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METAPHORS FOR MINISTRY IN JOHN: AN EXAMPLE OF DOING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY¹

Part 1—Incarnation and the World

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Ministers and church leaders are concerned with *practical* theology. It is their concern to ask for example, “How will a study of ministry in the Gospel of John relate to the church’s ministry today?” I have found the work of Don S. Browning helpful. Browning believes three generalizations can be made about practical theology: it (1) “tries to answer the question of what we should do in the face of problems and challenges to faithful action,” (2) “consists of several different levels,” and (3) “is correlational and critical.”²

All three of Browning’s generalizations are germane to our study, but the second is especially so. Within it Browning sets forth five “analytically distinct levels to practical theological thinking.”³ First is the metaphorical level that parallels systematic theology and is concerned with the great metaphors that symbolize our faith experience; God as creator is an example. Second is the level of obligation that parallels formal theological ethics and is concerned with moral development. The golden rule, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt 7.12), is an example. Third is the need-tendency level, the psychological plane concerned with personal emotional motivational development. The concern for righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness in a marriage relationship is an example (Hos 2.19-20). Fourth is the contextual-predictive level, the sociological dimension wherein “we try to interpret the situation that confronts us in our ethical deliberation.”⁴ An inner city church’s struggle for survival as it attempts to find resources to care for the homeless in its community is an example. Finally there is the rule-role communicational level, the point in which “specific rules and roles for organizing our

¹ This material to a large extent first appeared as “Metaphors and an Obligational Norm for Ministry in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Johannine Studies, Essays in Honor of Frank Pack*, ed. James E. Priest, editorial consultants W. Royce Clark and Ronald L. Tyler (Malibu: Pepperdine University Press, 1989) 111-131. It has been redacted.

² Don S. Browning, “Integrating the Approaches: A Practical Theology,” in *Building Effective Ministry*, ed. Carl S. Dudley (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 222-223. Browning follows the tradition of practical theology associated with the names of Daniel Day Williams, Seward Hiltner and David Tracy. See also Don S. Browning, “Pastoral Theology in a Pluralistic Age,” *Pastoral Psychology* 29:1 (Fall 1980) 24-35, and *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). For practical theologians to whom Browning is indebted see Dan Day Williams, “Truth in a Theological Perspective,” *Journal of Religion* 28:4 (October 1948) and *The Minister and the Care of Souls* (New York: Harpers, 1961), Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), and David Tracy, *The Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) and *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

³ The elements of the list are a compilation I have created from Browning’s data found in “Integrating the Approaches,” 222-223.

⁴ Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, 70.

practical action” takes place, both for individuals and groups.⁵ Paul’s command to the Thessalonians, “if anyone one will not work, let him not eat,” (2 Thess 3.10) is an example. It is essential for practical theologians to work at all of these levels, although the last three are the traditional areas for doing practical theology.

Although the Gospel of John may not address actual congregational settings, it does set forth a number of “ministry metaphors” and an “obligational norm” that relate the biblical message to contemporary church ministry. In this multi-part study I will work with the metaphorical and obligational levels (the first two levels for Browning), using the Fourth Gospel as my guide. Admittedly, my effort will be incomplete, but hopefully it will illustrate an essential step, since practical theology, as Browning puts it, “cannot afford to ignore the higher levels, the metaphorical and the obligational.”⁶

Preliminary Considerations

Two preliminary but necessary considerations require our attention. We need to say a few words about how different the Gospel of John is in comparison to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) concerning the topic of ministry, and we need to explore the question of whether the church is a reality in John. Can we really talk about Christian ministry without a believing community?

Comparing John with the Synoptic Gospels

Although ministry in all four of the Gospels is predicated on the ministry of Jesus, it is expressed and emphasized differently by each writer.⁷ However, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke there are usually three ministry activities attributed to Jesus—preaching, serving and healing. In John the vocabulary and thought patterns for these activities are significantly modified. For example, the terms “gospel” and “preaching” are nearly absent from John’s vocabulary. Instead weight is given to “testimony” and “witness.” Further, in the Synoptic writings ministry focuses upon “service” a widely emphasized New Testament theme. The Fourth Gospel speaks of “slaves,” “servants” and “service” with some regularity, but to my knowledge in only three instances, 12.26, 13.17, and 15.15, does the language seem to relate to ministry. Similar contrasting observations can be made of the third activity, healing. Jesus’ ministry in Matthew, Mark and Luke is characterized by frequent healings and/or exorcisms, vital demonstrations of the power of God’s kingdom over Satan.⁸ In John, the vocabulary

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Browning, “Integrating the Approaches,” 224. Browning’s use of “higher” and “lower” levels is not intended to mean that the lower levels are less important—only that they are dependent on “certain judgments at the higher levels for their proper positioning.”

