



“As You Sent Me”: Identity and Mission in the Fourth Gospel

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WHAT IS THE IDENTITY AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH TODAY? WITH EACH significant change in its culture the church has struggled with these questions, and today is no different. However, now some believe we face new and unique challenges in what is often called postmodernism. Whether or not there is really any such thing as this title proposes, we cannot deny that the church increasingly finds itself in the midst of radical cultural changes. Think, for instance, of the mentality of so-called “generation X,” the escalating pluralism of our society, and the role of women in society and church leadership.¹ As a result of such change, the church is once again faced with questions of who we are and what we are called to do.

As in other challenging times for the church, there are no easy answers to our dilemmas. We continue to face the necessity of both self-preservation and ministry to others beyond the community of faith—inward-directed and outward-directed concerns. Some of us fear, however, that the corporate business models for the church that are often proposed today are dangerous, even if there are resources there to be tapped. Some of us fear, too, that the expectations of ordained clergy

¹See my study of the contemporary church and New Testament images of the church, *Stumbling in the Light: New Testament Images for a Changing Church* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).

What models will the contemporary church find appropriate to define its mission and identity? The Gospel of John can help in that process, affirming some models while calling others into serious question.

betray an understanding of the church which is fraught with difficulties: that is, the expectation that pastors operate like CEOs, that they nurture personality cults around themselves, and that they are to be as entertaining as they are faithful—all of which are attractive responses to contemporary culture, given the challenges of the immediate future. Still, perhaps this is a time for us to assess once again who we are as a church and for what we have been empowered.

The Gospel of John has sometimes been ignored when one sets out to unearth resources for a contemporary ecclesiology, in part because the Fourth Gospel never uses the word ἐκκλησία. Rudolf Bultmann correctly characterized the Fourth Gospel's interest in ecclesiology when he wrote, "No specifically ecclesiological interest can be detected...but that does not entitle one to conclude that interest in the church is completely absent."² My contention is that the Gospel of John provides important and creative resources for reassessing the identity and the mission of the contemporary church.

The Gospel of John offers at least two rudimentary themes important for the current discussions of the church in the twenty-first century. As is so often the case with this gospel, however, we find these two themes interwoven with one another and intricately joined to still other motifs. This article does little more than offer a brief summary of what is implied about the identity and mission of the church in certain parts of the Fourth Gospel. We begin with a cursory examination of Jesus' commission to his disciples and then proceed to what seems to be the gospel's understanding of the nature of the church itself.

I. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

In two passages, Jesus refers to the mission given to his believers. The first occurs in Jesus' prayer in chapter 17. In the second part of that prayer (vv. 6-19) Jesus prays for those who have already come to believe in him, and in verse 18 says of them: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." The second passage occurs in the gospel's account of the second appearance of the risen Christ (20:19-23). The disciples are huddled behind locked doors fearful for their lives. Christ suddenly appears in their midst and says to them: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v. 21). The narrator then adds, "[He] breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (more literally, "receive a Holy Spirit"—v. 22).

Readers should be aware, first of all, that there is arguably ample evidence in the Fourth Gospel that the word "disciple" (μαθητής) is used of any believer and does not refer only to the circle of the "twelve."³ (See 6:60-61 and 67-71 for an example of the distinction between the two words.) Therefore, we can be confident

²Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955) 91.

³This was persuasively demonstrated, I believe, by Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 30-32.

that these two references to the commission in chapters 17 and 20 apply to the community of believers and empower the whole church, not just its apostolic leadership.

Equally important in these two passages is the fact that the disciples are “sent” (ἀποστέλλω)—the same word the Fourth Evangelist uses for God’s sending of Jesus (3:16), as well as John the Baptizer (1:6) and the Holy Spirit (14:26—παράκλητος). Furthermore, the Johannine Jesus most often uses the simple title “the one sent” for himself (e.g., 5:24; 7:16; 8:16). His role as emissary or agent for God is the most frequent christological title in John, however inadequate it may seem to be. What’s important for us is that Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples is an integral part of God’s whole saving activity among humans from Jesus’ forerunner to his successor (the Paraclete). The church continues the ministry of Jesus, the one sent by God.

How exactly is Jesus’ sending of the disciples like God’s sending him? A definitive statement of God’s commissioning Jesus is found in the beloved verses 3:16-17. Note there that Christ was sent as a result of God’s love (in this case, ἀγάπῳ) with the intent of rescuing the “world” (κόσμος) by bringing “eternal life.” Verse 17 declares that Christ’s advent was not intended to “condemn” (“judge”—κρίνω). God’s act of sending Jesus arose from love and was designed to provoke faith and life—that is, life as the Creator means it to be for creatures.

