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Apostolic Church: The Significance of the Sent Community in the Gospel of John

DAVID LERTIS MATSON

Looking the walls of the sanctuary where my family and I regularly worship are twelve elegant, stained glass windows bearing the names of the twelve apostles. On one side toward the back there is the Peter window, with an upside-down cross and a pair of keys, symbolizing Peter's authority and death; next to him the Andrew window, with his familiar X-shaped cross, denoting the particular type of cross upon which he supposedly died. On the other side toward the front there is the Matthew window, with three moneybags prominently displayed, symbolizing the profession of the one-time tax collector; next to him the Thomas window, with its arrow and spear, testifying to the suffering and martyrdom he would subsequently endure. These windows, reflective of both history and legend, Bible and tradition, serve a very useful function in the life of our congregation; they remind us each and every Lord's Day of the "one holy catholic and *apostolic* church."¹

The emphasis placed on the apostles by these windows is certainly in keeping with the prominence given to the apostles in the three Synoptic Gospels. Despite some degree of variation in both order and nomenclature, each of these Gospels lists the names of the Twelve and clearly designates them "apostles" (*apostoloi*), marking them out as envoys possessing a special relationship to Jesus, who personally called them, chose them, and sent them out (Matt 10.1-4; Mark 3.13-19a; Luke 6.12-16; cf. Acts 1.13). That Jesus chose *twelve* in number suggests a rather bold theological claim: the restoration of the twelve tribes by God in the last days.² Moreover, each of these Gospels presents an accompanying commissioning scene in which the apostles are "sent out" by Jesus, thus giving expression to the very meaning of their office (Matt 10.5-42; Mark 6.7-13, 30; Luke 9.1-6,10).

The Gospel of John, by contrast, shows no such interest in a group called the Twelve.³ First, John⁴ never designates *any* disciple an "apostle," reserving his one and only use of the noun for an emissary in general (13.16: "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent [*apostolos*] greater than the one who sent him" [NASB]). The rare occurrence of this word is all the more striking given John's proclivity for the cognate verb *apostellō*, which he uses twenty-eight times in his Gospel.

1. Emphasis mine. This statement is usually attributed to Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, in the latter part of the fourth century. It was also the title of Frederick D. Kershner's Presidential Address to the International Convention of Disciples of Christ in Denver, Colorado, October 16, 1938.

2. For a defense of the historical constitution of the Twelve by Jesus and its eschatological significance, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) Vol 3, 125-97; also E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 98-106. Against the historicity of the Twelve, see most recently Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 199-202.

3. Meier, 134. I am dependent on the insights of Meier for much of the argumentation in this paragraph.

4. I shall use the designation "John" to denote the author of the Fourth Gospel without making any judgment about historical authorship. The Gospel itself (or at least chapter 21) claims to be the product of "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (21.24), but the historical identity of this "Beloved Disciple" (if indeed he is a historical figure) remains an elusive question.

Second, John nowhere bothers to list the names of the twelve apostles; while he certainly knows of the existence of the group of the Twelve (6.67, 70-71; 20.24), their individual identities appear to hold little interest for him. Other important disciples in John—Nathanael, Lazarus, and, most notably, “the disciple whom Jesus loved”—do not belong to the group of the Twelve. Third, except for a passing reference in 6.67, John nowhere presents Jesus as choosing the Twelve nor does Jesus send the Twelve out on a special mission; as John P. Meier observes, in John’s Gospel there is no call of the Twelve, no mission of the Twelve, no miracles performed by the Twelve.⁵

The above observations raise an important question: Is it legitimate even to speak of an apostolate in John? Does John conceive of a group of authorized messengers sent out by Jesus to carry on his mission and work in a unique and special way? Is there a special class of “apostles” distinguished from a larger group of “disciples”? As Raymond E. Brown points out, a special class of apostles is not the primary conception in Johannine ecclesiology; rather John’s Gospel emphasizes *discipleship*, a status enjoyed by all Johannine Christians on an equal footing.⁶ It is the thesis of this essay that while John certainly does not deny the existence of the Twelve, it is the church, the “community of the Beloved Disciple” as a whole (to use Brown’s well-worn phrase⁷) that constitutes the “sent” community of Jesus Christ. This understanding of apostolicity, however, must be interpreted in light of a larger framework of mission that John develops in his Gospel.⁸

