of the words. Still, this discomfiting message may be an important corrective to a radical and reductionistic volunteerism. Perhaps it protects the mysterious, transcendent quality of faith from being trivialized into human choice (as if faith were a preference, much like one chooses soup instead of salad out of personal preference). This is particularly relevant to the popular American mentality of today, for we are a people who assume that, whatever the problem, we can *do* something to correct it. Jesus assaults the fortifications of American activism.

So, is nothing required of us? There is a human dimension to the responsibility for faith, but the dues are simply to "hear" and "follow." We are to recognize the voice of the Shepherd, whose sheep we are and to allow Him to lead us. That is to say, our due is *to know who we are as a result of what God has already done for us*. Our identity has been shaped by the divine act; we are then to be who we are. The human side of the faith act is accepting who we have become by virtue of God's act. We cannot pay the dues, for they have been paid; but we must accept that fact.

The *belonging* is God's ownership of us. We are God's sheep, irrevocably bound to the divine and held there by a power too great for any force which might threaten to grapple us out of the divine grasp. We belong to God! That means that our identity is determined—we are Christ's sheep. We are known—our lives are no longer private and secret, for belonging in this case means being known. We now have a quality of life ("eternal life") that survives all that threatens us, including death.

Participation in Christ's flock provides safety, a kind of divine "security system." The sheep are secure against all those powers which are at work to seduce them away from the divine flock. God is greater than those powers of either an exterior, social or an internal, individual kind. The attraction of the other gods cannot fracture the flock. It is interesting, however, that while the Gospel of John affirms God's persistent hold on the believer, it

never denies that the believer can self-abort from the safety of the flock (cf. 6:66).

“Pastor, how much are the dues to belong . . .?” The question poses two significant features of human nature, or at least of current American mentality. The first is the longing to belong. We need to feel ourselves part of a community of others. There is a compulsion in us to know we are attached to that which gives us significance and meaning. Isolation feels like nothingness. There is strength in numbers, but more importantly there is meaning and identity. If nothing else, we can say we are “Lutherans,” “Presbyterians,” “Lions,” “Masons,” or at least “Packers” fans. Belonging wards off the loneliness we so much dread and the void of identity which so much haunts us.

Yet it is also important to us that we pay the dues to belong. Belonging is an achievement which needs to be credited to our own efforts. Otherwise, it empties us of that profound sense of having accomplished something. Belonging, without feeling that it is gained by our own efforts, is strangely attractive but utterly disorienting. It smashes our view of ourselves as it accords us a strikingly different identity.

The Johannine Jesus offers us the sense of belonging for which we so yearn and with it a sense of identity. He offers us a relationship with the Ultimate within the community of Christ’s flock, but he does not offer it on *our* terms. The offer comes without the opportunity for us to achieve it. It comes “prepaid.” The grace of God fulfills our basic human longing, but that extravagant graciousness goes further than we might desire. It deprives us of the chance to “make it on our own.” It is “grace upon grace.”

I cannot recall how I responded to that strange question, “How much are the dues to belong?” I am sure that I did not have the forethought to say what I would like now to have said: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

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## *John 21:1–14*

**T**HE INTERPRETATION of the final chapter of the Fourth Gospel (John) is conditioned by the interpreter’s answer to two basic questions. First, is chapter 21 an appendix added to chapters 1–20 by a later redactor who intended to modify or even correct the theology of the Evangelist? Second, is this chapter intended to be a quasi-literal account of



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