The church today might well note that its mission, too, is based in love and is not to condemn the human condition but to rescue us from our own tendency to self-destruction. If the church’s mission is modeled after Christ’s mission, we also take seriously the means by which Christ accomplished his mission. In the Fourth Gospel Christ’s “glorification” (δόξα/δοξάζω) and his enthronement as king were by means of a cross. John does not portray Jesus as the humiliated victim but as one who willingly “lays down his life for his friends” (15:13). However, his suffering is no less real and his death no less certain (which I believe is the basic meaning of 19:34, whatever other symbolic meaning it might suggest). Ironically, through death, Christ brings life and is glorified while glorifying God.⁴

Many have already said more forcefully than I can that the church’s mission entails suffering for the world in order to rescue it. Yet the nature of the love out of which the community of faith is sent into the world does seem strangely contradictory to our current efforts to enlarge our churches and increase their power. How, for instance, can we construe growth in membership or extravagant expenditures for buildings as evidence of our suffering for the world? Exactly how the community preserves itself while still risking its life for our world is a difficult question, which ought to be higher on our list of priorities than it sometimes is.

⁴Andreas J. Köstenberger has written a very thoughtful study of the mission of the church in the Gospel of John and correctly based it on the gospel’s understanding of the mission of Jesus. I find some of his suggestions a bit conservative but nonetheless important: *The Mission of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel with Implications for the Fourth Gospel’s Purposes and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Note too the fact that the church is sent into the “world.” It is widely known that this gospel often uses “world” (κόσμος) as a designation for the realm of evil or an existence premised on the misconception that humanity and all being are independent of any Creator. To be sure, there are times when the Fourth Gospel seems to use the word “world” in a neutral or even positive sense (e.g., 1:9; 16:21; 17:24), but more often it refers to God’s opposition in creation. The use of κόσμος in 3:16 is sometimes debated. Is it a reference to the realm of evil or to the natural world? I tend to think the former is more likely, if for no other reason than the context in which κόσμος appears in chapter 17. Verse 18 of that chapter parallels the destination of God’s sending Jesus and his sending of the disciples. “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” These words follow a reference to the “hatred of the world” and the disciples’ distinction from the world, just as Jesus is not “of [ἐκ] the world.” Furthermore, Jesus states that he does not ask that his followers be taken from the world but protected in it (vv. 14-17). The evidence suggests that the disciples are sent into the realm of evil where they will meet opposition and suffer rejection, even as Jesus did (1:10-11). (For further examples, see 14:33; 15:18-20; 16:1-4.)

The Fourth Gospel, therefore, suggests that the world is evil but that the church is sent into the midst of that evil to bring God’s redeeming love. The contemporary church in the first half of this new century is likely to be forced again and again to stand on the narrow space between accommodation and sectarianism. Of course, this has been an ever-present task for the church throughout the ages and one that is never once and for all accomplished. If the church is to be relevant to the culture, it must know and even employ the categories of culture. It must speak from within the culture and not from outside. Then, however, we may find that we are only a reflection of culture without a message that differs from others (e.g., the self-help books of our time). On the other side, if we withdraw in order to protect our distinction from the world around us, we soon find ourselves alienated from culture and dismissed by the culture as just another sect group.

If we take seriously the Johannine understanding of the mission of the church, we find ourselves engaging culture without becoming identified with it. That understanding of mission means, among other things, that we adopt a countercultural posture without separating ourselves from culture.⁵ The sectarian group that flees culture cannot influence it, so we need to remain within our culture if we hope to influence it. And that is exactly where the Johannine Jesus seems to have sent us. Starting with this premise, we will explore the specific details of what it means to be in the world without sharing its values.

⁵Recent analyses of the language of the Gospel of John propose that the peculiarities of that language arose from the church’s effort to counter their culture and individuate believers from their society. See, for instance, Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) esp. 4-14.

II. THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

An understanding of the church's identity, as well as its mission, is implicit in the Johannine Jesus' statement "as you [God] sent me." The Fourth Gospel constructs an image of a complex community that includes believers as well as God and Christ. The members of this community are brought together by means of a number of different words and phrases. Sometimes it is the verb "abide" (μένω), sometimes the preposition "in" (ἐν), and sometimes the comparative adverb "as" (καθώς). God abides in Christ, and Christ is in God (e.g., 14:10). Believers abide in Christ (15:4), and Jesus prays that "they also may be in us" (i.e., in God and in Christ – 17:21). This relationship is enhanced by God's love of Christ and of the believers (17:23). Even the obedience of believers is modeled after the Son's love of the Father (14:31), for, as they love and obey Christ, God will love them (14:15, 21). As God gives Christ glory (δόξα), so Christ gives believers glory (17:22). The whole of the relationship of Christ with God is the model by which we understand our relationship with God, and our relationships with one another are also shaped by the relationship between God and Christ (15:12).⁶

Not least of all, chapter 17 also invites us to think of the unity of believers in terms of the unity of the Father and the Son. No less than three times in that chapter, Jesus prays that his followers "may be one, as we are one" (vv. 11, 21, and 22-23). The first such petition (v. 11) comes in the section in which Jesus prays for his present and immediate followers (vv. 6-19); we find the second and third (vv. 21-23) in the last section of the prayer, in which Jesus prays for "those who will believe in me through their [the current disciples'] word." So, there is a concern not just for the present believers but for all of us who have come to belief after the first disciples. Moreover, in each case, the basis for a oneness among believers is the fact that Christ and God are one. This unity strengthens community but—more importantly in Jesus' prayer—the unity will evoke faith in others, "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (v. 21) and "so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (v. 23).

