

John: The Nonsectarian, Missional Gospel

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For many people, reading (or writing) this essay would seem to be a waste of time, an exercise in stating the obvious.¹ After all, a plain-sense reading of the Fourth Gospel would note, and perhaps even stress, such clear missional texts as John 17:18 and 20:21:²

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (17:18)

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (20:21)

To these we could add other missional elements of the Gospel, not least the following:

- The very activity of Jesus as he interacts and dialogues with various figures and groups.
- The frequent use of words like "signs" as well as "work" and "works" to describe some of this activity.
- The pervasive use of two verbs for sending, *pempō* and *apostellō*.
- The frequent calls to faith/belief, and the summary of the Gospel's purpose in 20:31—"But these [accounts of signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."³

1 This essay is a revision of the keynote lecture given at Northeastern Seminary's theology conference entitled "Participation in God's Mission," in March 2016. An expanded version of the essay was delivered as the Payton Lectures at Fuller Theological Seminary in April 2016. The essay was further developed into the Didsbury Lectures at Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, England in October 2016, which were then published as *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018). The present essay is published with the permission of Cascade, an imprint of Wipf and Stock. I am grateful to my research assistant, Michelle Newman Rader, for her help with both the book and this essay.

2 All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

3 Even if the NRSV's "come to believe" should be rendered "continue to believe," this verse would still indicate a missional purpose for the Gospel. We shall return to this question later.

- The role of witnesses and witnessing, ascribed to the disciples, the beneficiaries of Jesus' activity, and the Spirit.
- The miniature mission discourse in 4:34–38.
- The entirety of Jesus' prayer in chapter 17, which calls for unity for the sake of witness.
- The fishing scene in chapter 21, similar in character to the scenes in the Synoptic Gospels of Jesus calling disciples to fish for people.

The Problem

So what is the problem? Part of the issue here is semantic: What do we—whoever “we” happens to be—mean by the word “mission” or “missional,” and what do we mean by the words “sect” and “sectarian,” and their implied opposites? Does mission mean evangelism? Deeds of loving service? Is it exclusively focused on those outside the community? Does “sect” mean an isolated community that deliberately lives apart from society with distinctive values and practices that it hopes to maintain, with a more-or-less disdainful attitude toward the larger world? Or is it a “contrast society” that interacts with the world but with distinctive values and practices that it hopes to share with others?⁴

But the problem is much more than semantic; it is substantive. We need to hear, or perhaps rehear, the charges against the Fourth Gospel made by some of its interpreters. These charges are typically couched in terms of “ethics,” but they clearly relate in significant ways to anything we might think of as “mission.” For example, the great Yale scholar Wayne Meeks once wrote that this Gospel

defines and vindicates the existence of the community that evidently sees itself as unique, alien from its world, under attack, misunderstood, but living in unity with Christ and through him with God. It could hardly be regarded as a missionary tract. . . . It provided a symbolic universe which gave religious legitimacy, a theodicy, to the group's actual isolation from the larger society.⁵

Years later, unrepentant, Meeks wrote that “the Fourth Gospel meets none of our expectations about the way ethics should be constructed,”⁶ for the “only rule [of

4 I intentionally use these rather informal definitions because many who charge the Fourth Gospel (or the community that produced it) with “sectarianism” do not use technical definitions of “sect” from sociologists of religion.

5 Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44–72 (here 70).

6 Wayne A. Meeks, “The Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist,” in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: WJK, 1996), 317–26 (here 320).

the Johannine Jesus] is ‘love one another,’ and that rule is both vague in its application and narrowly circumscribed, being limited solely to those who are firmly within the Johannine circle.”⁷

More radical still are the words of Jack Sanders, who famously and disparagingly compared John with certain kinds of modern evangelistically minded groups that, in his opinion, were hardly Christian:

Precisely because such groups, however, now exist in sufficient abundance to be visible, perhaps the *weakness and moral bankruptcy* of the Johannine ethics can be seen more clearly. Here is not a Christianity that considers that loving is the same as fulfilling the law (Paul) or that the good Samaritan parable represents a demand (Luke) to stop and render even first aid to the man who has been robbed, beaten, and left there for dead. Johannine Christianity is interested only in whether he believes. “Are you saved, brother?” the Johannine Christian asks the man bleeding to death on the side of the road. “Are you concerned about your soul?” “Do you believe that Jesus is the one who came down from God?” “If you believe, you will have eternal life,” promises the Johannine Christian, while the dying man’s blood stains the ground.⁸

Sanders here implies that John is a dangerous text, not truly representative of Jesus and his concerns known from other parts of the New Testament, and unworthy of its canonical status.

Lest we think that such disparaging (what some might call “heretical”) words are found only on the lips of certain kinds of so-called critical scholars, we should recall the words of evangelical scholar Robert Gundry, in his 2002 book *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian*. He wrote, “Just as Jesus the Word spoke God’s word to the world, then, so Jesus’ disciples are to do. But they are not to love the unbelieving world any more than Jesus did. . . . It is enough to love one another and dangerous to love worldlings.”⁹ Unlike Meeks and Sanders, however, for theological reasons Gundry found John’s alleged sectarianism positive.

These sample texts emerged from, and represent a cluster of conclusions about, the Fourth Gospel that we cannot explore at length here. In sum, they build on a

7 Meeks, “Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist,” 318.

8 Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 99–100; emphasis added. While it is true that Sanders hardly had a major impact on Johannine studies, the attitude expressed in this excerpt—though extreme—is not unique to Sanders. It is quoted (with disapproval), for instance, by Richard Hays in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 139.

9 Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian: A Paleofundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism, Especially Its Elites, in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 61.

general critical consensus about the Johannine community that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century under the influence of J. Louis Martyn, Raymond Brown, Meeks, and others.¹⁰ That consensus depicted the Johannine community, either as the Gospel was being produced or at the time of its final redaction, as a community that had experienced conflict with, and likely expulsion from, the synagogue (see *apostynagōgos*; 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) for its confession of Jesus' being equal to God. The result was a community turned in on itself, a sect in survival mode, at odds with "the world"—whether that world was nonbelieving Jews and/or other Christians and/or everyone—"outsiders." Hence the concern for internal cohesion and mutual love, and the (alleged) lack of concern for neighbors and enemies. Not everyone who accepts this sort of historical reconstruction (which, it must be said, has been challenged for numerous reasons¹¹) used or uses the word "sect." Raymond Brown ultimately did not, because he did not believe the Johannine community broke fellowship with other Christians.¹² But it is in this sense of a community turned in on itself that most students of John who do use the word "sect" and "sectarian" in reference to John utilize that language, and it is this sense that I will oppose its applicability to the Fourth Gospel.¹³

Winds of Change

There is already movement from others in the direction this essay seeks to go. In the introduction to an important book on recovering the ethics of John, Christopher Skinner suggests that there are three approaches to Johannine ethics:¹⁴ (1) they do not exist; (2) they are "sectarian, exclusive, negative, or oppositional"¹⁵; and (3) they are "broad, inclusive, or valuable . . . for Christian ethics,"¹⁶ even if often implicit. The majority view, I would suggest is option (2), but sometimes those who seem to deny the existence of any ethic—option (1)—actually allow for a

10 See, e.g., J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968); Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Lives, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979); and Meeks, "The Man from Heaven."