THE GOD WHO SENDS

John’s lack of interest in the apostolate should not be mistaken for his lack of interest in the theme of sending as a whole. Indeed, if the way Jesus speaks of God in the Fourth Gospel is any indication of John’s theology proper, God is primarily the Great Sender, the fount and source of all mission. Over and over again the Johannine Jesus refers to God as “he who sent me” or “the Father who sent me.”⁹ God is never the object of the verb “send” (*apostellō, pempō*) in John’s Gospel; rather, God is “the ‘mission center,’ the source from which all missions derive. He alone is the unsent sender.”¹⁰ In the Gospel of John, God stands behind four distinct but interrelated missions. To these we now turn.

JOHN THE BAPTIST IS SENT

The Prologue to John’s Gospel wastes little time in introducing the sending theme: “There was a man *sent* from God, whose name was John” (1.6). Once the Gospel proper begins, John is conscious of his mission from God, for he refers to “the one who sent me” (1.33) and later clarifies to his disciples, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him” (3.28). In distinct contrast to the priests and Levites, who appear in the opening scene of the Gospel as messengers “sent” by the Jerusalem authorities to interrogate John (1.19, 22, 24), John himself is “sent” by God to bear witness to Israel. Like the prophet Isaiah with

5. Meier, 185, n. 89. Hence, when we come to the Gospel of John, it is obvious that “we are dealing with a tradition very different from the one we find in the Synoptics . . .” (135).

6. Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) 90-91, emphasis his.

7. See Brown’s fascinating reconstruction of Johannine history in his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). Even if one does not accept all of Brown’s reconstructions, he offers remarkable insights into the Johannine literature.

8. Much of the following discussion is both a distillation and development of my earlier study, “Theology of Sending in the Fourth Gospel” (unpublished M.A. thesis, Pepperdine University, 1984). The approach I am taking here is narrative-critical, that is, I am not concerned with the stages of Johannine compositional history but with the final form of the text.

9. See, for example, 4.34; 5.23-24, 30, 36-38; 6.29, 38-39, 44, 57; 7.16, 18, 28-29, 33; 8.16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9.4; 12.44-45, 49; 13.20; 14.24; 15.21; 16.5.

10. James McPolin, “Mission in the Fourth Gospel,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 36 (1969) 113-22. It is generally agreed today that these two verbs for sending are used interchangeably throughout John’s Gospel. See, for example, how both verbs can refer to the same sending in the same context (1.19, 22, 24; 13.16; 17.18; 20.21). For further textual data, see the extended footnote in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995) 204, n. 81.

whom John identifies (1.23; cf. Isa 40.3), he is the recipient of a divine and compelling commission (cf. Isa 6.8). This sending consciousness is no accident in the Fourth Gospel. As C. K. Barrett remarks, "The work of John the Baptist derives significance only from the fact that he is sent."¹¹

As the first instance of sending in the Gospel, the mission of the Baptist receives clear christological focus: he is not the light but comes to bear witness to the light (1.7-9). Bearing witness, not baptizing, is John's chief vocation in the Fourth Gospel (1.7, 8, 15, 19, 32, 34; 3.26; 5.33). From this Gospel's perspective John was "a burning and shining lamp" whose witness provided temporary illumination (5.35); it is Jesus himself, the eternal Word made flesh, who constitutes the true light coming into the world (1.4, 9; cf. 8.12; 9.5; 12.46).

JESUS IS SENT

If God is primarily the One who sends, Jesus is first and foremost the One Sent: "Indeed, God did not *send* the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3.17). Here the verb "send" appears for the first time in John's Gospel in reference to Jesus' mission from God, preparing the way for what will become a dominant christological theme: Jesus is the unique Son sent from the Father.

