

Johannine Theology of Mission: Major Themes and Approaches

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Introduction

Johannine theology of mission is not as known as the Pauline approach to mission. Theologians such as Dean Gilliland, Rollin Grams, and Andreas Köstenberger have written on theologies of mission from various perspectives of the Pauline Epistles,¹ Matthean understanding,² or the Gospel of Mark,³ and Luke-Acts.⁴ However, a theology of mission according to John forms equally profound understandings and has numerous implications for Christian missions today. This paper explores the focus, different approaches, and major themes of a Johannine theology of mission.

Focus

Many Christians regard John 3:16 as a key text for salvation and use this verse for evangelism. Scholars such as Murray Harris⁵ expounds the context of this verse. It is important to note that the whole focus of Johannine theology of mission does not solely rest upon John 3:16. Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder identify three types of theology of mission: “Type A theology: mission as saving souls and extending the Church; Type B theology: mission as discovery of the truth; Type C theology: mission as commitment to liberation and transformation.”⁶ Which type of theology is Johannine? Unlike Pauline Epistles, Johannine writing does not focus on John’s own journey of faith. While in Paul’s ministry, his status and identity are important in witnessing to Christ, John spends much of his focus on Jesus Christ Himself. Andreas Köstenberger and Peter Thomas O’Brian assert, The Fourth Gospel’s primary focus is the mission of Jesus: he is the one who comes into the world, accomplishes his work and returns to the Father; he is the one who descends from heaven and ascends again; he is the Sent One, who, in complete dependence and perfect obedience to his sender, fulfills the purpose for which the Father sent him.⁷

Although Jesus Christ, the Incarnated *Logos*, points to God the Father, John pays particular

¹ Dean S. Gilliland, *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1983); D. Stott and R. Riesner, *Paul’s Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998); Ksenija Magda, *Paul’s Territoriality and Mission Strategy: Searching for the Geographical Awareness Paradigm Behind Romans* (Tübingen [Germany]: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

² Rollin G. Grams, “Narrative Dynamics in Isaiah’s and Matthew’s Mission Theology,” *Transformation* 21, no. 4 (2004): 238-255, Paternoster Press.

³ David E. Garland and Andreas J. Köstenberger, eds., *A Theology of Mark’s Gospel: Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

⁴ Jorge Henrique Barro, *Luke’s Theology of God’s Mission in the City* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI, 2005).

⁵ Murray J. Harris, *John 3:16: What’s It All About* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

⁶ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, American Society of Missiology Series: No. 30 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 35-72.

⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter Thomas O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology: 11 (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2001), 203.

attention to Christ and his earthly ministry, which is deeply oriented in the heart of God the Father. Theological discussions argue about whether the focus of mission according to John is Theocentric or Christocentric; I propose that the focus of Jesus' mission be understood within the Trinitarian framework. The identity and ministry of Jesus are rooted within the oneness or unity of the Triune God. Although the Fourth Gospel does not stress the role of pneumatology, the Father-Son unity (John 10:30) does not depart from the dynamic participation of the Holy Spirit as John 20:22 reveals.

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God the Son is at the center of the Johannine theology of mission. According to Kostenberger, "The most important finding of the above survey (the person of Jesus according to John) is the fourth evangelist accentuates in a variety of ways the uniqueness of Jesus."⁸ John does not begin with the genealogy of Jesus as in Matthew, or John the Baptist preparing the way of Jesus as in Luke. John emphasizes the incarnation: the fully divine and fully human characteristics of Jesus Christ — "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14). The central concern is the identity and nature of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, people around Jesus not only were curious of who Jesus was, they also made decisions based on who Jesus was. Jesus' disciples, crowds, individuals, and even Jesus himself had taken an interest in Jesus' identity. Some have decided to betray him, deny him, stone him, and others chose to accept him, and follow him (John 8:59). Jesus used rich and vivid imageries to describe who he was: bread, light of the world, living water, and shepherd.⁹ Thus, Jesus the incarnated is the ultimate revealer and revealed. Jesus Christ became both the symbol and reality of the divine God.