11 See, e.g., David A. Lamb, *Text, Context and the Johannine Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Johannine Writings*, LNTS 47 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

12 Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 88–91.

13 I should note that not all studies of John that focus on historical reconstruction dismiss the notion of mission, either historically, with reference to the first century, or theologically, with reference to today. Raymond Brown says, "By all means Christians must keep trying in various ways to bear a testimony about Christ to the world, but they should not be astounded if they relive in part the Johannine experience [of resistance to the testimony]" (*Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 66).

14 Christopher W. Skinner, "Introduction: (How) Can We Talk About Johannine Ethics? Looking Back and Moving Forward," in *Johannine Ethics: The Moral World of the Gospel and Epistles of John*, ed. Sherri Brown and Christopher W. Skinner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), xvii–xxxvi.

15 Skinner, "Introduction," xviii.

16 Skinner, "Introduction," xxv.

sectarian morality.¹⁷ In essence, then, there are two main approaches, options (2) and (3), the “sectarian” and the “robust but sometimes implicit” approaches.

Regarding option (2), the sectarian interpretation, Skinner says that recent studies of John have produced “countless . . . denunciations of Johannine ethics”¹⁸ similar to those I have noted earlier in this essay. If we transition from the word “ethics” to the word “mission,” or use both,¹⁹ we will still hear many interpreters repeat the sectarian sentiments. For instance, Alan Le Grys, in his book on early Christian mission, claims that the Johannine community is the “introverted community.”²⁰ The Farewell Discourse is “designed to offer reassurance to a community facing an uncertain changing world,” bearing witness to a community that “turns in on itself to retreat from this external threat.”²¹ Mission comes eventually, in 20:21, but “only at the tail-end” of a process of the community members “com[ing] to terms with their new social environment” after the “unwelcome experience of regrouping” after Jesus’ death. This was a community “rather fearful” of mission to the Gentiles.²²

As for option (3), it is the emerging view of a number of scholars, especially Jan van der Watt, Susanne Luther, Ruben Zimmerman, Kobus Kok, Cornelis Bennema, Asish Thomas Koshy, Sookgoo Shin, and the present author.²³ Some of these authors speak primarily about ethics, but many of their concerns and perspectives echo scholars who use explicitly missional language. For option (3), Skinner points to a representative article by Kobus Kok arguing for a

17 E.g., John P. Meier, cited by Skinner, “Introduction,” xix: “Apart from the love that imitates Jesus’ love for his own, John’s Gospel is practically *amoral*. We look in vain for the equivalents of Jesus’ teaching on divorce, oaths and vows, almsgiving, prayer, fasting, or the multitude of other specific moral directives strewn across the pages of Matthew’s Gospel. Everything comes down to imitating Jesus’ love for his disciples; what concrete and specific actions should flow from this love are largely left unspoken.” “Love in Q and John: Love of Enemies, Love of One Another,” *Mid-Stream* 40 (2001): 42–50 (here 47–48).

18 Skinner, “Introduction,” xxv.

19 As does Kobus Kok representing option (3); see below.

20 Alan Le Grys, *Preaching to the Nations: The Origins of Mission In the Early Church* (London: SPCK, 1998), 164.

21 Le Grys, *Preaching to the Nations*, 166.

22 Le Grys, *Preaching to the Nations*, 167.

23 See, e.g., various essays in Jan G. van der Watt, ed., *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, BZNW 141 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006) and in Ruben Zimmerman, Jan G. van der Watt, and Susanne Luther, eds., *Moral Language in the New Testament: The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*, WUNT 2/296 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); most of the essays in Brown and Skinner, *Johannine Ethics*; the entirety of Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmerman, eds., *Rethinking the Ethics of John: “Implicit Ethics” in the Johannine Writings*, WUNT 1/291 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Cornelis Bennema, *Mimesis in the Johannine Literature: A Study in Johannine Ethics*, LNTS 498 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017); Asish Thomas Koshy, *Identity, Mission, and Community: A Study of the Johannine Resurrection Narrative*, Biblical Hermeneutics Rediscovered 11 (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2018); Sookgoo Shin, *Ethics in the Gospel of John: Discipleship as Moral Progress*, Bib Int 168 (Leiden: Brill, 2019); and Gorman, *Abide and Go*. See also Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).

“missional-incarnational ethos” in the narrative of John.²⁴ Like many studies of mission in John,²⁵ Kok’s study begins in John 4 and widens out. He concludes that this missional-incarnational ethos

will transcend all boundaries (cultural, social, economical, racial, etc.) to show love and be accepting of everyone. . . . [T]he narrative of Jesus and the Samaritan woman should be integrated not only with the sending motive and ethos of the Son, but also with the imperative of the missional ethos of the followers of Jesus (cf. John 20:21). Together these elements form an inclusive moral language or ethical paradigm of mission and give the reader a full and integrated picture of the essence of behavior in following the way of Jesus.²⁶

Similarly, Sookgoo Shin argues that disciples in John are called to imitate four of Christ’s traits: love, unity, mission, and “ex-status” (other-worldliness).²⁷

There are, of course, some significant studies of mission in John.²⁸ Even among

24 Kobus Kok, “As the Father Has Sent Me, I Send You: Toward a Missional-Incarnational Ethos in John 4,” in Zimmerman, van der Watt, and Luther, *Moral Language in the New Testament*, 168–93, discussed in Skinner, “Introduction,” xxvi–xxvii.

25 See, e.g., Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4.1–42*, WUNT 2/31 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988).

