

## **The Trinitarian Mission Theology in the Gospel of John**

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When studying the topic of missions, it is important for Christians to survey the whole Bible with a mission hermeneutic. Richard Bauckham suggested that looking at the Bible in this way is not just a study of the mission theme as exemplified through the stories in Scripture; it goes further. It is to read Scripture as a whole, in all its parts, with the goal and purpose of the Christian mission in mind (Bauckham, "Mission" 1). This is not the only perspective with which one can or ought to interpret the Bible; it is important to look at it with a comprehensive hermeneutic. However, when one is specifically concerned with the Bible's teaching on missions, the whole Bible as one work corresponds with itself, so its mission theology connects and has continuity which is revealed throughout all of Scripture (Bauckham, "Mission" 2). The mission hermeneutic corresponds with the salvation history of the world, which changed from availability to one nation, to one that was for the entire world. In the Old Testament, the salvation history was centered upon Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God and his elect. Now the salvation history is one that has geographically spread to all the earth. Although the commissioning of Christians to go out into all the world is in the New Testament, all of the Old Testament points to the New Testament in the same way the salvation history led up to Christ. It is important to read the Bible with this continuity in mind when seeking its missional perspective, which is the precisely how John expressed the mission theme in the fourth gospel.

The book of John was written to a Jewish culture that was aware of the salvation history up to that point, and greatly valued religious traditions. John was written in such a way that shows fulfillment in Christ of all the Jewish promises, showing therefore the unique continuity

from the Old Testament to the New, from the Old Covenant to the New. The Gospel has a mission theology that is aware of the transition from a mission formerly being focused on the people of Israel, to one that is for the new messianic community (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 545). To be part of this new messianic community, one must believe in the Son, sent by the Father for the purpose of gathering these believers to Him (John 1:12, 3:16, and 20:30-31).

John's gospel not only has a salvation-historic framework, it is Trinitarian as well. In the Trinitarian mission, it is the Father who sent the Son, not the Son who sends the Father. Likewise, the Father and the Son are the senders of the Spirit and the Spirit is not the sender of the Father and Son (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 543). The Son accomplished the mission from the Father, and then transferred the mission upon us through the Spirit. The salvation history is further continued in the gathering of God's people, which is the role of the Spirit in the Trinitarian mission. Just as the Son proclaimed that he and the Father were one, so also the Trinitarian mission is one of unity. Through the Spirit, we also are united in this mission with the Father and Son. Therefore, we are now included in this Trinitarian salvation mission, and are sent by the Father, Son, and Spirit to bear witness of the gospel to all nations.

The role of the Father in the fourth gospel is the sender (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 107). The Father sent the Son to gather the new messianic community and when the Son's earthly work was accomplished, the Father commissioned us through the Son to continue this mission by spreading the gospel to the world (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 540-541). As John 20:21 says, "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." While God being referred to as "the Father" is not a very common idea in the Old Testament, the fourth Gospel is written depicting with the father-son relationships in the Hebrew culture, especially that of only sons, in mind (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 540). For Jews, it was a common cultural practice for a father to send his son on a

mission or delivery as a safeguard to ensure that the sent item would be properly received and dependably delivered (Kostenberger/O'Brien, *Salvation* 208-209). The primary characterization of Jesus in John's Gospel as Son, being typified by the Jewish father-son relationships of which everyone in that context was familiar with, says much of the importance of the sent Son's mission, and its purpose of bringing glory to the Father. Throughout the gospel, Jesus stresses his dependence on the Father for strength, showing that all he does is not only because of the Father who sent him, but also that it is from the Father that he gains the strength to accomplish the mission which he was sent to do (Kostenberger/O'Brien, *Salvation* 207-208).

The mission Jesus was sent for can be summed up in one way as the bearing witness of the truth (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 441). This was seen in the trial before Pilate, meaning he was bearing witness of himself, who is the Truth. Those who were condemning him to his sentence were in the process were condemning themselves because they were denying the Truth. Those who are of the Truth, responded to this him, but the accusing Jews and Pilate both did not respond to his truth and believe. This Jesus vs. the world motif that John depicts is a model for our mission as well. It shows Jesus being in the world, on trial, yet taking no part in the darkness of the world and bearing witness of the truth alone. Bearing witness of this truth however, required supernatural strength from the Father. The sending terminology in John stresses the Son's being dependent on the Sender (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 107) The Son shows dependence on the Father through his prayer directed to the Father (Kostenberger, *The Mission*. 111). He petitions him to help him when he is about to be betrayed, asking him to save him from the situation, but ultimately pleading that the Father's will be done. Then at the end of the farewell discourse, Jesus prays to his Father that he has accomplished his mission here on earth and is now going to heaven (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 541). In John 14:12-14, Jesus directs us

to follow this same prayer-dependence that he would model for us. He tells us that through the strength from the Spirit, and for the glory of the Father, when we ask anything in his name, he will do it. This is specifically regarding missions however, as the “greater works” in 14:13 is talking about the greater number of people who will come to believe because of our witness.

