SENT LIKE JESUS: JOHANNINE MISSIOLOGY (JOHN 20:21-22)

Craig S. Keener

Although scholars sometimes treat John as the most “universal” of the Gospels (cf. Jn 19:20), it is (along with Matthew) the most distinctively Jewish and the most explicitly rooted in Judean topography and culture.¹ But while it specifically views “the world” through the lens of Judean authorities, John’s world is theologically a wider one.

We could thus treat Johannine missiology through the lens of some other texts, for example, John 3:16, but we will subsume that text under our larger discussion outlined in Jn 20:21-22. As with the other lectures/articles in this series, I am using one passage to provide the structure for addressing the themes of the entire book or body of

When John’s first audience reached John 20, they would be hearing it in light of all the rest of his Gospel that had gone before.

When the risen Jesus appears to the disciples, he commissions them to carry on his work. “As the Father has sent me,” he declares, “in the same way I have sent you.” Then he empowers them to do it: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:21-22). Thus, this passage involves three primary elements of relevance to our discussion of Johannine missiology: the model of Jesus; the empowerment of the Spirit; and the mission of Jesus’ followers. The Spirit and Jesus’ followers together carry on aspects of Jesus’ mission. What then was Jesus’ mission?

1. “As the Father has Sent Me” (20:21)

Jesus kept telling his disciples that he was going to “go” to the Father, and then return to them, so they could enter the Father’s presence. Although his long-term ascension (20:17) may still remain future in our passage (20:21-22), Jesus has already gone to the Father by dying, preparing a place for them in the Father’s presence (14:2-6, 23). Now Jesus has returned to them, and in 20:21, he commissions them to carry on his mission. He sends them kathōs, “in the same way” that the Father sent him. If we wish to understand what the text means by his followers being “sent,” we must first examine the explicit model for their sending in the ministry of Jesus.

a. Sending in John’s Gospel

The motif of agency, or being sent, is frequent in John’s Gospel. A text very much like this one appears in 13:20: “Whoever receives
whomever I send receives me; whoever receives me receives him who sent me.”

Jesus’ followers carry out his mission as he carries out the Father’s. The concept may be implicit even in John’s terms for sending, insofar as they reflect a special Jewish tradition about what it means to send someone. John’s two Greek terms for “send” are, contrary to some scholarly traditions, interchangeable; John employs both for the Father sending the Son and for the Son sending the disciples. In antiquity, those sent with a commission were authorized representatives of those who sent them; how one treated those sent (e.g., heralds or ambassadors) reflected one’s attitude toward the sender.

Later rabbis even came up with specific rules regarding commissioned agents, including the formulation, “A person’s agent is as the person himself.” The agent carried the full authority of the sender, to the extent that the agent accurately represented the sender’s commission.

Jewish people recognized Moses and the prophets as God’s agents, sent with his message.

Verbs for “sending” appear some 60 times in John’s Gospel, applicable to John the Baptist (Jn 1:6, 33; 3:28), to agents of the

---

6 This same language appears in different words in Matt 10:40 (probably “Q” material; see Lk 10:16); cf. Mk 9:37.
7 See Diodorus Siculus 4.10.3-4; Josephus Ant. 8.220-21; more fully, Keener, John, 313-14.
9 On agents being backed by the sender’s authority, see e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus 6.88.2; Diodorus Siculus 40.1.1; Josephus Life 65, 72-73, 196-98; 2 Macc 1:20.
10 E.g., Ex 3:10, 13-15; 4:28; 7:16; Deut 34:11; Sipra Behuq. pq. 13.277.1.13-14; ‘Ab. R. Nat. 1 A, most MSS.
11 E.g., 2 Sam 12:1; 2 Kgs 17:13; 2 Chron 24:19; 25:15; 36:15; Jer 7:25; 24:4; 26:5; 28:9; 35:15; 44:4; Bar 1:21; Mek. Pisha 1.87; ‘Ab. R. Nat. 37, §95 B.
b. Jesus as God’s Revealer

Jesus came to reveal the Father’s heart. As he says in 12:45, “Whoever beholds me beholds the one who sent me.” John has been preaching this message since the opening of his Gospel, which climaxes in the announcement that Jesus has revealed God to us (1:18). John’s prologue is framed with the twin claims that Jesus is deity and that he is in absolute intimacy with the Father (1:1-2, 18). We are not deity, but Jesus’ invitation to “abide” in him is an invitation to intimacy with him as the basis for our mission (15:4-5).