Surveying the evidence, it is difficult to overstate the importance that this sending theme holds for Jesus' understanding of his life and mission as it unfolds on the pages of John's Gospel. Indeed, it would seem that almost everything Jesus says and does is the by-product of his fundamental conviction that he is sent from above. So strong is this missional self-consciousness on the part of the Johannine Jesus that he appears at times to lose his own sense of identity: Jesus does not exercise his own authority but only the authority of the One who sent him (5.27; 17.2-3); Jesus does not do his own will but only the will of the One who sent him (4.34; 5.30; 6.38; 8.29); Jesus does not perform his own works but only the works of the One who sent him (5.36; 9.4; 14.10); Jesus does not speak his own words but only the words of the One who sent him (7.16-18; 12.49; 14.10, 24; 17.8); Jesus does not possess life on his own, but depends on the life of the One who sent him (5.26; 6.57).¹² Over and over again, the Johannine Jesus declares that he never says or does anything of his own accord but only that which is given to him by his Father (5.30; 8.28, 42; 12.49; 14.10). If John's Gospel is christocentric, pointing to the Word made flesh, Jesus himself is thoroughly theocentric, constantly pointing to the One who sent him. In John's Gospel, Jesus stands as the model apostle.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS SENT

With the sending of Jesus into the world, however, God's missional activity does not cease. Embedded in the Farewell Discourse of John's Gospel (chapters 14-17) are five sayings that speak of the sending of the *Paraclete*, John's special designation for the Holy Spirit.¹³

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.
This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him (14.16-17).

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you

11. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Second Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978) 159.

12. Here I am especially indebted to the analysis of Albert Curry Winn, *A Sense of Mission: Guidance from the Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 30-34.

13. Brown resists a complete identification of the *Paraclete* with the Holy Spirit, noting that certain functions are attributed to the former that are not attributed to the latter. See *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) Vol 2, 1140. Yet if John means to distinguish the work of the Spirit in this way, his explicit identification of the *Paraclete* as the Spirit in four of the five *Paraclete* passages (14.17,26; 15.26; 16.13) runs counter to his literary and theological purposes. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Jesus in the Farewell Discourse speaks of the Holy Spirit *in his role* as the *Paraclete*.

everything, and remind you of all that I said to you (14.26).

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to from the Father, he will testify on my behalf (15.26).

Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (16.7).

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (16.13-15).¹⁴

A few observations on these respective passages are in order. First, all the verbs that speak of the arrival and activity of the *Paraclete* are in the future tense, anticipating a ministry of the Holy Spirit at some point in the future. Second, all the “you’s” are plural, suggesting that the Spirit will be given to a community of believers, not just to individuals per se. The Spirit may operate in the life of the individual believer (3.5-8; 7.38-39) but only as a by-product of the community’s reception of the Spirit. Third, Jesus’ role in the sending of the Spirit grows increasingly active: Jesus will “ask” the Father to give the *Paraclete* (14.26); the Father will send the Spirit in Jesus’ “name” (14.26); Jesus himself will send the Spirit “from the Father” (15.26); Jesus alone will send the Spirit to the disciples (16.7). What the Father does, the Son increasingly does in like manner. Fourth, the role of the *Paraclete* is clearly subordinate to that of Jesus. The *Paraclete* will teach and bring to remembrance all that *Jesus* said and did (14.26); the *Paraclete* will bear witness to *Jesus* (15.26); the *Paraclete* will declare whatever he hears from *Jesus* (16.13); the *Paraclete* will declare the things to come and thereby glorify *Jesus* (16.14). As Frederick Dale Bruner observes, the most pervasive mark of the five *Paraclete* sayings is their christocentricity: “The Holy Spirit appears to have as not only the center but as the circumference of his mission the witness to *Jesus*.”¹⁵

A fifth observation relates to the very meaning of the term *Paraclete*. If the *Paraclete* teaches, testifies, convicts, guides and declares, it is because *Jesus* himself teaches (6.59; 7.14; 8.20; 13.13), testifies (8.14, 18), convicts (3.20; 5.30), guides (14.6) and declares what he hears (5.30; 12.49). That *Jesus* himself performs these same functions on the pages of *John’s Gospel* suggests something vitally important about the Spirit’s mission—the *Paraclete* is to be the presence of *Jesus* among the disciples once *Jesus* has gone away (16.7). Hence the *Paraclete* is, in a very real sense, another *Jesus*, sent to indwell the disciples after *Jesus* has been glorified.¹⁶

THE CHURCH IS SENT

One final sending transpires on the pages of *John’s Gospel*. It occurs on the evening of the resurrection:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, *Jesus* came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

14. Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, which renders *paraklētōs* as “Advocate.” Whether the *Paraclete* sayings belonged originally to the Farewell Discourse, a la Hans Windisch, *The Spirit-Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968) or contra Raymond E. Brown, “The Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 13 (1966-67) 114-115, is not my concern here; whatever their origin, they now belong to the finished form of the text and must be interpreted as such.

15. Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977) 277.

16. Noting this resemblance of the *Paraclete* to *Jesus*, Brown remarks: “Virtually everything that has been said about the *Paraclete* has been said elsewhere in the Gospel about *Jesus*” (*The Gospel According to John*, Vol 2, 1140). Hence, “the one whom *John* calls ‘another *Paraclete*’ (14.16) is another *Jesus*” (1141).

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20.19-23).

In a survey of the commissioning scenes in the four Gospels, John R. W. Stott observes of this one: "Although this is the simplest form of the Great Commission, it is at the same time the most profound form, the most challenging, and therefore the most neglected."¹⁷ From a purely Johannine perspective, part of that profundity surely stems from the way John uses this commissioning scene to bring God's sending activity to a proper and fitting conclusion. The sending of the church gains in significance only as it assumes its rightful place in God's history of missional activity. In the sending matrix as John delineates it, Jesus succeeds the Baptist and is followed by the Spirit and the church.¹⁸

On two prior occasions in John, Jesus sends out the disciples (4.38; 17.18), but both of these instances may well be proleptic, anticipating this final, climactic sending. Here the resurrected, glorified Jesus sends out his disciples and gives them a *model* to follow: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Rarely does an adverb (*kathōs* – "as") carry so much theological weight, but in this case, what it communicates is nothing short of breathtaking.¹⁹ By the simple use of this word, Jesus patterns the mission of the church after his own mission from the Father, inviting such a close identification between the two that to receive the messengers of Jesus is tantamount to receiving Jesus himself (13.20). Thus, as Jesus' authority, will, works, words and life are not his own but belong to the One who sent him, so the church's authority, will, works, words and life are not its own but belong to the One who sends it.²⁰ What Jesus told the disciples after washing their feet on the evening of the Last Supper will now be true of their mission as well: "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as (*kathōs*) I have done to you" (13.15).

Not only does the church have a model for its mission, it has a *means* by which to accomplish this mission. Immediately upon commissioning his disciples, Jesus "breathes" on them the Holy Spirit, reminiscent of creation when God breathed into the man the breath of life (Gen 2.7). Here Jesus' act of new creation is given a particular focus by John—to mark the coming of the Spirit/*Paraclete*, whose task it is to empower the disciples for mission. There is no thought here of hierarchy in John's understanding of the church; the Spirit is given to all believers on an equal basis (cf. 1 John 2.20).²¹ The closest of connections between sending and breathing in the Johannine commissioning scene suggests that the Spirit is given not to comfort, but to compel the church. The Spirit comes, the disciples go. The resurrected, glorified Jesus will be present to teach, testify, guide and direct them as they carry out their task as his sent representatives in the world. The power to forgive sins, the by-product of the indwelling *Paraclete* among them, further underscores the status of the disciples as Jesus' fully commissioned representatives (20.23).

This last point has tempted some to limit the sending of the disciples in John 20 to the institutional office of the apostle. Yet, as we have seen, John never uses the word "apostle" to speak of an authorized representative, nor does he give much theological significance to the status of the Twelve. In fact, in the context of John 20 the "Twelve" are not even properly constituted, since Thomas is absent (20.24), and Judas has already abdicated his role (13.30). Instead, John twice uses his preferred term "disciple" in this scene (20.19, 20), and it is this more general grouping that is clearly in view throughout the chapter (20.10, 18, 25, 26, 30).

17. John R. W. Stott, "The Great Commission," *Christianity Today* 12 (1967) 4.

18. Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 574.

