

Interview with Gary Burge

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Gary M. Burge (Ph.D., King's College, Aberdeen University, Scotland) is professor of New Testament at [Wheaton College](#), Wheaton, IL. His experiences and training have made him an expert in the New Testament and the world of the Middle East (see his [full bio](#) on the Wheaton website). In addition to [The NIV Application Commentary: John](#), he is the author of *Who Are God's People in the Middle East?*, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition*, *Interpreting the Gospel of John*, and [The NIV Application Commentary: Letters of John](#).

Zondervan: How and why did you end up writing four books about the Gospel of John?

GB: My original interest in the Gospel of John came while I was a student at Fuller Seminary in the mid-1970s. John's gospel is often viewed as the "beloved gospel" of the church, a story about Christ that is at once simple and yet also profound. One can meditate on it and find incredible spiritual riches—and one can study it and discover that here are insights into Jesus and his context that we would have missed before.

In the early 1980s I wrote a technical volume on John's understanding of the Holy Spirit and later penned a seminarian's introduction to the study of John which is still in print. In the last five years I wrote a commentary on the gospel and a commentary on the letters of John in an effort to bring to the church leader some of the incredible insights into John that scholars take for granted—and which the average person in the church will never hear. The Cana story, the woman at the well, Jesus and the Jewish festivals—each of these bear a meaning that is not at first obvious. And when we discover them and bring them to the church, people become very excited about John's writing. My study of the death and burial of Jesus in John transformed the way I viewed these events, and I dare say that few Christians today have given thought to what really happened here.

Zondervan: What sets the Gospel of John apart from the other three Gospels?

GB: John's gospel is different. Most of its material is not paralleled in the other three Gospels. I think John has selectively built a portrait of Jesus for readers who may already know the basic (synoptic) events in Jesus' life. And because of this he is able to give us a presentation that is incredibly profound. Jesus now speaks in lengthy discourses rather than pithy sayings and parables. Miracles are limited and renamed "signs," inviting us to probe their inner meaning. But above all, Jesus' portrait here is given in contrast to the many festivals and institutions of Judaism—and understanding these is a key to understanding the whole of the Gospel.

Two examples: It is no accident that Jesus feeds the 5000 on Passover and then goes on to interpret his "feeding miracle" in light of Moses' feeding the Israelites in the wilderness. Just knowing the religious context of Passover will unlock the significance of John 6. John also uses cultural traditions from within Judaism that give us clues to Jesus' importance. For instance, when Jesus is anointed in John 12, what is the significance of this for his burial? When Jesus meets Mary in the garden in John 20, what images does this evoke from the rich literature of Judaism? In this commentary I explain these things and once you see them, your reading of this gospel will never be the same.

Zondervan: How was writing for the NIV Application Commentary Series different from your other projects?

GB: This commentary series posed a new challenge for me as a writer. Offering exegesis and background explanations have always been a regular part of my work. But

in this series, we have the teacher/preacher in mind—or at least the reader who wants to ask, What value do these texts have for our generation today? Therefore we outline how one "bridges" an ancient text to the modern world and we go on to give very concrete illustrations of how this can be done successfully. Many, many commentaries offer "application" sections which will be obsolete not long after the book is published. These commentaries offer a method for doing this and guidelines for application which will make it useful for years to come.

Zondervan: What is the key message today's readers can take from John and apply to their own lives?

GB: The key message of this gospel is this: God has entered the world in Jesus Christ, showing his love and grace, and this event has forever impacted humanity history. But in order to do this, God necessarily entered a Jewish cultural context that is quite different than ours. And as students of the Bible, as people living at a distance both culturally and temporally from these original events, we are obligated to work hard to study how the incarnation occurred in the first century in this setting. Hopefully, this commentary will present the wonder of the incarnation with power and offer insight into how first century readers would have understood it.