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*Biblical Studies*

# THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

Stuart L. Love

*"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me,  
even so I send you." (John 20:21 RSV)*

The above statement of the risen Christ to his disciples constitutes the keystone of a theology of mission for the church in the Gospel According to John. With the disciples paralyzed by fear and without the presence of Thomas, Jesus commissions them out of a christological model: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." The Father's sending of the Son serves not only as a model but also as a foundation, a grounding, for the Son's sending of the disciples. Their mission, the mission of the church, continues the Son's mission, which necessitates that the Son be present to the disciples during the mission just as the Father had been present to the Son. The reality of Christ's presence to the disciples in their mission is actualized through the gift of the Holy Spirit: "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (20:22).<sup>1</sup> Robert Kysar epitomizes our text, "The remarkable feature of this commissioning is that the believers bear the same divine authorization as did Christ. The nature of the mission of the church can only be understood in the light of the mission of Christ. The same self-giving love is asked of the believers in their mission as is evidenced in Jesus' fulfillment of his."<sup>2</sup>

But does Jesus' commissioning of the disciples include the ongoing life of the church in its mission to do the Father's will in the world? In other words, does the Fourth Gospel have a theology of the church? Raymond Brown points out that until 1965, most of the discussion concerning the topic of the church in John was negative.<sup>3</sup> For example, John has no explicit reference to church order and governance or to the Lord's Supper or baptism or the "people of God," and, like Mark and Luke, John does not use the term "church." On the other hand, the church as a community is implicit in the symbolic discourses on the Shepherd and the Vine. Sheep and branches are images not just of individuals but of the disciples, a community of believers. The discussion on worship in John 4 probably points to the church's worship in spirit and in truth (4:23–24). The witness of the disciples, chapters 14–16, seems to prefigure the church. Teaching on love, prayer, obedience, the Spirit, bearing fruit, and persecution in the world suggests a community of disciples with a fellowship, mission, and ministry. The prayer of Jesus for the disciples in John 17 is extended to the church beyond them: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word" (17:20). When evidence like this is combined with the corroborated

tion of the Johannine epistles, the community of the church is a defensible assumption within the context of Jesus' mission statement to the disciples. Edward Schillebeeckx, in a broader study, states that there is "no community without ministry" and, conversely, there is "no ministry without community."<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that there is no mission without community, and there is no community without mission.

Since a theology of sending is important to John's conceptualization of the church's mission, it is important to explore its christological grounding in the incarnation of the Word (1:14) as an essential base for the church to serve the Father in the Son's name as it is sent into the world. In other words, among many essential themes in John, the church's mission is flanked and informed on the one side by incarnational theology and on the other side by the object of the church's mission—the world. In this study I will examine these three interrelated Johannine themes—incarnation, the world, and the role of sending—as essential missional metaphors for the identity and ministry of the church.

### **Incarnation and the Church's Mission**

No writing in the New Testament has a higher christology than John. Not only does the Gospel parallel in its own way Paul's conviction that God has acted decisively in Jesus (cf. Rom 1:1–4, 16–17; 3:21–22), it also affirms the preexistence and universal importance of Christ. John's high christology contains as well the fullest expression of Jesus' humanity—the incarnation—a flesh-and-blood person, the "only Son" who became "flesh" (1:14). Rudolf Schnackenburg states that the incarnation "expresses the unmistakable paradox that the Logos who dwelt with God, clothed in the full majesty of the divinity and possessing the fullness of the divine life, entered the sphere of the earthly and human, the material and perishable, by becoming flesh."<sup>5</sup>

The combining of the human and transcendent dimensions of Jesus' mission may be illustrated throughout the Gospel. Jesus participates in a wedding feast (2:1–11), at which time he reminds his mother, "What have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (2:4 RSV). Weary, Jesus sits down at a well in Samaria and reveals to a woman her past (4:1–42). Agitated in spirit, Jesus weeps at the tomb of Lazarus and in the same moment reveals himself to be the resurrection and the life (11:33, 35, 25). During the Last Supper, Jesus lays aside his garments and washes

the disciples' feet (13:3–5), a deed that anticipates the fulfillment of his mission—"Now . . . Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1). At the hour of his glorification, his death, Jesus thirsts (19:28). Resurrected, Jesus shows the disciples bodily evidences of his death and then commissions them (20:20–21). One week later, he tells Thomas to touch and to handle the bodily signs of his suffering (20:27), which leads Thomas to confess, "My Lord and my God" (20:28).