⁷ The question of why John is so different from Matthew, Mark and Luke, along with a more in-depth treatment of the similarities and differences among these writings concerning the topic of ministry is provided by D. Moody Smith, “Theology and Ministry in John,” in *A Biblical Basis for Ministry*, ed. Earl E. Shelp and Ronald Sunderland (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) 186-200.

⁸ The Gospels variously treat the purpose of miracles. For example, Mark indicates that healings and faith do not always go together (3.19b-35; 4.35-6.56). Concerning Mark, Charles H. Talbert states, “to confess Jesus as Christ on the basis of his power is not only partial vision and must be supplemented by the vision of the cross (e.g., 8.14-21, 22-26, 27-30; 10.45-52),” in his *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 59. Faith, however, seems important to Luke’s presentation of Jesus’

for “healing” and the “kingdom” is used infrequently. Only four “healing” stories are found in John (4.46-54, an official’s son; 5.1-18, a man ill for thirty-eight years; 9.1-12, the man born blind; and 11.1-44, the raising of Lazarus to life). Indeed, this is a small number in comparison to the Synoptic record. Even more noticeable is the absence of exorcisms in John, a prevalent activity in Matthew, Mark and Luke. True, in John, Jesus is accused of having a demon, but never is there a casting out of a demon by Jesus. In fact, the miracles of Jesus are not described as miracles but as Jesus’ “works” (5.26; 9.3; 10.32-33; 14.10) and/or “signs” (2.11, 23; 3.2; 4.54) that have the force of testimony and are given for the purpose of producing faith. As D. Moody Smith states, the works and signs of Jesus in John “have the express function of raising the question of who Jesus is and suggesting an answer.”⁹

Even though certain ministry terms and thought patterns in Matthew, Mark and Luke are missing and/or modified in John, a rich message of ministry remains. Testimony, we shall see later, leads people to choose life or judgment. Service is stressed through the love commandment (13.34, 35; 15.12-13, 17) and the foot washing (13.1-11, 12-20). The works of Jesus are integral to his mission. In saying this, though, we must be careful. The Fourth Gospel does not express matters differently without reason. The language, structure, and activity of the writing are fundamental to its purpose.

Church and Ministry in John

Raymond Brown points out that up to 1965 most of the discussion concerning the topic of the church in John was negative.¹⁰ For example, it was argued that there is no explicit reference to church order and governance or to the Lord’s Supper or baptism or the “people of God” in John, and, like Mark and Luke, John does not use the term, “church.” On the other hand, reflecting a consensus of scholarship today, there is implicit evidence for the church as a community within the Gospel. The symbolic discourses on the shepherd and vine include sheep and branches, images not just of individuals but also of the disciples, a community of believers. The frequent controversial discourses (6.22-51; 7.10-31; 8.12-59, et al.) probably reflect struggles within and without the community.¹¹ The discussion on

miracles; see Paul J. Achtemeier, “The Lukan Perspective on the Miracles of Jesus: A Preliminary Sketch,” *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Danville, VA: ABPR, 1978) 16.

⁹ Smith, 216.

¹⁰ Raymond Brown, “Johannine Ecclesiology—The Community’s Origins,” *Interpretation*, XXXI 4 (October 1977) 379. See also Brown’s discussion in the introduction to his commentary, *The Gospel According to John*, I-XII (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1966) cv-cxi, and bibliography cxxvii, and his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York, et al.: Paulist Press, 1979) 13-24. A more complete bibliography is provided by Ernst Haenchen, *John*, trans. Robert W. Funk, ed. Funk and Ulrich Busse, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) section 37.