In the Gospel’s prologue, Jesus so accurately reflects the Father that he is the Father’s logos, normally translated “word.” John draws here on a range of rich Greek and Jewish conceptions, but most fundamentally the term for Jewish hearers would evoke God’s revelation of himself in Scripture, especially in the law, as God’s “Word.” Yet Jesus is a fuller, deeper revelation than was available in

\[12\] On the Son’s submission as the Father’s agent, see e.g., Craig S. Keener, “Is Subordination Within the Trinity Really Heresy? A Study of John 5:18 in Context,” Trinity Journal 20 NS (1, Spring 1999): 39-51, here 45-47.


\[14\] See the survey of Greek conceptions in Keener, John, 341-43; for Philo, ibid., 343-47; and for more traditional Jewish conceptions, ibid., 347-63.

the law. In the climactic section of his prologue, John compares Jesus with the Torah (hence Jesus’ first witnesses with Moses):\(^\text{16}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ex 32—33</th>
<th>Jn 1:14-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The giving of the law</td>
<td>The giving of the Word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God “dwelt” among his people in the wilderness</td>
<td>The Word “tabernacled” among us (1:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses beheld God’s glory</td>
<td>“We” beheld his glory (1:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The glory revealed God’s goodness (33:19), and was “abounding in covenant love and truth” (34:6)</td>
<td>His glory was “full of grace and truth” (1:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Though grace and truth were present, Moses could not withstand God’s full glory (33:20-23)</td>
<td>The law was given through Moses, (but the fullness of) grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one can behold God (Ex 33:20)</td>
<td>No one has ever seen God—(but now) the only Son of God, in intimate communion with the Father, has unveiled his character fully (1:18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The glory that Moses beheld only in part, the disciples discovered fully in Jesus, though in a hidden way. The glory at his first coming did not look outwardly like the glory on Mount Sinai, but in terms of revealing God’s character, God’s heart, it went beyond Sinai. What does this glory look like in John’s Gospel? If we trace the terminology of “glory” throughout his Gospel, we see that his glory and character were revealed in his various kind works (e.g., 2:11), but that the ultimate expression of his glory appears in 12:23-24: Jesus will be glorified by

laying down his life. The ultimate expression of God’s grace and truth, too glorious even for Moses to see, emerged where the world’s hatred for God also came to its ultimate expression: as we pounded the nails in the hands of God’s own Son, he was crying, “I love you! I love you! I love you!” In the incarnation, and ultimately in the cross, Jesus revealed God’s heart to us.

There are some ways, of course, in which the Father’s sending of the Son is unique. Jesus is the monogenès (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 Jn 4:9), the specially beloved and unique Son (the traditional English translation, “only-begotten,” reads too much etymology into the term). We are not divine, so while the world should see God among us (13:34-35; 17:21, 23), we are not his revealer in the unique way that Jesus was. While we may lay down our lives for one another (1 Jn 3:16), we do not carry away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). John declares that the Father sent the Son not to condemn the world, but to save it (Jn 3:17). Jesus’ agents do not save the world, but instead, like John the Baptist in the Prologue (1:7), are sent to “bear witness” concerning the light (e.g., 15:27). Still, John shows that the role of such witnesses is indispensable. Others would believe through their message (17:20); the Spirit would (as we shall soon propose) prosecute the world through Jesus’ agents’ witness for him (16:7-11). Even the context of our primary text emphasizes that Jesus’ agents are stewards of God’s forgiveness (20:23), presumably by accurately representing Jesus (cf. 16:7-11).

---


Nevertheless, provided that we allow for Jesus’ unique role and status, John’s Gospel presents Jesus as a model for mission, and demonstrates that those he sends come to participate in that mission. In 1:43, Jesus called Philip to follow him; in 1:45, Philip followed Jesus’ example by testifying to Nathanael from his experience understood through Scripture. But it is an encounter with Jesus himself that converts: Philip invites Nathanael to “Come and see” (1:46), and Nathanael believes through meeting Jesus who knows his life (1:46-51). Likewise, in 4:26, Jesus reveals his identity to a Samaritan woman, and she invites her entire town to “Come, see” the one who knew her life (4:29). Afterward, though they initially accepted the woman’s testimony (4:39), more Samaritans believed more fully once they met Jesus for themselves (4:41-42). As in Nathanael’s case, it is experiencing Jesus for themselves that converts them; the honor cannot go to the witnesses. We are Jesus’ agents, but as Jesus honored the Father, we are to honor Jesus. It is as we introduce people to the living presence of Jesus that they become most fully confronted by his truth, whether that makes them more hostile or, as in these cases, more receptive.