In John, the presentation of the Father and Son is one of collaboration in accomplishing the mission in unity (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 107). This unity is extended to us in our mission, through the gift of the Spirit. The mission we have is only important because of the greater mission which we are a part of, the mission of Christ (Kostenberger/O’Brien, *Salvation* 209), which we receive through the baptism of the Spirit. When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist (John 1:32-33), the Spirit descended upon Christ in the form of the dove. Through the Spirit, the presence of the Father was ever with Jesus, enabling him to accomplish his mission. When Jesus ascended, and the Spirit, the power of God, was further transferred upon believers at Pentecost, so we were united with Christ in this same mission. The Spirit convicts us, and those we share the gospel with (John 16:9) and the Spirit reminds us of the words of Jesus and all that he taught his followers (John 14:26). Through the Spirit we bear witness and so we bear fruit, of the harvest that we did not sow, but that God has already sown for us (John 4:31-38; Kostenberger/O’Brien *Salvation* 213-214).

This mission is YHWH, who is the only way the truth and the life, focusing on the fact that there is no other God besides him (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 546). This was the message of Jesus to the Jews, furthered to the Gentiles. The first half of John expresses Jesus’ seven parable-signs directed at the Jews to show them that he was the true Messiah (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 440). Seven was the number of the completion, and the signs each revealed Christological truths about his identity. He is the new temple, the eternal water which no one thirsts after drinking, he

is the bread of life, the true light which shines in the darkness and so on. In John there is a specific difference between the use of the word σημεῖον and the word ἔργα (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 53-54). Σημεῖον is used specifically in reference to the parable-miracles done by Jesus, and the word ἔργα refers to the work of Jesus in a much broader sense. As Jesus told us in John 14:12, “Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these he will do because I am going to the Father.” The use of ἔργα in this passage shows we are included in this kind of work; it is referring to the mission that we are given through the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 72). Ἔργα is used in its singular form ἔργον, in 4:34 and then again in 17:4 when Jesus reports that his work has been completed, forming an inclusio (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 53). The specific mission that the Father gave to the Son to do was finished, because now it is continued through us.

The word σημεῖον is used from 2:11 to 20:30, but primarily in chapters 1-12, depicting the signs of Jesus to the Jews, but 20:30 tells us the purpose of these signs are so that we might believe in him (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 53). The gospel of John’s depiction of these signs shows continuity with the Old Testament signs done by the prophets. The focus of these signs in the Old Testament, was not so much as miraculous works, rather they were revelatory of God’s sovereignty and purpose (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 58-60). For example in Isaiah 20:3, Isaiah walked barefoot and stripped for three years signifying God’s judgment against Cush and Egypt, but there is nothing notably miraculous about this action. The focus rather, is on the symbolism which provided revelations which continued to be further revealed through God’s fulfillment of them (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 59). In John, these seven signs are the changing water into wine, the temple cleansing, the healing of the nobleman’s son, the healing of the lame man, the feeding of the multitude, the healing of the blind man, followed lastly by the climactic sign of the

raising of Lazarus. This last, climactic sign typified both the resurrection of Christians in the baptism of the Spirit for regeneration and sanctification, and of Jesus' resurrection (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 71). The signs follow the model of the Old Testament prophetic signs, and show the fulfillment of their revelatory promises in the death and resurrection of Christ, the reality to which all the signs had pointed (Kostenberger, *The Mission* p. 66). Signs illustrated a truth, but were not the ultimate truth. Jesus' death was an actual death and the manifestation of God's glory, not just a picture of it therefore it was an actual truth, differentiating it from just a sign. It was the ultimate fulfillment of all the Old Testament signs (Kostenberger, *The Mission* 66, footnote 77). So the significance of these signs is that they pointed to Christ, the ultimate Truth that we testify to.

