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## Metaphors for Ministry, Part II

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# Metaphors for Ministry, Part II

STUART L. LOVE

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“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20.21)

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor” (John 12.23-26)

In our last issue, devoted to the Gospel of John, I presented the first in a three-part series entitled, “Metaphors for Ministry in John: An Example of Doing Practical Theology.” In that article, I affirmed that although the Gospel of John may not address actual congregational settings, it does set forth a number of “ministry metaphors” and an “obligational norm” that relate the biblical message of the Fourth Gospel to contemporary church ministry. The article explored two of seven metaphors for ministry in John that I would like to develop in this series—incarnation, and the world.

In this second installment I will examine three additional metaphors: sending, following, and bearing fruit. The first metaphor, sending, is a theme found throughout John. The second and third metaphors, following and bearing fruit, are two of three interrelated metaphors brought together in one passage, 12.23-26, a passage that Raymond Brown describes as “...a splendid commentary on the meaning that the hour of Jesus’ death and resurrection will have for all men.”<sup>1</sup>

## **SENDING**

The metaphors examined previously, incarnation and the world, are closely related to the church’s mission and authority expressed primarily in John by a theology of “sending.”<sup>2</sup> God’s mission to the world is carried out through the “sending” of John the Baptist, the Son, the Spirit, and the disciples who represent four aspects of a single mission. The ultimate “sending,” though, is of the Son. “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). Because the Son is sent by God, the other three aspects of this theme—John the Baptist, the Spirit, and the disciples—gain legitimacy and significance as essential aspects of one Christ-centered mission.

### *John*

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light” (John 1.6-8).

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1. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I-XII (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 475.

2. For an excellent and more thorough treatment of this vital theme in John see David Lertis Matson, “Apostolic Church: The Significance of the Sent Community in the Gospel of John,” *Leaven*, Volume 14, Number 1 (2006): 9-15.

John, never called “the Baptist” in the Gospel of John, is sent by God to witness to the light (1.6-7). His mission has significance only because he is sent by God. Its purpose is that all should believe in the “Lamb of God.” John does not know Jesus. And yet, John comes “baptizing with water” so that Jesus “might be revealed to Israel” (1.31). John testifies that Jesus is the Lamb of God (1.29, 36); that he is the one able to baptize with the Spirit (1.33; 3.34). Jesus alone is the Son of God (1.34). John’s witness also includes his own confession (1.20; 3.28) and complete abnegation before Jesus. Jesus comes after John but ranks before him (1.27, 31). This is his witness: “He must increase, I must decrease” (3.30), and “No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven” (3.27). In this John’s joy is fulfilled (3.29). The truth of John’s witness, even though delimited by his role, makes him a paradigm of discipleship. He testifies to Jesus’ distinctive relationship with God and the authority that relationship gives to Jesus’ ministry.

### *The Spirit*

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf” (John 15.26).

As the above citation indicates, the Spirit’s mission parallels the Son’s. The Spirit’s primary function is to teach—not his own thoughts—but only the teachings of Jesus. Jesus affirms, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14.26). Together, the Spirit and the disciples bear witness to the Son (15.26), but only after his glorification (7.39; 16.7; 20.22). The Spirit is the church’s source of life and the world’s salvation. Without the Advocate (*Paraclete*) there is no church or ministry.

### *The Disciples*

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17.18).

The sending of the disciples is inextricably bound to the sending of the Son and modeled after his mission (20.21; 4.38; 13.16, 20; 17.18). When key elements of Christ’s sending are seen, the church’s self-understanding and motivation for ministry in relationship to Christ are implicitly portrayed.

1. The Son is sent to do the Father’s will and not his own (4.24; 6.38). Implicit portrayal: the church is sent by the Son to do the Father’s will.
2. In doing the Father’s will the Son does only what pleases the Father (8.29). Implicit portrayal: in so doing the church does only what pleases the Son.
3. The Son does not seek his own initiative or glory (5.30; 8.42; 12.49; 7.18). Implicit portrayal: the church does not seek its own initiative or glory. In this fashion the church is like John.
4. Rather, the Son honors the Father (5.23). Implicit portrayal: the church honors the Son and in so doing honors the Father.
5. The Son honors the Father by acknowledging that his teaching, words and works are his Father’s and not his own (7.16; 8.26; 14.24; 9.4). Implicit portrayal: the teaching, words and works of the church are not its own.

In other words, the Son’s life, mission, authority and self-identity are bound up in his unity with the Father (6.57; 17.21), a unity that includes the church—“that the world may know and believe that thou didst send me” (11.42; 5.24; 12.44-45). Jesus, the Son, is the model apostle.

With this in mind, statements pertaining to the sending of the disciples are more coherent.

- 4.38—"I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."  
 13.16—"Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their masters, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them."  
 13.20—"Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."  
 17.18—"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."  
 20.21—"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'"

Then what specifically is the church's commission? Its mission is not its own, but is defined in reference to God. Its self-understanding—its identity—is inseparably linked to its message so that its calling and message coincide. Its ministry is not the result of its own resources or facilitation. Rather, its service is a faithful response to God, who through his Son sends his witnesses into the world to lead others to follow Jesus. In this commitment there is a sense of necessity. The church, like John, confesses its abnegation—"I must decrease, he must increase"—and therein its joy is fulfilled.