d. “Sent” to “the World” (Jn 3:16-17)

Jesus does not specify in 20:21 to whom he is sent, but this object is clear from earlier passages in the Gospel. The Fourth Gospel repeatedly emphasizes that the Father sent Jesus to the world (3:17; 10:36; 17:18; cf. 8:26; 17:21, 23), a theme repeated in 1 John (1 Jn 4:9, 14). The stated purpose of this sending is that the world might be saved (Jn 3:17; 1 Jn 4:14; cf. Jn 6:33, 51; 1 Jn 4:9).21

John 3:16-17 states God’s motive in sending Jesus to the world: God loved the world.22 In contrast to some attempts to distinguish the

---

20Despite the typical prejudice against women’s testimony in Mediterranean antiquity; see e.g., Josephus Ant. 4.219; m. Yeb. 15:1, 8-10; 16:7; Ket. 1:6-9; t. Yeb. 14:10; Sipra VDDeho. pq. 7.45.1.1; Hesiod W.D. 375; Livy 6.34.6-7; Babrius 16.10; Phaedrus 4.15; Avianus Fables 15-16; Justinian Inst. 2.10.6.

21Although Jesus came not with the purpose of condemning the world (3:17; 12:47), his coming does precipitate judgment (9:39; 16:8, 11).

22On divine love originating the sending in John’s theology, see M. Waldstein, “Die Sendung Jesu und der Jünger im Johannesevangelium,” Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift/Communio 19 (3. 1990): 203-21. For God’s love focused especially on the righteous or Israel, see e.g., CD 8.17; ‘Ab. R. Nat. 36, §94B; Sipra Deut. 97.2; further discussion in Keener, John, 568-69.
meanings of the two Greek words John uses for “love,” John employs them interchangeably for literary variation, as was common in his day.²³ Both verbs apply to Jesus’ love for the Father, the Father’s love for Jesus, and virtually every other category of love in the Gospel. What tells us about the character of divine love is not whether John employs φιλέω or (as here) ἀγαπάω, but how he defines this love in the context. The Greek here does not say, “God loved the world so much,” but rather, “This is how God loved the world”;²⁴ he gave his Son. Good human fathers love their sons; we should understand that God the Father loves his Son infinitely, no less than himself, yet he and the Son together²⁵ sacrificed this Son so that the world might have life. This means that God loved the world, or those who would become his own out of the world, no less infinitely. As Jesus later says to the disciples, his followers’ unity would reveal divine love to the world, so they would recognize that God loved the disciples, even as he loved Jesus (17:23).

God’s love is no mere abstraction, no empty words. Rather, God demonstrated his love in an act. The act in which God “loved” the world was that he “gave” his Son; the aorist verb tense for both “loved” and “gave” points to this single act, which the context indicates is the


²⁵John emphasizes that the Son laid down his life voluntarily (Jn 6:51; 10:11, 15, 17-18; cf. 15:13), inviting his followers to do the same (1 Jn 3:16).
Just as Paul emphasized decades before John’s Gospel, God demonstrated his love for us through the death of his Son while we were his enemies (Rom 5:8-10). The necessary condition God requires for eternal life is stated as “trust”; the verb tense and the rest of John’s Gospel indicate that this requires persevering faith (Jn 8:31; 15:6), in contrast to the inadequate faith earlier in this context (2:23-25). The rest of John’s Gospel also defines the object of faith: ultimately, it recognizes Jesus as our “Lord and God” (20:28). Here we have the motivation, method, and message for our mission: motivated by God’s love (cf. 2 Cor 5:14), we lay down our lives to invite people to trust, or depend on, God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we may especially note the object of his love here: “the world.” In John’s Gospel, the world often represents humanity hostile toward God (1:10; 3:19; 7:7; 8:23; 12:25, 31; 14:17, 19, 22, 30; 15:18-19; 16:11, 20, 33; 17:14, 25); yet it is from among those in that world that he saves those who trust in him (13:1; 17:6, 9, 11, 14-16, 25).27 After this passage, the next mention of the world comes in 4:42, where Samaritans recognize Jesus as “Savior of the world.”28 Jesus crossed multiple barriers,29 most obviously the ethnic and cultural barrier (4:9), to bring eternal life to the Samaritan woman at the well, who in turn brought her people to Jesus. While John’s narrative world does not venture directly beyond the Samaritans, it does imply the world beyond them: Jesus has “other sheep who are not of this fold” (10:16; cf.