19. John has a distinct preference for this word, using it thirty-one times in his Gospel. Kostenberger notes how John links such important concepts as life (6.57), knowledge (10.14-15), love (15.9; 17.23) and unity (17.22) to this word (*John*, 496, n. 62).

20. Winn, 44-50.

21. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1981) 724.

If the Twelve have a distinct role to play at all in John's Gospel, it is to provide the initial witness leading to the inclusion of all future believers in the one people of God (17.20; cf. 10.16). As Dan O. Via observes, "For John the disciples represent the Church or are the Church in miniature so that what he says about the disciples he understands about the Church."²² This emphasis on corporate apostolicity suggests that, in the Fourth Gospel, "apostle" is essentially a function, not an office. In a Gospel not always recognized for its ecclesiology, John's Gospel just may offer the profoundest ecclesiology of all: the church itself is the great apostle, sent in imitation of the model apostle himself.

CONCLUSION

What implications does such a theology of sending pose to the church today? This question is particularly relevant in the context of a Gospel that explicitly anticipates the formation of the "emergent church" of which believers today are most certainly a part (17.20). Rarely is the contemporary church so directly assumed on the pages of Scripture. Three observations are particularly compelling.

First, *it is the nature of God to send*. John's missional understanding of God is necessarily Trinitarian: The Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit.²³ John's theology of sending is certainly one in which all three members of the Trinity participate. Yet it would be a mistake to conceive of this sending activity as a "chain" of separate and distinct "sendings" a la later Gnosticism²⁴, in which God becomes more and more removed from the world. In John's Gospel, God is and remains the unsent Sender, the "mission center" from which all sending activity ultimately derives.

Second, *it is the nature of the church to be sent*. As Emil Bruner once so famously said, "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning." Certainly from the standpoint of other New Testament writings, apostolicity is more directly tied to the historic witness of the Twelve and the institutional structure of the church, built, as it is, "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph 2.20; cf. Matt 16.17-19; Jude 17; Rev 21.14). But John reminds us that apostolicity is more verb than noun; it is more *apostellō* than *apostolos*. We in the historic Stone-Campbell Movement have always rightly stressed the apostolic origins of the faith, but claiming to be an "apostolic" church is more than admiring the apostles or claiming to adhere to their teachings; it is a life in constant faithfulness to the God who sends. As Barrett so aptly reminds us, the church in John is "the apostolic church, commissioned by Christ, only in virtue of the fact that Jesus sanctified it...and breathed the Spirit into it...and only so far as it maintains an attitude of perfect obedience to Jesus."²⁵

Third, if it is the nature of God to send and the nature of the church to be sent, *then the mission of the church is not its own but God's*. There are four principal "sendings" in the Gospel of John, yet importantly only *one* mission: "Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (13.20). As Barrett again so aptly remarks, "The effect of this statement is to give to the mission of Jesus and the mission of the church an absolute theological significance; in both the world is confronted by God Himself."²⁶ The church's mission is not the church's mission at all, but an extension of God's own sending activity. In Johannine perspective, the church embraces its missionary task not to seek its own glory and will; the church engages in mission because—ultimately and decisively—"God so loved the world" (3.16).

22. Dan O. Via, "Darkness, Christ, and the Church in the Fourth Gospel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 14 (1961) 173. The judgment of Brown is similar: "The characteristically Johannine outlook does not demote the Twelve, but rather turns these chosen disciples into representative of all the Christians who would believe in Jesus on their word" (*The Gospel According to John*, Vol 2, 1034).=

23. I use the term "Trinity" here for lack of a better term. I certainly do not wish to impose a fully developed system of Trinitarian thought upon the author of the Fourth Gospel but wish simply to account for the phenomena of the text.

24. Winn, 108.

25. Barrett, 569.

26. Barrett, 445.

In this day and age of bigger churches, bigger programs and bigger budgets, I sometimes wonder if we are losing this critical theocentric perspective. In the exercise of our mission today we must ask ourselves the question: are we directing the attention of the world to ourselves or to the God who sends? Perhaps what we need is not a stained glass window to remind us of the apostolicity of the church but a transparent one. Only then can we as the sent community of Jesus Christ truly bear witness to the one who said: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14.9).

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