Further, the missional implication of the incarnation is underscored by statements that identify and depict the solidarity of Jesus and his disciples. If people persecute Jesus, they will persecute the disciples (15:20). If the world hates the disciples, it is because the world first hated Jesus (15:18). If anyone receives the disciples, that person receives Jesus and the one who sent him (13:20). As the Father has sent Jesus into the world, in like fashion Jesus sends the disciples (20:21). Jesus prays not that Father will take the disciples out of the world but that he will protect them from the evil one (17:15). Sometimes the fullness of John's christology is most clearly expressed by Jesus' opponents: "It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God" (10:33 RSV). D. Moody Smith states, "It is not the intention of the Fourth Evangelist to present the revelation of God in Jesus in such a way as to negate his humanity or to make his experience foreign, and therefore irrelevant to his followers."<sup>6</sup>

A corollary of the incarnation is John's view of "flesh." Flesh is not evil, nor does it stand in opposition to God. Flesh is simply "the sphere of the human and the worldly as opposed to the divine."<sup>7</sup> Flesh stresses the "transitoriness, helplessness and vanity" of the worldly sphere. Through Jesus' flesh, John affirms, "we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (1:14 RSV). Flesh cannot avail—the spirit gives life (6:63)—because it is fleeting and helpless. But through the flesh the glory of God is revealed in Jesus, and through the flesh the community of believers by the Spirit continues Jesus' mission and ministry to the world. H. Richard Niebuhr aptly describes John's view of flesh:

whatever is good . . . the physical, material, and temporal are never regarded as participating in evil in any peculiar way because they are not spiritual

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and eternal. On the contrary, natural birth, eating, drinking, wind, water, and bread and wine are for this evangelist not only symbols to be employed in dealing with the realities of the life of the spirit but are pregnant with spiritual meaning. Spiritual and natural events 'are interlocking and analogous.'<sup>8</sup>

Rudolph Bultmann perhaps best depicts John's meaning of flesh when he says, "This is the paradox which runs through the whole gospel: the *doxa* (glory) is not to be seen *alongside* the *sarx* (flesh), nor *through* the *sarx* as through a window; it is to be seen in the *sarx* and nowhere else."<sup>9</sup>

A theology of incarnation is crucial to the church's mission because it reveals the church's identity for the sake of its ministry. T. F. Torrance states, "Thus through the Incarnation is revealed to us that God in His own Being is not closed to us, for He has come to share with us the deepest movement of His divine heart, and so to participate in our human nature that the heart of God beats within it."<sup>10</sup> The church, through the incarnation, Karl Barth declares, is the community that exists for God, but in so doing it must understand that God exists for the world; in existing for God, therefore, the church must exist for the world.<sup>11</sup> The mission of the church is grounded by the christological imperative of the incarnation.

### **The World and the Church's Mission**

If the means of the church's mission is the Spirit working through the flesh, the object of the church's mission is the world. Care must be given at this point. Jesus is sent into the world (3:16), but the object of his work is to do his Father's will (4:34; 5:30; 17:4 et al.). At his death he exclaims, "It is finished" (19:30). His work is done. He has glorified his Father by loving the world. Ray Ander-

son states, "All ministry is God's ministry. Jesus did not come to introduce his own ministry. His ministry was to do the will of the Father and to live by every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."<sup>12</sup> In turn, the call of discipleship is to serve Jesus (12:26). The disciple who does so will be honored by the Father. Helmut Thielicke, in a carefully developed argument, maintains that care must be given that theology begins not with the "Cartesian self," with its subjective tendencies, but with the testimony and work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

But what constitutes the "world" in John? The world seems to be another of the Fourth Gospel's paradoxes. First, the world is the totality of creation (1:9; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9; 17:5, 24; 3:19; 12:46). Second, within creation, the world especially refers to human beings and human affairs, to humankind capable of knowing and comprehending. Both creation and humanity are transitory. They belong to the world that is below in contrast to the world that is above (8:23; 18:36). In this sense, "the world" is comparable to "flesh."

But the world also—and often in the same context—is humankind rejecting Christ, living in darkness, doing evil, being ignorant of God, and exulting over Jesus' death (7:7; 8:23; 14:17; 15:18–25; 17:25). In this sense, flesh and the world are not synonymous. This world, Bultmann declares, "stands over against God and confronts him with hostility." This world has made itself "independent of God." Its synonym is darkness, the "darkness of lies and sin."<sup>14</sup> God sent his Son to the world of both creation and alienation (3:16). But "this world," the world of darkness under the power of its ruler, hated Jesus and hates his disciples. It rejected Christ and refused to believe. This world is judged and not saved (3:18; 5:24; 9:39; 12:47–48). Jesus' disciples, the community of faith, are in an alienated and hostile world but are not of it (17:11, 15). Accordingly, they are opposed and suffer tribulation (16:33) but are encouraged that through Christ's glorification, his death, Jesus has overcome the world (12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

To accept this paradox is indispensable for the mission of the church. The church must "love" the world, "die" for the world, be involved with the world, all the while knowing it is still flesh. The church must know that it came out of the world but is not of the world. The church cannot accept the world's values, live by its strength, measure success by its standards, or share its dreams. It must never forget that the only way to transform the world is through the Word made flesh.

## Sending and the Church's Mission

The themes of the incarnation and the world are closely related to the church's commission and authority expressed primarily by a theology of "sending." The Greek verbs for sending, *pempein* and *apostolein*, are used interchangeably in John.<sup>15</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.<sup>16</sup> The ultimate "sending," though, is of the Son (3:17), from which the other three gain legitimacy and significance. In other words, each aspect of the one mission has a christological focus. Although the sending of the disciples is central to Jesus, it is preceded by the sending of John the Baptist by God to bear witness to Jesus and by the sending of the Paraclete by the Father and the Son as the abiding presence of Jesus in the church after his departure.