---


27Just as only a Samaritan (4:9) and a Gentile (18:35) acknowledge Jesus as a Jew, it is especially the most hostile representatives of “the world” who recognize that “the world” (much of humanity) goes after Jesus (11:48; 12:19). John thus mitigates his portrayal of the “world’s” hostility on a personal level: the world may come to know about God, i.e., so some will be saved (14:31; 17:21, 23; 13:35); Jesus’ death invites “all people” (12:32); the Judean crowds are divided in their responses to Jesus (7:43; 9:16; 10:19); Jesus invites the world (18:36-37).

28On the implied ethnic universalism, see e.g., Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word. Reading the Fourth Gospel: John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 14.

7:35),\(^{30}\) those who will believe in him through his disciples’ message (17:20). John’s mention of the “world,” then, is as much a summons to reach all peoples as Matthew’s or Luke’s call to the “nations.” Isaiah’s light to the nations (Is 42:6; 49:6; cf. 60:2-3) is in John the “light of the world” (Jn 8:12; 9:5; 11:9; 12:46).

2. “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22)

Not only are Jesus and his disciples “sent” in this Gospel, but so also is the Spirit “sent.” The Spirit comes to represent and carry on Jesus’ work: thus in 14:26, the Spirit is sent “in my name”; and in 15:26, the Spirit is sent to bear witness to Jesus. We are able to carry on Jesus’ mission only because God himself lives and works in us. No sooner does Jesus give them the commission than he breathes on them and commands them to “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). Just as in 15:26-27 and 16:7, the Spirit is closely connected with the disciples’ witness.

a. The Breath of Life

What is the significance of Jesus breathing on them? Most scholars see an allusion to Gen 2:7: as God breathed into the first human the breath of life, so now Jesus imparts new life to his

---

followers. Greek and Hebrew could employ terms for “breath” or “wind” for God’s Spirit. Jesus earlier depicted the eternal life initiated by the new birth not only in terms of water but also in terms of wind (3:8), perhaps evoking the resurrection life of God’s breath or Spirit in Ezek 37:9-14. (That is, as Jn 3:5-6 probably alludes to Ezek 36:25-27, so Jn 3:8 probably alludes to Ezek 37.) It is God’s breath that brings life to the new creation, as to the old.

As a matter of interest, we may pause to ask, as scholars often do, the relationship between this passage and Pentecost in Acts. Some

---


scholars see this passage as a lesser Pentecost; others as John’s replacement for or equivalent to Luke’s Pentecost. Perhaps on the historical level we may think of two levels of impartation, as some scholars argue. On the theological level, however, this is the passage that ties together Jesus’ various promises surrounding the Spirit promises earlier in the Gospel: Jesus coming to them (14:18); resurrection life (14:19); joy (15:11; 20:20); peace (14:27; 20:21); the Spirit’s new birth and indwelling (Jn 3:5; 14:17; 20:22), and being sent as witnesses (15:26-27; 20:21). John is not continuing his account his narrative as late as Pentecost; at least on the narrative level, this passage must carry the symbolic weight of John’s entire theology of the Spirit. What then is John’s theology of the Spirit?

b. The Spirit of Purification

First, the Spirit purifies God’s people, and in a manner that mere ceremonial washings cannot. The image of Jesus breathing new life into his followers in Jn 20 indicates that this emphasis in John’s theology of the Spirit continues here. Some ancient Jewish sources, especially among the Essenes, recognized in Ezek 36:25-26 that in the end-time the Spirit would purify God’s people morally. John

---


develops this emphasis especially through an ongoing contrast with merely natural water, often water used for ritual purification.

The contrast appears regularly in John’s Gospel (especially in what is often called its “signs” section). Jesus’ baptism in the Spirit is greater than John’s baptism in water (Jn 1:31, 33). Jesus sets aside the ritual purpose of six waterpots when he turns water in them into wine (2:6-10). Whereas some Jewish people may have expected Gentile converts to become like “newborn babies” after they immersed in water, Jesus summons Nicodemus to a true proselyte baptism in the water of the Spirit in Jn 3:5. In Jn 4:14, Jesus offers “living” water greater than the water of Jacob’s well, a site holy to the Samaritans. In fact, John’s “geographic” interest is not in holy sites like the Jerusalem temple or the Samaritans’ Mount Gerizim, but the proper sphere of worship, namely in the Spirit of truth (4:20-24). In 5:1-9, the water of a pool associated with healings leaves a man infirm, but Jesus heals him; in 9:1-7 another man is healed in connection with another sacred pool, but only because Jesus sends him there. Jesus later takes the