26 Kok, “As the Father Has Sent Me, I Send You,” 193.

27 Shin, *Ethics in the Gospel of John*, 131–91.

28 E.g. Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission*; Andreas Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel, with Implications for the Fourth Gospel’s Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Köstenberger’s *The Missions of Jesus*, though frequently cited in the scholarly literature, has significant flaws, which are indicated by the title’s plural “missions.” Köstenberger criticizes what he calls the “incarnational” interpretation of mission in John, which sees Jesus in part as a model of service in the world, arguing that such an interpretation underestimates and even “jeopardizes” the uniqueness of Jesus’ own mission in contrast to that of the disciples, which is what his book highlights—the “careful line [that] seems to be drawn between the roles of Jesus and of the disciples” (216–17). Thus Köstenberger argues for a “representational” model of mission, in which disciples do not *imitate* Jesus but *represent* him. Their sole similarity to Jesus’ mission is their relationship to the sender, “one of obedience and utter dependence,” like that of the Son to the Father (217). The disciples’ mission, including their “greater works” (14:12) and fruit bearing (ch. 15), is, for Köstenberger, only witnessing to Jesus and gathering people into the church as they offer “the word of ‘life in Jesus’” to a sinful world (220). After discussing the greater works of 14:12 (171–75), Köstenberger connects them to the fruit bearing of 15:12 as, in each case, making converts (184–86). Köstenberger’s exegetical work and hermeneutical appropriation of it seem to be a reaction against an evangelical interpretation of Christian mission that is more than evangelism, his primary target being the incarnational-missional theology of John Stott. Exegetically, Köstenberger appears to create a huge bifurcation between the first half of the Gospel, focusing on Jesus’ unique mission, and the second half of the Gospel, focusing on the disciples’ mission. Although Köstenberger’s work is now somewhat dated, and although many Christians have found other ways to deal with the alleged dichotomy between service (broadly defined) and evangelism, the issues he raises and the solution he offers—somewhat misguided, in my view—are still in need of careful reflection. To be fair to Köstenberger, in a later co-written book, he does say that mission “proceeds in word and deed” and that the “shape of Jesus’ mission determines the shape of the church’s mission”: Andreas J.

sympathetic readers of the Fourth Gospel, however, mission has often been underappreciated. Dean Flemming notes that “most recent treatments of the theology of John’s Gospel give little attention to the theme of mission.”²⁹ As evidence, he points to two significant and influential works, D. Moody Smith’s *Theology of the Gospel of John*, and Richard Bauckham’s and Carl Mosser’s edited volume *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*. We could add Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel*.³⁰ (This observation, I wish to stress, is not meant to take away from the value of these works otherwise, but simply to note their relative inattention to mission.)

The Present Thesis

So where do we go from here? The most obvious answer is to go back to the text of the Gospel. But even that could be problematic. Teresa Okure points out that certain “overtly missionary passages” in John (such as 3:16, 4:31–38, 17:20, and chapter 21) have at times been assigned to the Gospel’s “final redactional layers.”³¹ The approach taken here, however, is to consider the Gospel as a literary whole, a unity. We will be paying attention, not to the alleged history of the community and the Gospel’s supposed corollary redactional history, but to the final form of the text. As Andrew Byers has written, this sort of approach “focuses not on the community that produced John’s Gospel, but on the sort of community John’s Gospel seeks to produce”³²—and we may add, “to produce both then and now.” That is, we will be reading John as Scripture, and doing so with what has been called in recent years a “missional hermeneutic.”³³ Among several possible ways to understand a missional hermeneutic, I propose that it raises three sets of closely related questions:

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- Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain. *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 159–62 (quotes from 159, 160).
- 29 Dean Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 114 n.3. Flemming’s own treatment of mission in John, though brief, is insightful: *Why Mission? Reframing New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), 53–72. See also Andy Johnson, *Holiness and the Missio Dei* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 79–104.
- 30 D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser, eds., *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
- 31 Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission*, 34.
- 32 Andrew J. Byers *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John*, SNTSMS 166 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3. Neither Byers nor I wish completely to dismiss interest in the Johannine community but rather to prioritize different concerns in engaging the Gospel.
- 33 For discussion, see my *Abide and Go*, 2–8 and the resources noted there.

General Questions	Specific, Contextual Questions
What does this text say about the <i>missio Dei</i> ?	What does this text say about the <i>mission Dei</i> here and now?
What does this text say about the condition of humanity and the world, about the need for God's saving mission?	What does this text say about the specific condition and need of humanity and the world <i>here and now</i> , in our context?
What does this text say about the nature and mission of God's people as participants in the <i>missio Dei</i> ?	What does this text say to us about the call of God on us to participate in the <i>missio Dei</i> <i>here and now</i> ?

The theological tension in the final form of the Gospel, however, is (as we have seen) this: the *missio Dei* and the corollary mission of God's people appears, to many, rather narrow. Although there seems to be a missional thrust in the sense of evangelism rather narrowly understood, to many interpreters there seems to be little or no practical concern for those outside the community or for anyone's material welfare. The logical conclusion would seem, therefore, to be precisely what Jack Sanders said. Or, to put it more positively, what Bultmann said about the mission of Jesus: "Thus it turns out in the end that Jesus as the Revealer of God *reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer*"—in which case, we should conclude, Sanders was basically right.³⁴

The argument of this essay is that John is indeed a thoroughly and broadly—one might say *holistically*—missional gospel. It neither reflects nor fosters a sectarian community. Moreover, according to John, the disciples do not merely bear witness to Jesus, represent Jesus, or imitate Jesus. Rather, they abide in him, they participate in him. They therefore participate in what he is doing, thereby becoming like him and like the One who sent him. I will refer to this transformative, missional participation as missional theosis. Some will object to this terminology, but one need not agree with the terminology to concur with the basic argument.³⁵

Space permits only an outline of a larger argument, focusing on the Gospel's structure and theme, with a brief analysis of some of the missional texts.³⁶

The Argument from Structure and Theme

Structure

For more than a half-century, the Fourth Gospel has been widely understood as comprising a prologue, two "books," and an epilogue. In 1953, C. H. Dodd offered the following outline:³⁷

34 See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament: Complete in One Volume*, 2 vols., trans. K. Grobel (New York: Scribner, 1969 [orig. 1951, 1955]), 2:66.

35 For a wider discussion of the issues surrounding terminology, and the case that Paul's approach to mission also may (but not must) be called "missional theosis," see my *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

36 The larger argument appears in *Abide and Go*.

37 C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), x, 289–91.

1:1–51	The Proem: Prologue (1:1–18) and Testimony (1:19–51)
2:1–12:50	The Book of Signs
13:1–20:31	The Book of the Passion (The Farewell Discourses and The Passion-narrative) ³⁸
21:1–25	Postscript

In 1966 Raymond Brown outlined the Gospel as follows:³⁹

1:1–18	The Prologue
1:19–12:50	The Book of Signs
13:1–20:31	The Book of Glory
21:1–25	Epilogue

Brown's outline has become a standard, approaching quasi-canonical status. It is used, for example, in commentaries by both the Roman Catholic Frank Moloney and the evangelical Protestant Andreas Köstenberger.⁴⁰

Another approach to the Gospel's structure is to distinguish, with Moody Smith and others, between "The Revelation of the Glory Before the World" in part one and "The Revelation of the Glory Before the Community" in part two.⁴¹ Marianne Meye Thompson, in her commentary, further divides the first major section into 1:19–4:54 as "Witnesses to Jesus" and 5:1–12:50 as "The Life-Giving Son of God."⁴² Finally, then, with Thompson, we have an outline suggesting that Jesus and his disciples have a mission. Furthermore, Thompson keeps chapters 20 and 21 together, which rightly works against a natural tendency to underestimate the significance of something called an "epilogue." Interestingly, Richard Hays wonders if chapters 20–21 should be called "the book of the resurrection."⁴³

38 Recently, both Richard Hays and Marianne Meye Thompson have picked up on Dodd's phrase "The Book of the Passion," though Thompson does not use it in recounting the Gospel's structure in her commentary. See Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 79, 129 n.7; and Marianne Meye Thompson, "'They Bear Witness to Me': The Psalms in the Passion Narrative of the Gospel of John" in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kevin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 267–83 (here 268). Hays and Thompson would conclude "The Book of the Passion" at 19:42.