After all these signs, the Jews still rejected him, forfeiting their divine election and joining the world in its condemnation, so Jesus began spreading his message, gathering his new messianic community (Kostenberger, *A Theology* 442). The gospel message was extended from salvation solely to Jews to the salvation provided for all who would believe in Jesus' name. John 20:30-31 states the Christological purpose of these signs (Bauckham, *The Testimony* 274); however the gospel of John does not end there. In chapter 21, what is considered by many to be the epilogue, there is the miracle catch of the 153 fish by the disciples, when Jesus reveals himself to them for the third and final recorded time in the book of John. This miracle is not one of the signs since the seven signs that pointed to Christ had revealed fully the significance of his person. Rather this miracle "symbolizes programmatically the mission in which the disciples are now to engage." There is parallelism between 20:30 and 21:25, the latter of which has often been interpreted as a redactor's addition by modern biblical scholarship, imitating the style of the former. However the parallelism is clearly intentional by the Beloved Disciple himself, to show

that the mission of Christ, pointing to his Christology has now been fulfilled, therefore fulfillment had come of 12:14. In the context, Jesus had just commissioned Peter, and stated the Beloved Disciple's purpose as well, as the one who has borne witness of the things Jesus did that his testimony might be trusted as true. Moreover, the parable-sign of the fish forms an inclusio between John 3 and John 20 stressing that the mission of Christ's fishing of men has been transferred to us. These things Jesus did are now part of our testimony that we share with the entire world.

The miracle of the 153 fish confirms this purpose of mission. Numerical significance is extremely important in the writings of the Apostle John, therefore it can only be expected that 153 holds important significance as well. On a basic level, there are seven disciples mentioned as the fishers in this miracle account, signifying the completeness of the number of the disciple's Jesus had gathered to himself. They catch 153 fish which is considered to be the number of the kinds of fish there are, which signifies all the nations to whom the salvation message was to now be shared with, since the work of Jesus enabled all peoples to be a part of his new messianic community (Bauckham, "Mission" 4). The fact that the fish were not caught until Jesus intervened shows that it is futile to try and bring people to Christ ourselves except in full dependence on Christ. However further examination shows that the number 153 has even deeper significance as well, in expressing the mission purpose of this miracle.

153 is the triangular number of 17, meaning that the sum of the numbers between 1 and 17 is 153 (Bauckham, *The Testimony* 275, 278). Triangular numbers were part of Gematria, the common technique in biblical and related literature of the ancient world involving numerical significance in the calculation of words, syllables, and the alphabet in Hebrew and Greek (Bauckham, *The Testimony* 274-275). The prologue to the book of John (1:1-1:18) has 496

syllables, which is the triangular number of 31. 486 is significant because it was also the numerical number for μονογενής (John 1:14, 18), and the next section of the gospel, 1:19-2:11 has 1150 syllables which is the number for Χριστός (John 1:20, 25). So just in this first section of the gospel, the Gematria stresses the one and only person of Jesus Christ as significant. This is further expressed in the seven signs and later in the purpose statement of those signs (John 20:30). These all point to Christ as the unique Son of God, sharing in the divine identity, which of course makes all the difference in the accomplishment of his mission. Further significance of the number 486 is shown in 17:1-26 which contains 486 syllables, because this number is also the numerical value of the word πατερ, showing that the person and work of Christ is closely connected in dependence with the Father (Bauckham, *The Testimony* 276). The epilogue, 21:1-23, which is framed by the purpose statement of Jesus' signs (20:30-31) and the purpose of all the things he did in our mission (21:24-25), ties in with this number as well because it also contains 486 words (Bauckham, *The Testimony* 277). There is not a specific word in the epilogue that corresponds with 486, but as the chapter where the disciples are commissioned, 486 does bring us back to the prologue where it signifies μονογενής, reminding us again that the purpose of our mission is to share the gospel of the μονογενής (486), one and only, Χριστός (486), Christ, the Son of God, who is the πατερ (486). Also, in the Hebrew, 486 is the numerical number for the words meaning "Lamb of God", and the prologue (John 1:12) tells us that the μονογενής Son of God came into the world that those who believe might become children of God. Jesus, as the Son of God, was also the sacrificial Lamb of God, who because of his sacrifice enabled us to become children of God. While this all ties the prologue and the epilogue, and the person of Christ to our mission, the numerical significance of 486 and "Lamb of God" in the Hebrew

seems random, since all the other numerical-word-value references were in the Greek, and the “Lamb of God” word is in the Hebrew. However this is not a random connection either.