39See discussion more fully in Keener, John, 611-19.
40Scholars often note the contrast between the two passages; see especially R. Alan Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 139; cf. also Jeffrey L. Staley, “Stumbling in the
role of the suffering servant as he washes his disciples’ feet, in a scene interspersed with announcements of the coming betrayal (Jn 13).\textsuperscript{41}

The key text with reference to John’s water motif (key because it offers an explicit explanation) is Jn 7:37-39, where Jesus promises rivers of living water. Jesus speaks on the last day of the festival of tabernacles (7:2, 37); at this festival priests poured water from the Pool of Siloam at the base of the altar, to symbolize an expectation stemming from the Scripture texts read on the last day of the festival. These texts, Ezek 47 and Zech 14, spoke of rivers of living water flowing from the temple and from Jerusalem in the eschatological time.\textsuperscript{42} On the day that these texts were read, Jesus announces to the people, “Whoever thirsts, let them come to me; let them drink, whoever believes in me. As the Scripture has said, ‘From his belly will flow rivers of living water.’”\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{flushright}
41 For the footwashing, see especially John Christopher Thomas, Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community (JSNTSup 61; Sheffield: JSOT Press, Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
navel of the earth; but Jesus here depicts himself as the foundation of God’s new temple, the source of living water. John explains that once Jesus would be glorified, those who believe in Jesus would receive from him this living water, the Spirit (7:39).

Lest we forget his point, John also takes time to narrate an event at the crucifixion not included in the other extant Gospels. When a soldier pierced Jesus’ side, not only blood but water came forth (19:34). Historically, the spear may have punctured the pericardial sac around the heart, releasing a watery substance along with the blood. But why does John bother to record it and even underline it emphatically by noting that he was an eyewitness (19:35)? I suspect
that it forms a climactic illustration of Jesus’ point.\textsuperscript{48} Lifted up and glorified, crowned king of the Jews, Jesus by his death provided living water for his people. The Book of Revelation expresses John’s point well. Let the one who thirsts come and drink freely from the water of the river of life (Rev 22:17)! John’s Gospel deals with the water of the Spirit of which traditional ritual purification is at best a symbol.

c. The Spirit of Prophetic Empowerment

Second, and of primary importance for our discussion of John’s missiology, the Spirit involves prophetic power. Whereas some Jewish texts stressed the purifying aspect of the Spirit, most stressed the prophetic aspect of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{49} Jesus’ closing discourses to his disciples emphasize this aspect of the Spirit’s work, including in his sayings about “sending” the Spirit. The Father sends the Spirit in Jesus’ name to teach them and to recall Jesus’ teachings to them (14:26); likewise, Jesus sends the Spirit to bear witness concerning him (15:26), as the disciples will do also (15:27).

Prophets both heard God and proclaimed what they heard, and we find both elements in this Gospel. Jesus talks about his disciples hearing his voice in 10:3-5, 16, 27. Indeed, his sheep there “know”


him just as the Father knows him and he knows the Father (10:14-15). This indicates the depth of relationship with Jesus that God has made available. The context is this: a blind man healed by Jesus becomes his follower and is expelled from the synagogue by Israel’s guardians. Jesus compares these hostile guardians of Israel with strangers, thieves, and wolves, i.e., those who exploit the sheep (10:1, 5, 8, 10, 12); they resemble the false shepherds of Israel in Ezek 34:2-10. By contrast, Jesus is the good shepherd (Jn 10:11, 14), who would lay down his life for the sheep to protect them from the thieves. Jesus is using biblical imagery; the chief shepherd of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures was God (e.g., Ezek 34:11-16), whose role Jesus appropriately fills here. Meanwhile, this formerly blind man, though excluded from Israel's religious community by its leaders, is embraced by Jesus as truly one of God’s people, who were often compared with God’s sheep in Scripture (e.g., Ps 100:3; Ezek 34:2). This man, who heeded Jesus, becomes an example of the sheep who heed his voice (as Israel, his sheep, failed to do in Ps 95:7-11). Jesus’ disciples would provide another example of hearing his voice during his earthly ministry: he called them “friends,” because whatever he heard from the Father he shared with them (Jn 15:15).