39 Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 2 vols., AB 29–29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) 1: cxxxviii–cxxxix.

40 Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Francis P. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, SP 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998).

41 D. Moody Smith, *John*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 7–10. See also, somewhat similarly, J. Ramsey Michaels (*The Gospel of John*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], v–vii, 30–37), who uses the phrase "Jesus' Self-Revelation" rather than "The Revelation."

42 Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2015), vii–x. Another of Smith's students, Craig Keener, labels 1:19–6:71 "Witness in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee" and makes other minor changes to the standard outline but does not question its basic approach: Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012 [orig.: Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003]), 1:xi–xxiv.

43 Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 129 n.7.

Without denying the importance of outlines that focus on Christology, I want to suggest a new approach:⁴⁴

- I. Opening: The Mission of God the **Father** and the *Incarnation* of the **Son** (1:1–18)
- II. The Mission of the **Father** and the **Son** in *Doing Signs and Giving Life* (1:19–12:50)
- III. The Mission of the **Son** in *Death* and the Future Mission of the **Spirit**-Empowered Disciples (13:1–19:42)
 - a. **Jesus’** Mission Discourse with the Promise of the **Spirit**, and **Jesus’** Prayer of Consecration and Commissioning (13:1–17:26)
 - i. Mission Discourse (13:1–16:33)
 - ii. Commissioning Prayer (17:1–26)
 - b. The Culmination and Completion of **Jesus’** Mission in his *Death* (18:1–19:42)
- IV. The *Resurrection* of the **Son** and the Mission of the **Spirit**-Empowered Disciples (20:1–21:25)

Note the key features of this outline:

1. the persistent focus, from beginning to end, on mission (note underlined words);
2. the trinitarian substance of the mission and of the Gospel (note **boldfaced** words);
3. the narrative and Christological continuity of the mission (note *italicized* words);
4. the literary and theological rehabilitation of chapter 21 (in connection with chapter 20); and
5. the choice of the term “Opening” over “Prologue.”

Despite the significance of each of these features, space permits me to comment only on the last of them.

The Gospel’s first eighteen verses are not merely a prologue or an overture. I agree with many interpreters that they introduce themes and serve as a hermeneutical lens for the entire Gospel. But this passage does more, and it does something different, too. It reveals the narrative and theological starting point of the entire Gospel and the fundamental reality that makes the *missio Dei* what it is.⁴⁵ This

44 This outline is slightly revised from both the original lecture and its published form in *Abide and Go*, 40.

45 Although in his forthcoming essay, “History, Eschatology, and New Creation: Early Christian Perspectives on God’s Action in Jesus” (*Canadian-American Theological Review* 8.1 [2019]), N.

originating reality is the eternal intimate relationship and union between the Father and the Son that consists of love, light, and life and into which human beings are being drawn through the incarnation, ministry, and death/exaltation of Jesus.

We will hear more about this fundamental theological reality throughout the Gospel. As the narrative proceeds, we learn more fully what it means that the Son is the living exegesis, indeed the “self-exegesis,”⁴⁶ of the Father and is God (e.g., 8:58, confirming 1:1–2, 18). We learn that the relationship between the Father and the Son is one of mutual indwelling, or what the tradition will later call perichoresis (10:38; 14:10–11, 20). Therefore, although the Son is sent by the Father and is his agent, he is much more than that. Andrew Lincoln, although stressing Jesus’ role as divine agent,⁴⁷ gets to the heart of the paradoxical matter: “In witnessing to God . . . Jesus also bears witness about himself, and in testifying about himself, he bears witness to God.”⁴⁸ This only makes full sense in John, says Lincoln, because the Gospel affirms that Jesus is one with God.⁴⁹ Udo Schnelle makes an even stronger claim: “The central theological concept in the Fourth Gospel is the work of the Father in the Son. It is not a matter of the Father’s working through the Son, for the Son is more than an instrument, messenger, or agent of the Father: the Son shares the Father’s essential being.”⁵⁰ Agency, therefore, depends in the case of Jesus on ontology, on his directly sharing in the very identity and character of God. That is why “in him was life” (1:4).

My point here is a simple one: to be drawn to Jesus is to be drawn to God; to be “swept up” into Jesus’ life is to be swept up into the life of the God who is love.⁵¹ And that brings us to the Gospel’s theme and purpose.

T. Wright uses the term “prologue” but does not use either “*missio Dei*” or “opening.” I think the general gist of my argument here is compatible with his approach to John. For Wright, the Fourth Gospel is a new Genesis, a “story of creation and new creation in terms of the fulfilment of the divine purpose [i.e., *missio Dei*] in, for and through Israel.” Moreover, as we will see below, Wright and I agree firmly that the divine mission in John means “the *renewal* of the present world rather than its abandonment.” Furthermore, in his interpretation of the divine image as a “vocational” picture of humanity, Wright implicitly speaks of the human dimension of mission as similarity to God, which is close to what I mean by “missional theosis.”

46 Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 674.

47 E.g., Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St. John*, BNTC 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 60–62.

48 Lincoln, *John*, 61.

49 Lincoln, *John*, 62.

50 Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, 663.

51 The “sweeping” image comes from Francis J. Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). This notion of being swept into the life and love of God is, at least in part, what the Christian tradition means by “theosis.”

Theme

There are of course many themes in John. I remember the first time I drew up a list of them so that students could choose one to explore in a final course paper—I had dozens. But it seems that the Gospel itself prioritizes one, into which the others fit in one way or another: life. That is, life abundant and eternal. The “life” word-family appears 56 times in John, 50 of them in the first half of the gospel, when the Gospel narrates Jesus’ ministry prior to his saving death. Two-thirds of those 50 occurrences are found in chapters 4 through 6, and half of those two-thirds in chapter 6 alone. Jesus is about the business of life.⁵²

This Gospel tells us that its purpose is to be an instrument of life: “But these [accounts of signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). Is this an evangelistic or a formational purpose? Andrew Lincoln is one of many who argue for translating the purpose clause in 20:31 “in order that you may continue to believe.” He contends that a variety of readers/hearers of the Gospel would have needed strengthening, especially in view of the Johannine community’s recent experience of various crises (expulsion, etc.), “if they were to bear effective witness.”⁵³ Lincoln’s emphasis on the missional dimension of the Gospel’s purpose, if his interpretation of 20:31 is accepted, is significant.