As has been stressed earlier, the Beloved Disciple frequently uses the signs and numbers to refer to the Old Testament and show the historic-salvation continuity. There is a tie in the epilogue between the 153 fish, the sacrificial significance of Lamb of God, and Ezekiel 47 (Bauckham, *The Testimony* 278- 280). Ezekiel 47 tells us of a stream of water that will flow from the new temple, which in John is shown to be fulfilled in the person of Christ (a huge theme in the book of John). When the water from this stream flows into the sea, it turns from salt water to fresh water so that people may fish from the spring of Gedi to the spring of Eglaim (Ezekiel 47:8-10). In the Hebrew, the numerical values of Gedi and Eglaim are 17 and 153. Also, Gedi is the 153rd word in Ezekiel 47. Ezekiel 47:10 discusses the spreading of nets and the catch of many kinds of fish. The 153 fish caught in John 21 and the numerical significance of 17 and 153 in Ezekiel 47 must be a connection since the stories are so similar. So through these numbers John shows that Ezekiel 47 has been fulfilled! Eglaim and the Hebrew for “children of God” also have the same numerical number, showing that Jesus, as the new temple, has enabled the streams of water that were previously unusable to the other nations, to enable every nation (153 fish) to become part of the children of God. Therefore, the fact that John was working with Hebrew in the “Lamb of God”, who is not only the new temple, but also the perfect, sacrificial Lamb who enables us to be children of God, is now understandable since he is referring to the Old Testament story of the Ezekiel 47 which was written in Hebrew. Living water flowing from Christ, the new temple was also previously alluded to in John 7:38, and 19:34 showing further references to Ezekiel 47 throughout the book of John (Bauckham, *The Testimony* 279-280).

The number 153 has even further significance, as it connects the first purpose statement to the second purpose statement, and the Christology of Jesus with the ecclesiological mission of his believers. John 20:30-31 states that the signs were made so that we may believe the Christ is the Son of God, and therefore have life. In this verse the words “sign”, “believe”, “Christ”, and “life” are used for the last time in the gospel. The numerical number for “sign” is 17, and the sum of the numerical numbers of “believe”, “Christ”, and “life” (98, 19, and 36) is 153. So the number 17 with its triangular 153, make a connection with the 153 fish, showing it is because Christ is the Son of God, and he has given us life as believers, that we are to share his name and works with others so that all nations, shown in the 153 fish, might believe! The miraculous catch of the fish symbolize the mission of the church to be “fishers of men”, who believe that Jesus, the *monogeneis* Son of God, the perfect sacrificial Lamb, is the Messiah. <sup>1</sup>

This message that was preached to the Jews and then to the Gentiles is the same message that we preach and that brings us to the knowledge of salvation today. We are commanded by Christ to bear witness of this message, as light in the darkness, and reap the harvest. Obedience to this command was seen fulfilled in the early church, as Paul and the other apostles spoke to the Gentile nations and proclaimed to them the living God, the one who is the Creator, and who is not made by human hands. The same mission theology of Acts is that with which we are commissioned to spread to the world today

We need to see our mission continually in light of Jesus’ mission, as it is the basis for ours (Kostenberger/O’Brien, *Salvation* 224). It is still the same mission; it is simply being carried out now through us, his united followers in the form of the church, empowered by the Spirit

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the mission of the church and the fulfillment in Christ is clear in the written message of the gospel of John, it is not some hidden code that otherwise cannot be figured out unless the Gematria is deciphered. However, it is further emphasized by John’s use of Gematria, and the Jews at the time were far more likely to pick up on it than we are today.

(Kostenberger/O'Brien, *Salvation* 225). The credibility of our mission is witnessed by the world through our love for one another and our humble servant-attitude (John 13:35, 15:13; 13:1-5). For this reason, our commission is not to be accomplished on an individualistic level because whereas the preached word may not be always accepted, the genuine love of Christians for one another provides a testimony that the world cannot deny as being false (Kostenberger/O'Brien, *Salvation* 226). This is an active representation of Christ, one that is doing and not just saying, as a united community reflecting the unity of the Trinity, of which we have been made a part of because of the Spirit. Our mission is a Christ-centered mission, and just as Christ's sent purpose was to glorify the Father, so also that same purpose undergirds our entire mission and testimony, and is our ultimate purpose in life (Kostenberger/O'Brien, *Salvation* 226).

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