¹¹ J. Louis Martyn’s *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, second revised edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), first published in 1968, was the beginning of several studies that maintain the Gospel operates on two levels, the author’s present as well as Jesus’ past. We must not forget, however, the importance of the pre-Easter Jesus. Talbert, in discussing the theological importance of apostleship in Luke, makes a statement with a broader significance. “Theologically, this view of apostleship is significant as it places the church’s proclamation under the control of the career of the pre-Easter Jesus as known through his witness” (*Reading Luke*, 62). For a helpful overview of other efforts in the reconstruction of the milieu out of which the Gospel and Epistles arose, see Raymond E. Brown’s *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 171-182. I assume that the Gospel works with both the faith and life of the Johannine circles as well as the pre-Easter Jesus. But I also agree with Smith that the Gospel has a polemical setting which helps account for its apparent distinctive emphasis upon

worship in John 4 probably points to the church's worship in spirit and truth (4.23-24). The commissioning of the disciples (20.19-22) seems to prefigure the church.¹² Teaching on love, prayer, obedience, the Spirit, bearing fruit and persecution in the world suggests a community of disciples with a fellowship and ministry. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 includes "those who believe in me through their word" (17.20). This study cannot settle the contemporary debate concerning the doctrine of the church in John, but the reality of the church is a defensible assumption from which to work, especially when the evidence of the letters of John are considered.¹³ Finally, if we can speak of the church as a community in John we must speak of its ministry as well. Edward Schillebeeckx expressed this matter well: there is "no community without ministry" and conversely there is "no ministry without community."¹⁴

Having addressed our two preliminary matters, we now are ready to explore seven metaphors for ministry: incarnation, the world, sending, following, bearing fruit, serving and shepherding. These seven metaphors function as analogies for faith development and are shaped and guided by one ethical norm, the new commandment. The remainder of this article examines the first two metaphors, incarnation and the world. Subsequent articles will develop the remaining metaphors and the ethical norm of love.

First Metaphor: Incarnation

No writing in the New Testament has a higher christology (Jesus is deity) than John. Not only does the Gospel parallel in its own way Paul's conviction that God has acted decisively in Jesus (cf. Rom 1.1-4, 16-17; 3.21-22), it affirms the pre-existent (1.1-4) and universal importance of Christ. Smith states, "The cosmic significance of Christ... is now expressed in a Gospel," and a central early Christian "...tenet is now taken to mean that Jesus is, at least functionally, equivalent to God."¹⁵ This high christology is found not only in John's prologue but also in Jesus' conversation with Philip (14.9-11), Jesus' prayer for his disciples (17.20), and in the confession of Thomas after the resurrection (20.28).

John's high christology involves as well the fullest expression of Jesus' humanity—the incarnation. Jesus is declared to be the "only Son" who "became flesh" (1.14), that is, with all the limitations of what it is to be human including mortality. Put another way, the phrase "became flesh" means that the eternal Word (Greek *Logos*, 1.1) completely entered

Christian conviction, and "The vigor, and even vehemence, of the Fourth Gospel's Christological affirmation" Smith, 214-215).

¹² C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: S.P.C.K., 1955) 78-82.

¹³ There are a variety of opinions for and against church order in the Gospel and Epistles. Opposed is Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (SBT 32; London: SCM, 1961). Schweizer's argument centers on the absence of the notion of "the people of God" in the Johannine theology. A more balanced view in my opinion is that of S. Pancaro, "People of God in St. John's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 16, 1967-68) 114-29. Smith asserts, "It cannot be shown that either the Gospel of John or the Johannine epistles evince a highly developed church organization," ("Theology and Ministry in John," 218). Conversely, Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church With a Human Face* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 94-99, sees a Spirit led community in the Gospel, with the possible exception of 21.15-19 which is a structure based on the authority of love.

¹⁴ Schillebeeckx, 128.

¹⁵ Smith, 216.

the human experience, the time-bound sphere. Truly, the story of Jesus is the story of the Word become flesh (Greek *sarx*). It is also *the* strategic theological theme for understanding the Gospel. Notice that in verse 14 of the prologue the first-person plural (*we/us*) is used, indicating a confessional perspective on the part of the writer within or alongside the believing community. Verily, this is the church's experience of God in John. The combination of the eternal Word become flesh contains a profound paradox. Rudolf Schnackenburg puts it well, "It expresses the unmistakable paradox that the Logos who dwelt with God, clothed in the full majesty of the divinity and possessing the fullness of the divine life, entered the sphere of the earthly and human, the material and perishable, by becoming flesh."¹⁶