The theme of unity contributes to the image of a community of faith modeled on the relationship between God and Christ. They are one, so the church can be and should be one. Note that the singularity of believers is not achieved through institutional or doctrinal changes but through the imitation of the divine relationship. Once again, the community of believers is linked to Christ and God, this time through its unity.

These are just a few examples of the structure of relationships within the church and between the church and God and Christ. The point is that *in the revelation of God in Christ, God creates a new community which includes believers within the community of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."* We have easily understood that God creates a new family through Christ by giving us "power (ἐξουσία) to become

⁶Robert Kysar, *John*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 266.

children of God” (1:12). However, perhaps we have not been so bold as to think of the “children” as a part of and sharing in the relationships of the household that includes the triune God.

Hence, the identity of the true church is marked by its inclusion within the divine community as a full part of those relationships. This is best expressed, I think, in the idea that God gave Jesus “glory” and then Jesus passed it on to the body of believers (17:22). If John uses δόξα in the sense of the Hebraic concept of the כְּבוֹד, then the glory is nothing less than God’s own presence. The natural conclusion of 17:22 is that the church is God’s presence in the world—the divine amid the human. In the context of the Fourth Gospel, we are correct, I believe, to think of the community of believers as the continuing incarnation of the Word (1:4). Such an idea may not be that different from the Pauline concept of the “body of Christ” (e.g., 1 Cor 12:12-27); however, the Johannine concept provides a fresh (if rather complex) way of speaking of the church’s identity.

There is some evidence, however, that the Fourth Evangelist intended to distinguish this “true church” from all of the emerging temporal structures of the evangelist’s time. For instance, there may indeed be a sense in which John puts Peter in a subordinate role to the beloved disciple as a protest against the institutionalization of the church in the late first century.

If the identity of the church is as lofty as this reading of John suggests, what does it mean for our corporate self-understanding in the twenty-first century? First of all, the church will have to be ever mindful that we are not the “true” church, but a human institution designed to be God’s agent in the world. That is to say, simply, that the body of believers today avoids self-righteousness by recognizing we ourselves are still “the world” and not just “in the world.” So long as we are still the world, the church will express all of the sinful and evil inclinations of the κόσμος to which Christ sends us. In addition to balancing ourselves between cultural accommodation and sectarianism, we will have to balance our sense of divine identity and worldliness (or our identity as both saints and sinners at the same time). The question is, how can we be the divine δόξα in the world when we ourselves constantly reflect our own worldliness.

The Gospel of John is very clear in its portrayal of believers. Unlike the tendency of the Gospel of Mark to demean the first disciples, John pictures them as struggling and faulty humans. They constantly misunderstand Jesus (e.g., 16:25-33), act impulsively and mistakenly (e.g., 18:10-11), and even contribute to plots to entrap Jesus (e.g., 5:1-18). Their unfaithfulness to Jesus during the passion is not as absolute as the synoptics would have us believe, for there are some who stand at the foot of the cross, including the unnamed “beloved disciple” and the female disciples.

Still, the Johannine story of Jesus is laced with the recognition that believers are frail and weak. For the Gospel of John the essential nature of sin is simply unbelief, and so when those who had followed Jesus can no longer believe in him, they

are accounted sinful (6:60-65). In another sense, humans are so culpable that they cannot of themselves believe in Christ and accept the revelation. That is accomplished only by their being “drawn” by the Father (6:44; 12:32), being “born from above” (3:3-8), or being “given” to Jesus by God (e.g., 17:6). Believers—and consequently the church—are weak and sinful.

However, for John the community of believers is also sustained by the Holy Spirit who is represented in the gospel most often as the Paraclete. Scholars are in near agreement today in contending that the Fourth Evangelist believed that her or his writing was the result of the work of the Paraclete and that the gospel message came daily into the community of faith by means of the Spirit. So, in spite of themselves, the Christian community witnesses to the presence of God, thanks to the activity of the Spirit among them.

The contemporary church desperately needs a self-understanding that will embolden and empower us for ministry in this changing world. In spite of the enormous gap between what the church is and what it is called to be, we have no alternative but to continue to cling to a belief in the church’s identity like that found in the Gospel of John. Part of our struggle is not with the world or culture “out there”; it is with the world or culture “in here.” Like an athletic team that has a petty dispute within its own ranks, the church’s witness is paled and depreciated. For clergy and congregational leaders that means, among other things, that we can never divide the ministry within our community and the ministry outside our community. Each nurtures the other. We know that we strengthen our ministry beyond the wall of the church by nurturing hope and enthusiasm among our members; but it is also true that, the more we stretch ourselves out into the world, the stronger we become for doing so.

Obviously the Gospel of John supplies us no quick fix for the life of the church in the next decades. Nor is its witness entirely unambiguous. However, this gospel may provide some clarity in terms of who God wants us to be and what God wants us to do. Certainly in a church that is sometimes dominated by Pauline conceptions of the church and its ministry, the Fourth Gospel, too, deserves a hearing. ⊕

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