It is still possible to add some perspective to this old dispute. The debate sometimes stalls because it deteriorates into an argument between (a) those who think of Gospels as both derived from and addressed to community circumstances and needs and (b) those who conceive of Gospels more broadly as intended for the universal church and/or for use in bringing people to faith (evangelization). This is an unnecessary either-or situation that should be a both-and matter. “John writes,” claims Dean Flemming in sync with Lincoln, “to encourage and strengthen the faith of this new generation of believers [i.e., not eyewitnesses], including their participation in the mission of God.”⁵⁴ That is, believers will be strengthened, will continue to believe/be faithful, which includes being faithful to the missional vocation given to them by Jesus both before and after his death and resurrection. But how will such believers participate in God’s mission? They will do so in part by telling the stories of Jesus and of conversion to Jesus that fill the pages of this Gospel. The signs John recounts *did* generate faith and faithfulness, and they may do so again when they are recounted anew. The Fourth Gospel may

52 The noun *zōē* (“life”) occurs 36 times, 17 times qualified by “eternal”; the cognate verb *zaō* (“live”) 17 times; and the related verb *zōopoieō* (“make alive”) 3 times.

53 Lincoln, *John*, 87–88.

54 Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God*, 113. Flemming, echoing Ben Witherington, thinks the gospel’s accounts of people coming to faith may give the gospel an “indirect evangelistic purpose” (114), but I would go further: the gospel is directly evangelistic in its goal of forming an evangelistic, or missional, community.

not be an evangelistic tract, but its content inherently has potential missional value; those faithfully formed by its stories should, and hopefully will, extend the divine life to others by means of both their words and their deeds.

The Gospel's structure and movement at both the macro- and the microlevels reinforce this perspective on 20:31. The Gospel bears witness to a life-giving, life-changing Savior who invites others both to receive that life and to pass it on. And they do, as we see for instance, in the case of the Samaritan woman (ch. 4) and the man born blind (ch. 9). To be swept into the life of the life-giving Savior will include sharing that life with others, both when it is welcomed (as in ch. 4) and when it is resisted (as in ch. 9).⁵⁵ *The apparent ambiguity of the gospel's expressed purpose in 20:31 is due to the thick, missional ethos of the gospel.* Like Jesus himself in John, the Gospel text is itself inherently missional, even evangelistic, and at the same time missionally formational of those already evangelized. God's mission involves both drawing people into the divine life offered in Jesus and nurturing them within it. Part of the problem in the discussion of John and mission is that interpreters frequently define mission too narrowly as (some form of) "outreach." They thus fail to recognize that the formation of a holy, unified, loving community is actually part of the divine mission and therefore of the church's mission.⁵⁶ Life together is part of life in mission, and vice versa.⁵⁷

Reading John in Concert with Ezekiel

The central leitmotif of life appears, of course, in the various "I am" sayings scattered throughout the Gospel. We will focus on just one, "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14), and its corollary claim about Jesus' mission: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10b). The chief intertext for these pronouncements is Ezek 34. We need to note two dimensions of this intertextual phenomenon.

First, Ezek 34 depicts both God himself (34:11, 15, 22, 31)⁵⁸ and God's servant/prince David (34:23–24) as the shepherd, with the emphasis on God, who—both rhetorically and theologically—surrounds David:

¹¹For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. . . . ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up

55 The emphasis on the dynamic of mission in the face of resistance will reappear in the Mission Discourse in chs. 13–17.

56 On this with respect to Paul, see Michael Barram, *Mission and Moral Reflection in Paul*, StBibLit 75 (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

57 This claim anticipates the discussion of John 13 and 15 below.

58 See also Ezek 34:6–10.

the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. . . . ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged. . . . ²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken. ²⁵I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely. . . . ³⁰They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. ³¹You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God.”

Ezekiel portrays the king as both agent of God and participant in God’s life-giving shepherding, a normal aspect of the royal mission in the world on God’s behalf. But in calling himself the good shepherd, Jesus assumes both the Davidic role of divine agent *and the role of God*. He is at once human and divine, the David-like agent of God’s life and, as God, the very source of that life.

Second, we must pay careful attention to the content of the life promised in Ezek 34. It is certainly abundant, full of good pasture, freedom, security, blessing, justice, and the knowledge of God—an eschatological vision of almost unparalleled riches. We must note, then, that this abundant life is both material and spiritual—though I seriously doubt that Ezekiel or Jesus or John drew that distinction. But we often do. Yet if Jesus is *this* good shepherd, offering *this* kind of abundant life, then the ministry of Jesus is to both spiritual and material needs. Furthermore, if there is a ministry for his disciples like that of Jesus (“as the Father sent me” referring to Jesus’ missional *modus operandi*, not just the bare fact of his sentness), it too will of necessity be both spiritual and material.

This observation leads us directly into the question of the signs in the first half of the gospel.

Signs of Life

The significance of the signs in John is frequently misunderstood and underestimated. Many interpreters, both popular and academic, view them as something like “pointers to something other than themselves,” because “that’s what signs do”—so the argument goes. In the case of the Synoptics, however, we often hear people say that healings and exorcisms and the like are “signs of the kingdom,” but we seldom hear anyone say that those things are insignificant in themselves and only point to something else. Not at all. The signs of the kingdom in the Synoptics and, I would argue, the signs of life in John, point *both* to themselves as constituent

dimensions of the larger reality (whether the kingdom or “life”) *and* to the larger reality of which they are part. Otherwise, the materiality of Ezek 34 disappears, and the ministry of Jesus becomes a gnostic mission of imparting only spiritual knowledge rather than eschatological life.

I would suggest that this is a hermeneutical misstep rather than an appropriate reading of the text. Linguistically, we have imported a notion of sign from our culture—“signage”—into the text. BDAG, the lexicon, however, rightly gives only two basic meanings for *sēmeion*: (1) “a sign or distinguishing mark whereby something is known, *sign, token, indication*”; and (2) “an event that is an indication or confirmation of intervention by transcendent powers, *miracle, portent*.” (Rightly or wrongly, it puts the Johannine uses into definition 2.)⁵⁹ More importantly, theologically we have turned the realized eschatology of John, grounded in Ezek 34, into a purely incorporeal, spiritual salvation. It is this kind of gnostic interpretation that Sanders rightly rejects, but this is not what the text of the Gospel conveys if we have good intertextual ears.

Udo Schnelle contends that the signs are “the divine presence in the world.” They “illustrate” (so the English translation, but the context suggests he really means “instantiate”) “*the saving divine presence in the Incarnate One, who as the mediator of creation created life at the beginning (John 1:3), is himself the Life (1:4), and is the giver of life to others.*”⁶⁰ That is, the signs do not *only* point to Jesus as the *source* of the divine life; they are also the *presence* of the divine life.