John is very clear that hearing Jesus’ voice is an experience that should continue among the community of believers. Just as Jesus did not speak from himself (12:49; 14:10), the Spirit would not speak from himself (16:13). Just as Jesus indicated in 15:15 that he told his friends whatever he heard from the Father, he explains now that

50 OT language for Israel’s covenant relationship with God (e.g., Ex 6:7; in the new covenant, Jer 24:7; 31:33-34).
52 Sharing rather than keeping secrets was one key element in ancient Mediterranean ideologies of friendship; see discussion in Keener, John, 1010; idem, “Friendship,” 380-88 in Dictionary of New Testament Background (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley Porter; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 383.
54 I.e., not on his own authority, e.g., T. Ab. 15:8; 19:4A; Philostratus Hrk. 8.2.
whatever the Spirit hears from Jesus, he will speak to them (16:13). Just as Jesus came to glorify not himself but his Father, the Spirit comes to reveal and glorify Jesus (16:13-15). This means that disciples today at least potentially are able to hear Jesus as clearly as did his first disciples, except now with the advantage of a retrospective understanding of Jesus’ identity and mission.

Likewise, disciples who heard from Jesus would also reveal him to the world, in connection with the Spirit (15:26-27). Whereas the Father sent Jesus “into the world” and Jesus sends the disciples “into the world” (17:18), John does not tell us that the Spirit is sent to the world. Rather, Jesus says, “If I go, I will send him to you” (16:7; cf. 15:26: “I will send him to you”). After Jesus promises to send the advocate to them, Jesus says that the Spirit will “convict” the world (16:8). In a context where the Spirit comes as witness (15:26) and perhaps “advocate” (one possible translation for paraklētos in 14:16, 26; 15:26; and 16:7), we might render the Spirit’s activity here as “prosecuting” the world. The Spirit will charge the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. These were activities of Jesus earlier in the Gospel (3:20; 8:46), and the particulars offered in 16:8-10 also involve Jesus’ person or acts. The point appears to be that Jesus, who confronted the world in this Gospel, will continue to confront the world; his presence remains. Now, however, Jesus’ presence is revealed to the world especially through the Spirit’s ministry in and through the disciples.

d. The Spirit and God’s Presence


56I discuss this more fully and in more explicitly practical terms in my Gift & Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 39-42.

57Although the passage involves the first disciples who were with him “from the beginning” (cf. 2:11; 8:25; 16:4; Acts 1:21-22), but John expects his audience to understand their own experience analogously (1 Jn 2:24; 3:11; 2 Jn 6).


The Spirit empowers us to communicate Jesus to others because, through the Spirit, Jesus’ presence remains in our midst. Jesus sends the advocate that “he may be with you forever” (14:16), and be “in you” (14:17); thus the Father and Son make their “dwelling place” within us (14:23). In fact, even Jesus’ promise of many “dwelling places” in the Father’s house apparently communicates the same point. Against the common assumption that the “Father’s house” here must mean heaven, its other uses in the gospel refer to a father’s household (8:35) or to the temple (2:16-17). Thus, only context can specify what it means here. Most essentially, we may surmise that it will involve the place of the Father’s presence.

What does Jesus mean by “dwelling places” (“rooms” in some translations) that he prepares in the Father’s house in 14:2? This Greek term, monē, appears in only one other location in the entire New Testament. Not coincidentally, that location turns out to be later in this same context, deliberately clarifying its use here. In that passage (Jn 14:23), Jesus declares that he and the Father will come and make their “dwelling place” (monē) within believers. The cognate verb is frequent in the context, referring to the Spirit or Jesus’ message dwelling or remaining in believers, or believers dwelling or remaining in Christ (14:17; 15:4-10, 16).

---

60Though argued only rarely by scholars, e.g., Holwerda, Spirit, 20, n. 52; also Calvin, John, 2:81.
62It appears only once in the Apostolic Fathers (in Papias), twice in Josephus (Ant. 8.350; 13.41); and never, so far as I can tell, in the LXX (though 15 times in the Philonic corpus).
63Many recognize a connection between the two uses in this context; see Robert Alan Berg, “Pneumatology and the history of the Johannine community: Insights from the farewell discourses and the First Epistle” (Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate School of Drew University, 1988; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1989), 107-10.
64This is a favorite verb for John, though not always carrying its full theological import: it appear 40 times in the Gospel, which is about 33.9% of NT uses, though John is just 11% of the NT text (i.e., over three times the NT average). The Johannine epistles employ the verb 27 times, or 22.9% of NT uses, or 13.7 times (1370% more) than average. Together the Gospel and epistles offer about 56.8% of NT examples of this verb.
What does Jesus mean in this context by, “I will come again to you” (14:3)? Later in this context, his coming (14:18) is associated with the giving of the Spirit (14:16-17) and new, resurrection life (14:19). It also involves Jesus and the Father “coming” to the believer and making their dwelling place there (14:23). In contrast to the second coming, his disciples would see him at the coming to which he refers here, but the world would not see him (14:19). Again in a context emphasizing the coming of the Spirit (16:13-15), Jesus says in 16:16 that he would return to reveal himself to them; the context clearly means after his death and resurrection (16:17-22). Jesus refers here not to his coming at the end of the age,65 but his coming in Jn 20:19-23 to inaugurate eschatological life in the lives of his disciples.