The mission of Jesus was also centered on the identity of Jesus. He revealed himself to the people around him. His mission was a consistent paradox of "this world" and the world above. Jesus lived in "this world," and yet he was not of "this world." For instance, Jesus testified to his kingship when Pilate was questioning him. As in John 18:36, "Jesus answered, 'My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from this world.'" Jesus' emphasis of his kingship fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament, and revealed a different kind of kingship that the world had never seen before. Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension were also verified by eyewitnesses. Jesus did not only "demonstrate" the defeat of an old structure "of this world." For disciples to learn from him, he empowered them by giving them the Holy Spirit who transformed the disciples from being merely from "this world" to being able to bear a different kind of witness. In other words, the focus of the Johannine theology of mission is not a simplified statement of saving the lost souls of the world. The Johannine theology of mission calls Christian believers to reveal the divine God so that disciples and followers can "come and see," know God and partake of Him, and live in "this world" and the next together with the Triune God. The eschaton is not a primary Johannine concern. Craig Keener highlights God's love as the motivation for mission. 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.¹⁰

The mission of Jesus' followers was also closely woven together with the mission of Jesus. Jesus taught his disciples and sent them to carry out mission works. "As the Father has sent me, I am

⁸ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *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, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 51.

⁹ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003).

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, "Sent Like Jesus: Johannine Missiology (John 20:21-22)," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 12, no. 1 (January 2009): 29.

sending you” (John 20:21b). The purpose of the disciples being sent was to witness the Christocentric Gospel, and the Holy Spirit inaugurated such mission, “With the receiving of the Spirit, the disciples will become witnesses of Jesus (15:26-27). So equipped the disciples are sent to carry on Jesus’ ministry in the world.”¹¹ Furthermore, the disciples’ mission was not without the continuous empowerment and guidance of the Holy Spirit. For example, John 20:22 points up the role of the Holy Spirit in the apostolic mission.¹²

To answer the question at the beginning of this section, Johannine theology is a Type B theology according to Bevans and Shroeder. The focus of Johannine theology is for people to “discover the truth.” Johannine theology of mission strongly emphasizes on the Incarnated Christ, his mission, and how his mission intertwined with his commission to his disciples by pouring out his own Spirit on them.

Approaches to the Johannine Theology of Mission

Scholars have identified several diverse approaches to the Johannine theology of mission. Some scholars such as David R. Bauer¹³ engages the methodology of inductive Bible study method, instead of a deductive Bible study method. Inductive Bible study focuses on interpreting the Johannine Scriptures by analyzing authorship, the historical backgrounds, identifying main units and subunits, structure of the book, relations of chapters of the passages, recurrences, contrast, climax, and lexicon. David Bauer and Robert Traina promote the principal methodologies as observing and asking, answering or interpreting, evaluating and appropriating scriptural passages.¹⁴ Although scholars interact with inductive bible study methodology, I have not observed them using the full scale of the method to understand the Johannine theology of mission. Many scholars engage in deductive bible study method that focuses on extracting themes of the Fourth Gospel. Scholars may focus on certain passages they take interest in. Both inductive method and deductive methods are important in analyzing the Johannine theology of mission, with emphasis on inductive bible study method which pays more attention to the text itself than reading into the text and rushing into conclusions.

Teresa Okure engages the contextual method in exploring the features of the Johannine Epistles. She discusses the reasons for this approach, which “seek(s) to establish the relationship between the missionary emphases present in the Gospel and the factors in the living situation of the Evangelist and of his audience which could have shaped his conception of mission.”¹⁵ An important aspect of Johannine mission is the missionary dialogue that Okure describes based on her exegesis of John 4:1-26. “[T]wo other important missionary motifs raised in the dialogue but not sufficiently developed

¹¹ Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 39.

¹² Keener, “Sent Like Jesus: Johannine Missiology (John 20:21-22),” 21-45. See also Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*, 197-198. Building on Keener and Kostenberger, David Moe explores the implications of John 20:21-22 for a contextual trinitarian missiology in a pluralistic world. See David Thang Moe, “The Word to the World: Johannine Trinitarian Missiology (John 20:21-22),” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 68-85.

¹³ David R. Bauer, “Inductive Bible Study: History, Character, and Prospects in a Global Environment,” *The Asbury Journal* 68, no.1 (2013): 6-35, Asbury Theological Seminary.

¹⁴ David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

¹⁵ Teresa Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study John 4:1-42*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament: 2. Reihe* 31 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988), 56.

concern the issues of fellowship (vv 9, 2) and that of ‘the gift of God.’”¹⁶ In the story of Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman and her later interaction with the Samaritans in town, the mission image is “the viewing of the disciples’ mission essentially as harvesting, where sower and reaper ‘rejoice together’ (vv 35-38).”¹⁷

Other approaches such as the narrative approach and comparative studies are also important methods in studying the Johannine Scriptures. Narrative approach highlights the events of the Fourth Gospel. The contextual studies approach features the Messianic Christ and the Jewish readers at John’s time. This approach is helpful in comparing the similarities of the Synoptic Gospels and identifying the distinctiveness of Johannine literature.