This “material” interpretation of abundant life may meet with a bit of resistance. It could lead to the prosperity gospel, some will charge. However, if you were living, for instance, in the remote village of Dindi in Zimbabwe a few years ago, where severe drought had left you without any water *at all* for your children and yourself, and no hope for getting any, then perhaps Jesus the source of living water, rightly understood, would also have wanted to give the children a cup of H₂O, probably through the hands of his disciples. This would be a sign of the life-giving presence of Jesus.⁶¹ John does not deny that sort of life-need or Jesus’ desire to fill it; he actually feeds the hungry and gives drink to the thirsty.⁶² John is like a fourfold interpreter of Scripture. His images are pregnant with allegorical and anagogical, or eschatological, meaning. But like a good medieval interpreter, *John never leaves the literal behind*, consistently implies the tropological (moral/

59 BDAG, s.v. *semeion*.

60 Schnelle, *New Testament Theology*, 677; emphasis original.

61 This kind of situation is repeated across the globe on a regular basis. Those in North America can begin to identify with this sort of reality in times of natural disaster or in extreme ongoing cases such as that of Flint, Michigan, in the U.S.

62 On this, see the insightful contribution of Harold Attridge in Harold Attridge, Warren Carter, and Jan G. van der Watt, “Quaestiones disputatae: Are John’s Ethics Apolitical?,” *New Testament Studies* 62 (2016): 484–97.

missional), and always grounds all spiritual significance in the literal—meaning, for John, in the concrete sign.

Moreover, those worried about a material interpretation of the signs that might imply the selfish pursuit of personal prosperity need only wait for the second half of the Gospel, where we find that the abundant life Jesus offers is not without cost, as already suggested in the story of the healing of the man born blind. The abundant life is both demanding and potentially dangerous. It is cruciform, as chapter 13 will say. But it is always material, physical, as well as spiritual. It is *life*, not *escape* from life.

The Argument from Texts

I have argued that the mission of God, of Jesus, and of Jesus' disciples is to "sweep" people into the abundant life of God, a life that is material as well as spiritual—holistic. What I seek to do now is twofold. First, I want to show how for John mission is participatory; this will be a defense of the term "missional theosis," even *cruciform* missional theosis, as appropriate for describing the disciples' mission in John. Second, I want to take two texts, chapters 13 and 15, that could be misread as supporting the sectarian thesis, and argue for their being primary evidence for John's notion of missional theosis. As a preface, I begin with a brief consideration of chapter 4.

John 4

Something fundamental about the disciples' mission is indicated in John 4, where we find a miniature mission discourse (4:31–38) that is sandwiched, Markan-style, into the story of Jesus as a paradigmatic missionary and the Samaritan woman as a paradigmatic convert and missionary. A chain of witness appears here that will place its mark on the Gospel as a whole: the Father has sent the Son who sends the disciples:

³⁴Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." ³⁵Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

The missional implications for the disciples and the church are significant. Three things stand out.

- First, *discipleship* is inherently *missional*; it involves being sent.⁶³
- Second, Christian mission is *derivative*, an extension of the Son's work, which is itself derivative because it is ultimately the Father's work.
- And third, Christian mission is *participatory*; it is entering into "their labor"—the activity of others. Although this could be a reference to some unnamed group of (human) missionaries, as most interpreters propose, I would suggest that the overall missional theology of the Gospel makes it more likely that these "laborers" are the divine missionaries, that is, the Father, the Son, and (implicitly) the Spirit.

The participatory, derivative, and missional character of discipleship is especially evident in John 13 and 15, to which we now turn.

John 13–15 as Components of the Johannine Mission Discourse

As is clear from the outline of the Fourth Gospel offered above, John 13–17 should be understood as the Johannine Mission Discourse. It is an expansion of 4:31–38. The strongest argument for this interpretation is in the work of Teresa Okure. Most importantly, she notes the parallels, sometimes nearly verbatim, between the mission discourses in Matthew and Luke and what is normally called the Johannine Farewell Discourse.⁶⁴

63 See (despite the limitations noted earlier) especially Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*, 176–98.

64 Okure argues that chapters 13–17 are an expansion of 4:31–38 (*The Johannine Approach to Mission*, 194–95) before showing the similarities between the Synoptic mission discourses and John 13–17. I have constructed this table in large measure from Okure's list of parallels (196 n. 11), with modifications and additions. Okure implies that the list of parallels is not exhaustive. She wonders whether John 13–17 "might not be the Johannine version of the Synoptic missionary charge" in Matthew 10 and Luke 9–10, referring specifically to Matt 10 and Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–25 (196). The parallels certainly suggest, at the very least, an overlap in concerns. Together with other dimensions of the so-called Farewell Discourse, this overlap becomes part of a compelling case for the centrality of mission in John 13–17. Okure's interpretation (also on 196) of the proximity of the Farewell/Mission Discourse to Jesus' death is that the evangelist "again underlines his position that Jesus alone does and completes the Father's work (17:4)," but that is not the only significance of the literary proximity. It is also the case that the mission of the disciples is to share intimately in the shape of Jesus' own mission, i.e., they will participate in the kind of slave-like foot washing activity (concrete and cruciform) that is an icon of his death and hence of his mission.

John	Matthew and Luke
Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. (13:16)	A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! (Matt 10:24–25; cf. Luke 6:40)
Remember the word that I said to you, “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. (15:20)	
Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. (13:20; cf. 12:44)	Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. (Matt 10:40; cf. Matt 18:5; Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48)
	Whoever listens to you listens to me (Luke 10:16a)
If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. (15:18)	[Y]ou will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matt 10:22; cf. Matt 24:9b; Luke 21:17)
But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. (15:21)	
Cf. 1 John 3:13: Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.	
Whoever hates me hates my Father also. (15:23; cf. 5:23)	Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me. (Luke 10:16)
They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. (16:2)	Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues (Matt 10:17; cf. Matt 24:9a; Mark 13:9; Luke 21:12, 16)
	Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death (Matt 10:21; cf. Mark 13:12; Luke 21:16)
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. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. (15:26–27; cf. 14:26)	When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt 10:19–20; cf. Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11–12; 21:13)

We will see that the distinctiveness of the *Johannine* understanding of mission is that it is *explicitly participation* in the mission of Jesus, which is the mission/work of God, as already suggested by 4:34–38.

John 13

The Mission Discourse begins with Jesus’ foot washing and two interpretations of it, one soteriological (13:6–11) and one ethical/missional (13:12–35), if we can separate the two for a moment—though ultimately they are inseparable. There is

a dizzying amount of theological and spiritual activity and energy in chapter 13, but three main points need to be emphasized.

First, what is happening here is a parable or metaphor of forgiveness and self-giving love, but it is also much more. In both interpretations, the foot washing is an invitation to transformative participation at the deepest and fullest level. In 13:6–11, the transformation is effected by Jesus' word and/or his death, and later in the development of the church symbolized by water-baptism. This cleansing also draws the one washed into the death of Jesus, as Paul says of baptism in Rom 6; it is an event of *participation* in Jesus' death. (The new birth by water and the Spirit of chapter 3 already anticipated a connection between water and the cross—the “lifting up” of Jesus.) The word “share” in v. 8 is key: “Unless I wash you, you have no share (*meros*) with me,” says Jesus to Peter.