Jesus repeatedly says, “I am going” (14:2-5, 28; 16:5, 7), referring in most of these texts to going to the Father by way of death (8:22; 13:33, 36; 16:28; cf. 16:20-22).66 Jesus tells his disciples that they know where he is going and the way he will get there (14:4), but Thomas protests that they know neither one (14:5). The first disciples themselves did not understand 14:2-3 by itself any better than we understand these verses isolated from Jesus’ following explanation. But Jesus then explains: where he is going is the Father, and Jesus himself is the way to the Father (14:6). He is not telling the disciples that at his second coming they may go with him to places prepared for them. He is telling them that those who come to the Father through Jesus—i.e., those who believe and abide in Jesus—are in the Father’s presence.67


66Some texts admittedly look beyond the death and resurrection to Jesus’ longer-range presence with the Father away from the disciples (14:12; 16:10); John’s love for riddles and wordplays leaves considerable ambiguity, probably deliberately.

67On Jesus as the “way” to the Father’s presence here, see e.g., Robert H. Gundry, “In my Father’s House are many ‘Monai’ (Joh 14:2),” Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 58 (1967): 68-72, here 70.
That is to say, Jesus’ coming in 20:19-23 to give his disciples the Spirit inaugurates his presence in their lives in a new dimension. We can do God’s work because God’s Spirit lives in us.

3. “I Send You” (20:21)

Jesus sends the disciples into the world just as the Father sent him into the world (Jn 17:18). Some may object that such passages apply specifically only to the first disciples in John’s narrative world. This objection, however, misunderstands the function of John’s narrative.68 Just as John the Baptist functions as a paradigmatic witness in the opening of John’s Gospel,69 so do Jesus’ disciples function as paradigmatic for the community of believers. John is interested in those who believe through their proclamation (17:20). It is not only the first disciples who are fruit-bearing branches on Jesus the vine (15:1-8), who must abide and bear fruit (15:2-5, 8), persevere (15:6), and so forth. In his epistles John does not limit the Spirit to the Twelve (who receive the promises of the advocate in Jn 14—16); rather, he limits the Spirit to all true believers (1 Jn 2:20, 27; 3:24; 4:2, 13).70 Not all believers in the community have the same role as the first disciples, but the community as a whole shares their same mission and purpose: to make Christ known.

a. Christological Confessions

A central part of this mission is proclaiming Jesus’ identity. Among the models of preaching Jesus in the Gospel that we have noted are Philip and the Samaritan woman. Yet John himself offers us a model of how we should preach Jesus by how John himself, inspired by

70Indeed, 1 Jn 2:27 may deliberately echo Jn 14:26 (with Dunn, Baptism, 197).
the Spirit, preaches Jesus in this Gospel. One may compare the various christological confessions he records in the Gospel:\(^71\) John the Baptist calls Jesus the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29);\(^72\) Nathanael declares, “Rabbi, you are God’s Son! You are the king of Israel!” (1:49). The Samaritans acknowledge, “This one is truly the world’s savior!” (4:42). Peter confesses, “You are God’s holy one!” (6:69).\(^73\) The climactic confession of faith, though, is Thomas’: “My Lord and my God!” (20:28). Jesus affirms as true this confession as faith, yet praises those who can have such faith without a resurrection appearance (20:29), whereupon John explains that this is why he wrote this Gospel: so those who have not seen may nevertheless believe Jesus’ identity (20:30-31).

Let us add to these confessions Jesus’ own declarations of his identity in this Gospel: “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 41, 48, 51), to sustain us; “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 95), to enlighten us; “I am the door” (10:7, 9), to welcome us; “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), to protect and care for us; “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), to raise us; “I am the way and the truth and the life” (14:6), to bring us to the Father; “I am the true vine” (15:1), to nourish us with continuous life; and greatest of all, simply “I am” (8:58)—as the God of the patriarchs and prophets.\(^74\) Such declarations are a fitting

---

\(^71\)These confessions need not all progress from lesser to greater (M. Baron, “La progression des confessions de foi dans les dialogues de saint Jean,” *Bible et Vie Chrétienne* 82 [1968]: 32-44), though 20:28 is certainly the climactic one.