### *Following*

To follow Jesus is to accept a fundamental reality of discipleship—"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (12.25). Instances of following (or rejecting or denying discipleship) are frequent in John.

First, there is the call of the first disciples of Jesus (1.35-51). Interestingly, the term "follow" appears in verses 37, 38, 40 and 43. When this passage is carefully examined, other crucial words for following Jesus appear—"abide" (dwell), "come" and "see."<sup>3</sup> Throughout John, the theme of "coming" to Jesus describes faith (3.21; 5.40; 6.35, 37, 45; 7.35). Similarly, "seeing" Jesus with perception also describes faith. Jesus asks the two men sent by John, "What do you seek?" Notice, Jesus takes the initiative by turning and speaking to the men. This behavior parallels John 10.16, "It is not you who chose me. No, I chose you." The men wish to "abide" with Jesus (1.38), to which Jesus responds, "Come and see" (1.39). Discipleship is at stake. John's proclamation prompts two disciples to follow Jesus. Andrew then finds Simon and brings him to Jesus the Messiah. Throughout the passage, Jesus' identity is expressed through christological titles—"Messiah" (1.41), "Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote" (1.45), "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!" (1.49). The pattern is that the disciples then bring others to Jesus.

Second, in John 6 the term "follow" in the sense of discipleship does not occur, but the theme pervades the chapter. Initially, we are told a multitude "followed him" (6.2). Later, when the people seek Jesus he tells them they seek him "not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (6.26). The bread of life discourse is then given and concludes with many of his disciples drawing back (6.66). In turn, this motivates Jesus to ask the Twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter then confesses for all, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (6.68-69). In this case following Jesus, discipleship, is predicated upon Jesus' claims and teaching.

Third, in the light of the world discourse (8.12-10.21), the man born blind (9.1-41) is healed and becomes Jesus' disciple despite significant persecution. The person who follows Jesus "will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8.12).

Fourth, the sheep follow Jesus because he is the shepherd who gives his life (10.1-42). Two reasons are given: (1) Jesus goes before them and they know his voice (10.4), and (2) he lays his life down for the sheep

3. Here, I recommend the article by D'Esta Love, "Seeking and Finding: Incarnational Ministry in John's Gospel," *Leaven*, Volume 14, Number 1 (2006): 4-8.

(10.11-18). The theme of leading as well as following can be observed in the passage. Jesus' leadership, a model for his followers, is contrasted with that of "strangers" and "thieves."<sup>4</sup>

Fifth, the incident of Peter's premature discipleship (John 13.36-38) follows the footwashing scene (13.8), and demonstrates that Peter remains too proud to receive the humility of Jesus. Peter asks, "Lord, why cannot I follow you now?" He then immediately affirms, "I will lay down my life for you" (13.37). Peter is sincere, but unenlightened (good intentions are inadequate) as he struggles to find his own will. Jesus tells him "the cock will not crow, till you have denied me three times" (13.38). Denial is the opposite of confession. The reinstatement of Peter, the reversal of his three-fold denial, is found in the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus in Galilee (21.15-22). Jesus asks three times "Do you love me?", reminiscent of Peter's triple denial (18.17, 25-27). In the end Jesus challenges Peter, "Follow me" (20.19).

Among contemporary theologians discipleship is a major theme for the church and its ministry. For example, Avery Dulles has developed a model of the church as a community of disciples. He first builds a biblical basis for the model out of the book of Acts, but then turns to the Gospels. He states, "...when the evangelists speak of the common life of the disciples with Jesus, they are quite conscious of the ecclesial significance of their statements."<sup>5</sup> Then focusing on the latter chapters of John, Dulles speaks first of the role of the *Paraclete*, but then turns to the post-Easter experience and dwells on the necessity of Peter's obeying "the precept 'Follow me'" (21.19). He states, "Discipleship for John achieves its fullest meaning in the post-Easter situation for only then is the Holy Spirit given in fullness."<sup>6</sup> Dulles demonstrates that discipleship is a major means by which the church's response to the work of Christ is made known. The call to discipleship in examples like Peter suggests a corresponding parallel to the community of faith. The church must die to itself to follow Christ. It can only follow, abide, come, and see as it gives its life to Christ for the sake of the world.

### BEARING FRUIT

If the heart of discipleship is a call to hate one's life in this world (12.25) and to follow Jesus unto death, a striking parallel is the metaphor of bearing fruit. Jesus states: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (12.24). This passage constitutes what Rudolph Schnackenburg believes to be "... an impressive little parable" by which "Jesus illustrates the fruitfulness of his death, a fruitfulness which will lead to his glorification."<sup>7</sup>

But what does it mean to bear fruit? Fruit bearing is emphasized in three contexts in John: (1) in our present text, (2) in the conversion of the Samaritans (4.31-42), and (3) in the allegory of the vine (15.1-17).