In the second interpretation of the foot washing, the washed ones become those who wash; soteriological participation organically becomes practice, or ethics/mission, as Jesus calls on disciples to love others similarly.⁶⁵ In light of the significant linguistic and ethical/missional connections between chapters 13 and 15 (such as the adjective “cleansed/pruned,” the noun “disciple,” and the verb “do”⁶⁶), we should understand that such ethical/missional activity can only take place by “abiding” in Jesus, clearly a pregnant image of participation.⁶⁷ The foot washing “serves to draw the disciples into Jesus' coming glorification [on the cross] as an *incorporating act*,” as Mark Matson puts it.⁶⁸ It is more like a sacrament, an invitation to *participate* in Jesus' death, both as acted upon and as actors.

Second, if it is God's love that motivates the sending of Jesus to heal and save the world by means of death/exaltation (3:14–17), and if it is this death-exaltation that will draw all people to Jesus (12:32), then it makes perfect sense that the enacted parable of this paradoxical humiliating-exalting death would point precisely to the reality of being drawn into the love of the Father and the Son manifested on the cross. Since Jesus is the “self-exegesis” of God (Schnelle), then Jesus in motion is God in motion; the act of foot washing tells us something profound, not only about the self-giving love of Jesus, but also about the gratuitous, hospitable, kenotic love of God. In this story we enter “the heart” of the Fourth

65 The use of “mission” language here is defended in the discussion below.

66 “Cleansed/pruned” = *katharos* in 13:10–11; 15:3; “disciple” = *mathētēs* in 13:5, 22–23, 35; 15:8. For the verb “do,” see further below.

67 For a participatory interpretation, see also Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John*, 106, who refers as well to C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Louisville: WJK, 1978), 441.

68 Mark A. Matson, “To Serve as Slave: Footwashing as Paradigmatic Status Reversal” in *One in Christ Jesus: Essays on Early Christianity and “All That Jazz,” in Honor of S. Scott Bartchy*, ed. David Lertis Matson and K. C. Richardson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 113–31 (here 130; emphasis added).

Gospel, where we find “the extraordinary revelation of God—‘God at our feet,’” in the memorable words of Brendan Byrne.⁶⁹

Thus the foot washing depicts Jesus drawing his disciples to himself, the source of life, and then, through those disciples, drawing others to himself. The parable portrays an inherently missional Father and Son, an inherently missional cross, and (one would think) an inherently missional, cruciform band of disciples. This parable is an “open” story, one with multiple possible practical interpretations for the disciples. Since foot washing is so earthy, so concrete, it must not be overly spiritualized. Rather, it is like the text of Ezek 34: holistic; material as well as spiritual.

But there is a problem. The foot washing seems limited in scope to the community of disciples: “one another’s feet” (13:14). Yet that goes against the theology of the foot washing, which is the icon of God’s love for the world.

Third, then, we need to pay close attention to 13:14–16:

¹⁴So if I, your Lord (*kyrios*) and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For (*gar*) I have set you an example (*hypodeigma*), that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants (*doulos*) are not greater than their master (*kyriou*), nor are messengers (*apostolos*) greater than the one who sent them.

In order not to sound gender-exclusive, the NRSV has pluralized the nouns in v. 16 (*doulos*, *apostolos*) that refer to the role of the disciples. Furthermore, the NRSV does not translate *kyrios* in v. 16 as it does in v. 14. And it renders *apostolos*—which occurs only here in the Fourth Gospel—rather weakly with “messenger.” We might therefore better translate v. 16 this way:

^{16a}Very truly, I tell you, a servant (*doulos*) is not greater than that person’s lord/Lord (*kyriou*), ^bnor is an authorized representative (*apostolos*) greater than the one/One who sent that person.

The structure of this passage suggests that there are actually two related, but not identical, kinds of foot washing required of the disciples. As servants of their lord/Lord, they are to wash one another’s feet (v. 14), an exhortation that is grounded (“For”; *gar*) in the example of Jesus (v. 15) and implicitly repeated in v. 16a, as indicated by the repetition of the word *kyrios*. But v. 16b comes as a bit of a surprise, as the relational imagery changes from lord-slave to sender-sent one. This suggests that the example (*hypodeigma*) Jesus has given in the foot washing is more expansive than simply obediently imitating the Lord by washing feet

69 Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A Reading of John’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014), 228.

within the community. Jesus the Lord is also Jesus the Sender, and each disciple is a sent one, an *apostolos*. That is, v. 16b is clearly *externally* rather than *internally* oriented. It is about the “apostle” going out and implicitly washing the feet of others just as the sender-Jesus washed feet not only of friends, but also of enemies and traitors like Judas and Peter. Centripetal (internally focused) foot washing is complemented by centrifugal (externally focused) foot washing. This external focus corresponds, as suggested above, to the fact that the cross, symbolized by the foot washing, is the act of God’s love for the world (3:16).

The outward, missional focus of v. 16b is reinforced by v. 20: “Very truly [or “Amen, amen”], I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” The mission of God is achieved by the loving death of Jesus, which creates a beloved community that practices concrete, cruciform love both for one another *and* for those to whom it is sent. That is why, when Jesus repeats the internal-love command, he stresses its missional effect: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:35). These words do not mean that love is simply an identity marker. Rather, such love, to use Johannine idiom, is a sign that points both to itself and beyond, to Jesus the source. Even internal foot washing carries external, missional significance.

John 15

In the Scriptures of Israel the people of God are sometimes portrayed as God’s vineyard or vine.⁷⁰ Musa Kunene suggests that the metaphor conveys two main things, “corporateness” and “covenant”: “the corporate existence of Israel as YHWH’s chosen people . . . [and] the covenant relationship between Israel and YHWH which embeds the holiness of Israel as people belonging to YHWH.”⁷¹ The prophets especially utilize the metaphor, according to Kunene, when Israel has become “fruitless” by failing to practice the covenantal responsibilities, falling instead into injustice, unrighteousness, and idolatry, and needs to obey YHWH once again.⁷² Significantly, when Israel falls away from YHWH, “it has thus ceased to be a beacon to the nations.”⁷³ That is, the image of the vine, fruitful or fruitless, includes within it what we might call the *missional dimension* of Israel’s vocation. In addition, then, the fruitful vine, along with the fig, could be a symbol of the prosperity and peace of the Promised Land (abundant life, if you will) and, when

70 E.g., Ps 80:8–16; Isa 5:1–12; 27:2–6; Jer 2:21; 6:9; Ezek 15:1–8; 19:10–14; 17:5–10; Hos 9:10; 10:1.

71 Musa Victor Mbabuli Kunene, *Communal Holiness in the Gospel of John: The Vine Metaphor as a Test Case with Lessons from African Hospitality and Trinitarian Theology*, Langham Monographs (Carlisle, UK: Langham Partnership, 2012), 46; cf. 48–52.