\(^74\)Some of these evoke divine or Wisdom images in Scripture or early Judaism, but “I am” is the most explicit (Ex 3:14; Is 41:4; 43:10; cf. Lightfoot, *Gospel*, 134-35; Hunter, *John*, 89; David Mark Bell, *I Am in John’s Gospel: Literary
focus for a Gospel whose prologue is framed by confessions of Jesus’
deity (Jn 1:1, 18). 75 Indeed, so is the body of John’s Gospel, if we
connect the prologue’s claim (1:1, 18) with Thomas’ confession in
20:28. 76 Biographies were supposed to focus on their protagonists; 77
John naturally focuses on Jesus in this Gospel, and preaches him while
he does so. He preaches Jesus’ identity to his audience so “that you
may believe” (20:31), as the Spirit brings the hearers into real
encounters with Jesus himself (16:7-15).

b. Jesus Revealed in the Community’s Love

But we who are sent to preach Jesus present Jesus to the world not
only through our words, but like Jesus himself, also through our
“works.” Believers will do the kinds of works Jesus did (14:10-12).
Many of Jesus’ works in this Gospel are his miraculous signs (5:20;
7:3, 21; 9:3-4; 10:25, 32, 37-38; 15:24), but his work also summarizes
his entire mission (4:34; 17:4). Presumably, John, like Luke and other
New Testament writers, does expect continuing miracles among Jesus’
followers. But there is a kind of sign that John specifies, one that
reveals God’s character and light in a dark world. In 15:1-11, Jesus
says that disciples, as branches bearing the fruit natural to the vine,
should love one another. By loving one another, we show the world
more of God’s heart.

In 17:21, Jesus prayed that his followers would be one, “that the
world may believe that you sent me.” In 17:23, Jesus went on to pray
that we would be perfected in unity, “that the world may know that you
sent me, and that you loved them, even as you loved me.” Part of our

---

75 With Boismard, Prologue, 76-77.
76 Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament (Philadelphia:
Westminster; London: SCM, 1959), 308. I do argue for reading Jn 21 as part of
the Gospel (Keener, John, 1219-22; cf. also Bruce, John, 398; Paul S. Minear,
“The Original Functions of John 21,” Journal of Biblical Literature 102 [1,
1983]: 85-98); my point here is only that it is not part of the main body of the
Gospel.
77 On ancient biographies and the Gospels see especially Richard A. Burridge,
What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography
(SNTSMS 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992).
The greatest witness is the supernatural testimony of the reality of Jesus by the divine love that believers demonstrate to one another—at least, when we are truly depending on and imitating our Lord. Assuming the posture of a servant, 78 Jesus washes his disciples’ feet in 13:4-10, in the context of the impending passion (13:1-3, 11). 79 Although disciples did almost anything for their teachers that servants would do, the one exception was apparently the demeaning work of dealing with the feet (washing them, carrying sandals, etc.) 80 Yet Jesus adopts this servile posture and summons his disciples to follow his example, doing the same for one another (13:12-15). In 13:34-35, he commands us, “Love one another, even as I have loved you. By this behavior everyone will know that you are my disciples.” Jesus titles this injunction a “new” commandment not because it involves love (which was already commanded, Lev 19:18), 81 but because of the new standard: “as I have loved you.” That is, to love one another as he loved us is to love to the extent that we lay down our lives for one another (cf. 1 Jn 3:16). This is the greatest sign of Jesus’ reality and character that he has given to us his people. The God of grace and truth, the God who revealed his glory in the cross, makes that message believable to the world when they see the church believing and living the heart of God.

Recall Jn 1:18: “No one has beheld God at any time, but the only God, who is in the Father’s bosom, has made him known.” Compare 1 John 4:12: “No one has beheld God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.” How will the world see God’s heart now? Not only through our words preaching Christ, but also through our lives following his example.

78 Cf. Homer Od. 19.344-48, 353-60, 376, 388-93, 505; Apollodorus Epitome 1.2; Thomas, Footwashing, 40-41, 50-55.
Conclusion

Jesus is the model for what it means to be sent in this Gospel: “As the Father sent me, even so I send you.” The object of this mission, as in the case of Jesus, must be the world: “For God in this way loved the world.” The Spirit who comes to testify about Jesus enables this mission by continuing to make Jesus the Word present in his followers’ word: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Finally, Jesus’ followers must present the living Lord Jesus both by our words and by our works, by our witness and by our love.

Our mission is to present Christ in prophetic power, Jesus speaking in us; to bring people to experience our Lord Jesus for themselves; and to be a community of such divine love that outsiders can see and are drawn to God’s heart for the world.