#### *The immediate context—the coming of the Greeks.*

The coming of the Greeks (12.20) symbolically anticipates the future after Jesus' crucifixion, when the church includes both Jews and Gentiles (cf. 10.16; 11.52). The request to see Jesus (12.21) depicts the theme of discipleship and is reminiscent of the disciples' call of 1.35-51. But, the time of the Gentiles first requires the glorification of the Son of Man (12.23), illustrated by Jesus' statement comparing his death to the sowing of a seed of grain. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns believes this parable should not be applied "primarily to the lives of the disciples of Jesus, as though their fruitful obedience to the will of God was to burst forth

4. The theme of "feeding" as leading through love is also the topic of 21.15-19. In addition, the themes of death and discipleship parallel 12.23-26.

5. Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 7.

6. *Ibid.*, 8.

7. Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*. Vol 2 (London and New York: Burns & Oates, Herder and Herder, 1968), 383.

independently on its own. They are the fruit of the isolated (xvi.32) obedience and death of Jesus; and their fruitfulness springs from His death, and is joined organically to it.”<sup>8</sup>

*The harvest of the Samaritans.*

Jesus tells his disciples “The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together” (4.36). Once more, gathering “fruit” stands for making converts to the Christian faith, in this case the Samaritans. As in 12.24, the work of Jesus precipitates a rich missionary harvest. Interestingly, it is the woman’s testimony, not the disciples’, which leads to the Samaritans’ conversion (4.39).

Evangelism in the form of witness is important to John. However, the relationship of the two, witness and evangelism, must be carefully weighed. The Fourth Gospel emphasizes that the *works* of Jesus done in his Father’s name bear witness to him (10.25). Words alone are an inadequate witness. Jesus challenges both “the Jews” (10.37-38; 5.36) and his disciples (14.11) to believe his works. If they do, they will know the Son’s unity with the Father (10.37; cf. 14.11). The mission of Jesus is “to *do* the will of him” who sent him, and to accomplish his *work*” (4.34). The “now” of his hour (12.23; 13.1; 17.1) is the work of God for the salvation of the world. Word and deed are one and cannot be disentangled.

The discourses of Jesus often grow out of his deeds, and these deeds are referred to as “signs.” Two examples are given. First, the “sign” of the feeding of the five thousand (6.1-14) is followed by the discourse on the bread of life (6.25-29) and the response of Jesus’ disciples (6.70-71). The unity of sign and discourse, deed and word, reaches a climax when “many of his disciples draw back” (6.66), except for the Twelve (6.69). A second example is the healing of the man with congenital blindness (9.1-40), a demonstration that Jesus has come for judgment as well as for salvation (9.39-41). The theme and discourse, Jesus the light of the world (8.12), precede the sign. The dynamics of both discourse and deed lead to acceptance and rejection—acceptance on the part of the blind man (9.38), rejection on the part of Jesus’ opponents. John’s gospel does not seem to allow for neutrality in human encounters with the witness of Jesus. His witness necessitates a decision. A positive response is faith which leads to confession, following and eternal life. A negative response results in rejection and/or denial, which lead to judgment (12.44-50).

Finally, as previously noted, the “signs” (the works) of Jesus function to produce faith, but not “simply a belief in miracles.” Jesus’ signs should never be confused with the “food that perishes” since they symbolize the food which “endures to eternal life” (6.27). Word and deed are one. Words cannot be emphasized over deeds. The two go together. Believing is more than a cognitive activity—it is relating to God in a relationship. Knowing God includes love, obedience and mutual indwelling. Faith, too, is the work of God (6.29). The witness of the church that produces faith requires a connection and unity between its words and its deeds, both in proclamation and in practice. Avery Dulles states, “...the goal of preaching is not mere profession of faith in the message, but rather a communion of life and love.”<sup>9</sup>

*The allegory of the vine.*

Perhaps the most familiar passage on bearing fruit is the allegory of the vine (15.1-17). Fruitfulness, service to God, is related to answered prayer, and is produced by obedience in love. Accordingly, bearing fruit is simply living the life of a Christian disciple (15.5, 8); especially the practice of mutual love (15.12). Fruit-bearing consists of every demonstration of a vital faith and reciprocal love. Obedient love is the essential element in the growth of faith. It is expressed through the image of mutual abiding. Abiding and bearing fruit constitute a reciprocal relationship. A believer cannot abide in the vine without bearing fruit, nor

8. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davey (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), 424.

9. Avery Dulles, S.J. *Models of the Church* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, A Division of Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974), 91-92.

can one bear fruit without abiding in Christ. Thus, we must not equate bearing fruit with human merit or achievement. The church is God's creation and owes its existence to the word of God. It is not its own master, nor can it make its own beginning or end. Only because of the vine is the church able to keep the new commandment (13.34-35), and by being a witness is given that "all men will know that you are my disciples" (13.35).

### CONCLUSION

The metaphor of "sending" serves as a foundational assumption for ministry in John. In this way it parallels the metaphors of "incarnation" and the "world." The metaphors of "following" and "bearing fruit" function as analogies of faith development. In the next article I will explore the metaphors of "serving" Christ, "shepherding," and the ethical norm that holds all of the metaphors together—the new commandment of love.

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