This combination—external Word became flesh—is emphasized throughout the Gospel in various ways. For example, Jesus incarnate participates in a wedding feast (2.1-11) at which time he reminds his mother in transcendent terms, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" (2.4). Jesus incarnate, weary and thirsty, sits down at a well in Samaria and in transcendent terms reveals to a woman not only her past but also the reality of "living water"—water that becomes "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (4.14). Agitated in spirit, Jesus incarnate weeps at the tomb of Lazarus and in the same moment reveals that he is the resurrection and the life (11.33, 35, 25). During the Last Supper Jesus incarnate lays aside his garments and washes the disciples' feet (13.3-5). This scene is introduced with the transcendent words "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13.1). This suggests that the foot washing was a symbolic, anticipatory "sign" pointing to his death and glorification. At the hour of his glorification, his death, Jesus incarnate thirsts (18.28). Resurrected, he shows the disciples bodily evidences of his death and then commissions them with the words, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20.22-23). One week later, he tells Thomas to touch and to handle the bodily signs of his suffering—then believing (20.27), Thomas confesses, "My Lord and my God" (20.28). Thomas' confession is the most powerful tribute to Jesus' identity in the Gospel. He sees God fully revealed in Jesus. Thus, by means of the eternal Word made flesh, Jesus offers himself to Thomas and Thomas is brought to faith. Sometimes the fullness of John's christology is most clearly expressed by Jesus' opponents, "It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God" (10.33). Smith states, "It is not the intention of the Fourth Evangelist to present the revelation of God in Jesus in such a way as to negate his humanity or to make his experience foreign, and therefore irrelevant to his followers."¹⁷

Further, statements that identify and depict the solidarity of Jesus and the disciples underscore the incarnation. If people persecute Jesus, they will persecute the disciples (15.20). If the world hates the disciples, it is because the world first hated Jesus (15.18). If anyone receives the disciples, that person receives Jesus and the one who sent him (13.20). As the Father has sent Jesus into the world, in like fashion Jesus sends the disciples (20.21).

¹⁶ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of John: Volume One, Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1-4*, translated by Kevin Smyth (London and New York: Burns & Oates, Herder and Herder, 1968) 268.

¹⁷ Smith, 217.

Jesus prays not for the disciples to be taken out of the world, but that the Father will protect them from the evil one (17.15).

A corollary to the incarnation is the Gospel's view of "flesh." Flesh is not evil, nor does it stand in opposition to God. Flesh, Rudolph Bultmann affirms, is simply "the sphere of the human and the worldly as opposed to the divine..." Bultmann distinguishes among the meanings of several related words including "flesh," "spirit," "world" and "darkness." Flesh stresses the "transitoriness, helplessness and vanity" of the worldly sphere. "Spirit" emphasizes the divine, especially the divine power. "Darkness" is "the worldly sphere in its enmity towards God..." "World" can be used both in the sense of "flesh" and "darkness."¹⁸ Again, we confront a paradox. On the one hand "flesh is useless" because only "the Spirit" gives life" (6.63). On the other hand, those who eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood eat true food and drink true drink (6.54). Flesh is transitory and helpless, but through it the glory of God is revealed in Jesus and through it the community of believers by the Spirit continues Jesus' mission and ministry to the world. H. Richard Niebuhr describes the Gospel's view of flesh:

...whatever is good...the physical, material, and temporal are never regarded as participating in evil in any peculiar way because they are not spiritual and eternal. On the contrary, natural birth, eating, drinking, wind, water, and bread and wine are for this evangelist not only symbols to be employed in dealing with the realities of the life of the spirit but are pregnant with spiritual meaning. Spiritual and natural events are interlocking and analogous.¹⁹

Bultmann perhaps best depicts John's meaning of flesh when he states, "This is the paradox which runs through the whole gospel: the *doxa* (glory) is not to be seen *alongside* the *sarx* (flesh), nor *through* the *sarx* as through a window; it is to be seen in the *sarx* and nowhere else."²⁰

A theology of incarnation is crucial to the church's self-understanding and sense of ministry.²¹ T. F. Torrance aptly conveys this significance,

Thus through the Incarnation is revealed to us that God in His own Being is not closed to us, for He has come to share with us the deepest movement of His divine heart, and so to participate in our human nature that the heart of God beats within it.²²

¹⁸ Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley Murray et al. (Westminster Press, 1971) 62.

¹⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 197.

²⁰ Bultmann, 63.