72 Kunene, *Communal Holiness*, 46, 50.

73 Kunene, *Communal Holiness*, 51.

times were bad, of a better future; similarly, wine could symbolize such hope and future salvation.⁷⁴ Implicitly, the better, more fruitful future would include the restoration of Israel's witness-bearing function to the nations.⁷⁵

We find a creative and significant paradoxical tension within John 15 between the main verb, "abide" (*menō*), on the one hand, used 11 times, and the verbs "do" (*poiein*; vv. 5, 14) and especially "go," or "depart" (*hypagēte*; v. 16), on the other. "Abiding" has to do with a deep, permanent, roots-in-the-ground relationship with Jesus. It is as intimate as the language of mutual indwelling, as with the Father-Son relationship of perichoresis. It means being home, resting; it connotes, or could connote, spiritual ease or even apathy. A vine and its branches can certainly bear fruit—an expression used eight times in chapter 15—by staying put.

The verbs "do" and "go," however, have to do with acting and moving. Although healthy vines and branches naturally grow and bear fruit, they do not naturally move from place to place. The disciples, however, have been appointed to go (v. 16). They constitute, in other words, a *mobile* vine, a community of internally, or centripetally, oriented love that shares that love externally, or centrifugally, as they move out from themselves, all the while abiding in the vine, the very source of their missional capability. The image of a "creeping vine" might capture the missional dimension of vine-ness here, though I suspect that what Jesus in John has in mind is still more itinerant.

We may actually find such an image in Psalm 80. Richard Hays, commenting on John 15, contends that the hope of John 3:16, expressing God's saving love for a rebellious world and enacted in the disciples' mission, "is precisely the hope foreshadowed" in Ps 80:11 (LXX 79:11): "It [God's vine] sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River."⁷⁶

In chapter 15, then, we have what is perhaps the most potent symbiosis of spirituality and mission in the New Testament. It is a message that can be summarized in the paradoxical phrase "abide and go." John 15—rooted in chapters 13–14 and further developed in chapter 16 through the end of chapter 17⁷⁷—is the

74 Kunene, *Communal Holiness*, 46–48, 51.

75 Furthermore, the vine/vineyard motif is related to a broader symbolism of Israel as God's "pleasant planting" (Kunene's term): trees, a garden, etc. (e.g., Ps 1:1–3; Isa 58:11), suggesting both the people's covenant fidelity and God's concurrent approval and presence (Kunene, *Communal Holiness*, 55–62). Themes similar to those discussed in this paragraph continue in the literature of Second Temple Judaism (Kunene, *Communal Holiness*, 20 [citing Walter Brueggemann], 53–73), with perhaps an increased emphasis on the fruit of the vine as symbol of enhanced relations between people and God (72) and greater use of the more generic "pleasant planting" motif.

76 Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 339–40.

77 Chapter 16 contains the means of mission as it depicts the witness-bearing role of the *alter Christus* (14:16), i.e., the Paraclete (15:26; 16:13). Chapter 17 is Jesus' prayer of consecration and commissioning.

quintessence of a participatory missiology. This is what I mean by “missional theosis.”

The varied uses of the common verb “to do” (*poiein*) link chapters 13–15 together to give voice to this missional theosis:

- Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” (13:7)
- After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? (13:12)
- For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (13:15)
- If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (13:17)
- Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. (14:10)
- Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. (14:12)
- I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (ἵ ἐ:ἵ Ϛ)
- If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. (14:14)
- Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make [“do”; *poiēsometha*] our home with them. (14:23)
- but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way. (14:31)
- I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (15:5)
- You are my friends if you do what I command you. (ἵ ο:ἵ ἐ)
- I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (15:15)

All of this culminates in the words of Jesus in chapter 17:

I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. (17:4).

How do we synthesize these texts? To be sent as Jesus was sent is to be in a

relationship of mutual indwelling with the Sender such that the works one does are the works of the indwelling one. For Jesus, there was an ontological unity with the Father that, in a sense, guaranteed his doing the Father's works. It was impossible for him not to do the works of God. His works were God's works (*erga*), his mission God's mission (*ergon*). Nonetheless, being fully human, Jesus needed to *willingly* do his Father's will. Like Jesus, disciples are in a relationship of mutual indwelling. Jesus has finished his work, as he will say again from the cross (19:30), and yet he continues his work in and through his disciples. But even more than Jesus, since they are not God by nature, the disciples need to depend on him by constantly abiding and praying. As they do, they will share so deeply in Jesus' passion for bringing life to the world that they will become his friends (15:13–15). At the same time, they will always remain his disciples. In fact, disciples will become disciples as they participate in this divine missional life of bearing fruit: "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and *become* (*genēsthe*) my disciples" (15:8; emphasis added).⁷⁸ Participation in the mission of God is transformative, and the transformation is toward likeness to Jesus and, therefore, to God.

Conclusion

The argument of this essay has been that John is a thoroughly missional gospel that neither reflects nor fosters a sectarian community turned in on itself and rejecting the world.⁷⁹ Rather, it depicts and advocates for a missional community of disciples engaged in holistic, cruciform mission that is both spiritual and material. However, as John 17 makes clear, the Johannine community, both then and now, will be distinct from the world. As Richard Bauckham has said, such holiness (distinctiveness) is precisely so that it can be in mission.⁸⁰

Moreover, according to John, the disciples do not merely bear witness to Jesus, represent Jesus, or imitate Jesus. Rather, they participate in his life and mission, especially giving life by means of cruciform love, and thereby becoming like him. The church fathers got it right: "He became what we are so that we could become what he is." Such a sentiment is the source of the theological theme of theosis, though the tradition has not always understood that our becoming what he is entails participating in what he is doing—his mission.

The language of participation with respect to mission is, to me, wonderfully satisfying theologically. It respects the initiative and activity of God without

78 The NRSV (like the NAB) gets the sense of *genēsthe* right with "become," over against, e.g., the RSV ("prove to be") and the NIV ("showing yourselves to be").

79 Among others who argue this perspective, see now Shin, *Ethics in the Gospel of John*, esp. 167–76.

80 Richard Bauckham, "The Holiness of Jesus and His Disciples in the Gospel of John" in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 95–113 (here 113).

diminishing the significance of human involvement and responsibility. The Fourth Gospel bears rich witness to this sort of missional theology and practice.⁸¹

81 If this argument sounds a bit like the one I have made in *Becoming the Gospel* regarding Paul, there are good reasons for that. As others have pointed out, Paul and John have some significant similarities. I am adding that each is an advocate of cruciform missional theosis. I *might* like to propose, therefore, that John is actually a Pauline Gospel (uppercase “G”), that John is “channeling” Paul, so to speak. Or perhaps they are simply each channeling Jesus. But all of that would be another essay for another time.