Major Themes in Johannine Theology

The Mission of Jesus

According to John, there are two aspects of the mission of Jesus — sending and glorifying. Many scholars comment on “sending,” rather than “glorifying.” “Whereas the formulation in the other Gospels emphasizes proclamation, John’s formulation is broader and in some ways more fundamental. The wording is also found in Jesus’s high priestly prayer in John 17:18, where Jesus explicitly speaks of sending the disciples ‘into the world.’”¹⁸ The Johannine theology of mission demonstrates the powerful and interesting transformation of the roles of Jesus and the disciples “The Gospel of John falls rather neatly into two distinct parts. The first 12 chapters present the earthly Jesus’ mission to the Jews while chapters 13 through 21 depict the mission of the exalted Jesus to the world. The sent one turns sender (20:21); the one who came now returns to where he came from (16:28); and the shepherd appoints an under-shepherd (21:15-19).”¹⁹

The theme of sending affirms the active role of God in mission. Johannine theology of mission emphasizes *missio Dei*. “[M]ission has two specific characteristics. It is a divine activity—God manifesting his glory in the sight of the nations by saving his people.”²⁰ The Johannine theology of mission carries an eschatological realization. “John’s Christology has an important missiological dimension. Jesus is the Son sent from the Father; he came into the world and returned to the Father; and he is the eschatological shepherd-teacher who called others to follow him in order to help gather the eschatological harvest. John’s concept of discipleship, too, is missiologically constrained.”²¹

Johannine theology narrates symbolism and reality. It depicts rich imageries: “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35); “I am the world’s light” (John 8:12); Gate for the sheep, the good shepherd (John 6-18); Resurrection and Life (John 11:25-26). Andreas Köstenberger points out, “Ultimately, all signs point to Jesus as the true messenger of God, the giver of life, a reality that finds its fullest expression in Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, but a reality that is already given preliminary expression in the signs performed during Jesus’ public ministry. According to John, the ‘signs,’ including the temple cleansing, are revelatory pictures of Jesus’ true identity; he is Christ, the Son of God (cf. 20:30).”²²

¹⁶ Ibid, 131.

¹⁷ Ibid, 131.

¹⁸ Ibid, 39.

¹⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John,” *Missiology* 23, no. 4 (October 1995): 450.

²⁰ Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, ed., *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, The American Society of Missiology Series: No. 43 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 11.

²¹ Köstenberger, “The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission,” 447.

²² Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*, 70.

The Mission of the Disciples

Howard Baker uses the agent motif to understand the mission of disciples rooted in the mission of Jesus. “Just as Jesus’ communion with the Father never ceased during his mission, so the disciples’ communion with Jesus is vital to their fruitful mission, as Jesus said, ‘Apart from me you can do nothing’ (15:5). It is communion that sustains mission.”²³ Some scholars observe the secondary role of the disciples’ participation in mission. Kostenberger states, “With regard to the work of Jesus’ followers, it may be concluded that both the revelatory and redemptive aspects of Jesus’ work in the Fourth Gospel are tied to the unique personal characteristics of Jesus to such an extent that the disciples can be said to participate in these only in a secondary sense.”²⁴ However, the humanity of the disciples was in the process of being redeemed and restored. Although John lifts up Jesus, separation of the mission of Jesus and the mission of the disciples is not necessary, for part of Jesus’ very own mission is that of the disciples as well.

John lifts up the importance of “come and see” in the mission of the disciples, even the Samaritan woman testified to her town people. Andrew led his brother Simon to Jesus by pointing out that Jesus was the Messiah (John 1:40-42). “Several other examples of disciples bringing friends and kin to Jesus are likewise highlighted in the Gospel of John.”²⁵

The role of the Holy Spirit is significant in the Johannine theology of mission. The Holy Spirit is witnessing, empowering, and even purifying. “[T]he 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 John 20:22 indicates that this emphasis in John’s theology of the Spirit continues here.”²⁶

Conclusion

Johannine theology of mission is both centrifugal and centripetal, meaning that the mission of God compels missionaries to move into diasporas and simultaneously draw people close to the reconciling and restoring relationship with God and the world. Jesus sent the disciples as the Father sent him, and at the same time, mission is also to draw people to a Christocentric life. “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.”²⁷ Johannine theology of mission calls followers of Christ to join in the *missio Dei*. A true “incarnational mission” relies on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so Christians can live out a life of holiness and purity, and bears life-giving witness to the nations.

²³ Howard Baker, “The Place of Mission in Johannine Discipleship: Perspectives from the Motif of Agency,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 44.

²⁴ Kostenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel*, 81.

²⁵ Stanley H. Skreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness: New Testament Images of Disciples in Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 92.

²⁶ Keener, “Sent Like Jesus,” 32.

²⁷ Keener, “Sent Like Jesus,” 45.