²¹ Rudolph Bultmann, *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark and Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979) 493.

²² T. F. Torrance, *Service in Christ, Essays Presented to Karl Barth on his 80th Birthday*, ed. James I. McCord and T.H.L. Parker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, The Epworth Press, 1966) 4-5.

The church through the incarnation, Karl Barth believes, is the community that exists for God, but in so doing it must understand that God exists for the world, which means that in existing for God the church must exist for the world. In John the church and its ministry are shaped by the imperative of the incarnation.

Second Metaphor: the World

If the means of ministry is the Spirit working through the flesh, the object of ministry is the world. Care must be given at this point. Jesus is sent into the world, but the object of his work is to do his Father's will (4.34; 5.30; 17.4 et al.). At his death he exclaims, "It is finished" (19.30). His work was done. He had glorified his Father by loving the world. Bultmann writes, "All ministry is God's ministry. Jesus did not come to introduce his own ministry. His ministry was to do the will of the Father and to live by every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."²³ In turn, the call of discipleship is to serve Jesus (12.26) and the reward of such service is to be honored by the Father (12.26). Helmut Thielicke, in a carefully developed argument, maintains that care must be given that theology does not begin with the "Cartesian self" with its subjective tendencies but with the testimony and the work of the Holy Spirit.²⁴

But what constitutes the world in John? Niebuhr believes the world is one of the Fourth Gospel's apparent paradoxes. First, it refers to the totality of creation. The prologue affirms, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (1.9; see 8.12; 9.5; 11.9; 17.5, 24). It is God's good creation. Niebuhr states,

In his convictions about creation through the Word and about the incarnation of the Word, John expresses his faith in God's wholly affirmative relation to the whole world, material and spirit. Creation means what redemption does, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."²⁵

From this perspective, the creation highlights the world of persons, of human affairs, of humankind capable of knowing and comprehending. Both creation and humanity in this sense are transitory. They belong to the world that is below in contrast to the world that is above (8.23; 18.36). The world so understood is comparable to John's view of "flesh."

But second, the world also, and often in the same context, refers to humankind rejecting Christ, living in darkness, doing evil, being ignorant of God, and exulting over Jesus' death (7.7; 8.23; 14.17; 15.18-25; 17.25, et al.). In this sense flesh and the world are not synonymous. The world, Bultmann declares, "stands over against God and confronts him with hostility; ..." This world has made itself "independent of God." Its synonym is darkness, the "darkness of lies and sin."²⁶ God sent his Son to both the world of creation and alienation (3.16). But "this world," the world of darkness and under the power of its ruler, hated Jesus and hates his disciples. It rejected Christ and refused to believe. This world

²³ Bultmann, *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, 7.

²⁴ Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, Vol I (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1974) 129-60, 193-205.

²⁵ Niebuhr, 197.

²⁶ Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 54-55. In footnote 3, p. 55, Bultmann refers the reader to John 8.21-29, 30-40, 41-47; 9.39-41; 15.21-25; 16.8-11.

is judged and not saved (3.18; 5.24; 9.39; 12.47-48). Jesus' disciples, the community of faith, are in an alienated and hostile world but are not of it (17.11, 15). Accordingly, they are opposed and suffer tribulation (16.33), but are encouraged since Jesus through his death overcomes the world (12.31; 14.30; 16.11).

To accept this apparent paradox is important for the church and its ministry. It must "love" the world, "die" for the world, and be involved with the world all the while knowing it is still flesh. It must know that it came out of the world, but it is not of the world. The church cannot accept the world's values, live by its strength, measure its success by the world's standards, or share its dreams. It must never forget the only way to transform the world is through the Word made flesh. Schnackenburg reminds us "...in the Johannine theology of incarnation and mission, the greatness of God's act is manifest in the very bridging of the chasm between God and the 'world'."²⁷

Conclusion

Space constraints demand that we now conclude this first part of our study of metaphors for ministry in John. In our second article we will examine four metaphors: sending (see the article by David Matson in this issue), following, bearing fruit and serving. The latter three are found in one passage, 12.23-26, a text that provides what Raymond Brown describes as "...a splendid commentary on the meaning that the hour of Jesus' death and resurrection will have for all men."²⁸ Truly, the area of faith development is essential as an enduring basis for practical theology and its contribution to contemporary ministry.

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²⁷ Schnackenburg, 399.

²⁸ Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I-XII, 475.