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*Without the Paraclete there is no church, no mission, and no ministry.*

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John the Baptist is sent by God to witness to the light (1:6–7). His mission has import only because he is sent by God that all should believe in the "Lamb of God" (1:35–37). Even though John does not know Jesus, he "came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel" (1:31 RSV). His testimony is that Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29, 36), that he is the one who is able to baptize with the Spirit (1:33; 3:34), and that he is the Son of God (1:34). His witness also includes his own confession (1:20; 3:28) and complete self-abnegation to Jesus. Jesus comes after John but ranks before him (1:27, 30). His witness is "He must increase, I must decrease" (3:30) and "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven" (3:27 RSV). In his mission 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 for all believers.

The Spirit's mission is parallel to the Son's (15:26). The Spirit's primary function is to teach—not his own thoughts, but only the teachings of Jesus (14:26). Together,

the Spirit and the disciples bear witness to Christ (15:26), but only after the Son's glorification (7:39; 16:7; 20:22). The Spirit is the church's source of life and the world's salvation. The statement in 20:22, "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit,'" seems to parallel the first creation (Gen 2:7) and perhaps Ezekiel's vision of dry bones (Ezek 37:5). For John, the breath of Christ and the reception of the Spirit is the beginning of the new creation, the church.<sup>17</sup> Without the Paraclete there is no church, no mission, and no ministry.

The sending of the disciples is congruent with the sending of the Son and is modeled after his mission (20:21; 4:38; 13:16, 20; 17:18). When key elements of Christ's sending are identified, a true representation of the church's identity and mission is portrayed.

1. The Son is sent to do the Father's will and not his own (4:34; 6:38). *The church is sent to do only the will of Christ.*
2. In so doing, the Son does only what pleases the Father (8:29). *In doing Christ's will, the church follows Christ and pleases him.*
3. Jesus does not seek his own initiative or glory (5:30; 8:42; 12:49; 7:18). *The church does not seek its own initiative or glory.*
4. Rather, the Son honors the Father (5:23). *In honoring Christ, the church 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). *In honoring Christ, the church acknowledges that its words and works 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 inclusive of the disciples so "that they may believe that you sent me" (11:42; 5:24; 12:44–45). Jesus, the Son, is the model apostle.

Now the statements regarding the sending of the disciples become more clear:

- 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 Verily truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

13:20 Verily 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 Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

What then can we say about the church's mission? First, its mission is not its own but is defined by God as revealed in the incarnate Word. Second, its identity is essentially associated with its message so that its election and message coincide with the incarnate Word. Third, its ministry is the result not of its own resources but of a faithful following of the Spirit's presence to lead others to believe on Jesus. To this commitment there is an absolute sense of necessity. Finally, the church, like John the Baptist, confesses its self-abnegation—"I must decrease, he must increase." And therein is the church's joy fulfilled.<sup>18</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kysar, *John*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 304.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Brown, "Johannine Ecclesiology—The Community's Origins," *Interpretation* 31, 4 (October 1977): 379.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church With a Human Face* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 128.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*,

trans. Kevin Smyth (London and New York: Burns & Oates, Herder & Herder, 1968), 1:268.

<sup>6</sup> D. Moody Smith, "Theology and Ministry in John," in *A Biblical Basis for Ministry*, ed. Earl E. Shelp and Ronald Sunderland (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 217.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 62.

<sup>8</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), 197.

<sup>9</sup> Bultmann, 63.

<sup>10</sup> James I. McCord and T. H. L. Parker, eds., *Service in Christ: Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, The Epworth Press, 1966), 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), 4:762–63.

<sup>12</sup> Ray Anderson, "A Theology of Ministry," in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh and Grand Rapids: T. & T. Clark and Eerdmans, 1979), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:129–60, 193–205.

<sup>14</sup> Bultmann, 54–55.

<sup>15</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 473. For example, following Barrett, Christ is sent by the Father (cf. 3:17, 34; 5:36, 38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25 [*apostellein*]; 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 37; 6:38, 39, 44; 7:16, 18, 28, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 9:4; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5 [*pempein*]). In the three Paraclete passages (14:26; 15:26; 16:7), *pempein* only is used. In the case of the disciples (4:38; 17:18), *apostellein* is used, but in 13:(16), 20 *pempein* is found. Both are used in 20:21.

<sup>16</sup> David Lertis Matson, "Theology of Sending in the Fourth Gospel" (master's thesis, Pepperdine University, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Barrett, 474–75.

<sup>18</sup> Elements of this article appear under the title "Metaphors and an Obligational Norm for Ministry in the Fourth Gospel" in *Johannine Studies, Essays in Honor of Frank Pack*, ed. James E. Priest (Malibu, Calif.: Pepperdine University Press, 1989), 111–31.