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'EVEN SO I SEND YOU'

An Expository and Theological Reflection on John 20:21

The saying recorded in John 20:21, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you', has long been recognized as a crucial statement in the account of the ministry of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. As the Johannine form of the 'Great Commission', it represents the critical programmatic watershed for the Church's mission to the world. Addressed first to the 'ten' disciples, it has clear and continuing significance for the Christian community in all ages, certainly not least our own. It will be the purpose of this article to identify several threads in the texture of its message and to focus something of its significance for Christian mission in our time.

As far as context is concerned, these words of the Risen Lord are embedded in a resurrection appearance account on the evening of Easter day (20:19). Precise location is not given but the upper room Last Supper site in Jerusalem seems most plausible. Jesus, after appearing visibly, utters the familiar Jewish word of greeting 'Shalom' (v.19), dispelling the disciples' understandable fears. He then confirms the reality of his personal presence by reference to his physical wounds which he displays, producing an overwhelming joy in the disciples (v.20). Jesus speaks again re-affirming the gift of peace and then utters the words of commission (v.21). The appearance concludes with an exhortation of the Spirit and the pronouncement of the authority to forgive and retain sins (vv.22-23).

Turning to exposition we find ourselves addressed by the text concerning, in turn, the importance of mission, its character, and the resources made available for it. As far as the *importance* of mission is concerned, the first consideration to be explored is the autobiographical perspective of Jesus in this saying, 'As the Father has sent me'. Jesus here understands himself as the 'Sent One', the personal emissary of the Father, a self-identity which echoes through the Fourth Gospel from end to end (cf. 5:36; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 13:20; 20:21). As Jesus favoured self-designation in this gospel, it is not without parallel to the Son of Man in the Synoptics (although Son of Man is also known in John) (cf. 1:50; 3:13f; 6:27; 8:28; 12:34; 13:31). Not only does this missionary perspective define Jesus, it also correspondingly defines the Father as the 'One who sent/sends me' (cf. 3:17; 4:34; 5:23; 6:44; 7:18; 8:29; 10:42; 12:44f; 13:16; 14:24; 15:21; 17:8).

This brings us immediately to an issue of profound theological and practical significance. The pervasiveness of this language means that, for this Gospel, God defines himself in terms of mission. In the dynamic interaction of a Sender and Sent One the divine is disclosed to us. Thus, mission, whose context and form we will examine more fully below, reaches back into the internal relations of the Godhead. It is accordingly not straying beyond the boundaries of this Johannine perspective to assert that God is a missionary God, even that God is a missionary, or a missionary society. In our text, then, Jesus senses the profound claim of the mission on his life and, that being so, his whole action is set within the context and under the sign of his being sent forth by the Father, and the Father correspondingly appears as the source and the sustainer of the missionary task of the Son.

This carries massive implications for our understanding of the Godhead. For if this dynamic interaction of Sender and Sent reaches back into the interior life of the Trinity we are immediately in a fundamentally different thought-world than the Unmoved Mover of Hellenism, the impassible 'Being' itself. Instead we are confronted with a God whose very being reverberates to the ultimate depths in dynamic, interpersonal relationship in the context of a passionate and self-sacrificial involvement with the world he has brought into being. This Johannine vision has a

significant contribution to make to modern debate concerning the nature of God and the struggle to assert a dynamic as distinct from a static concept of Godhead.

As the mission of the Son to the world is precisely and identically the mission of God to the world, this vision of God necessarily affirms the significance of the world for God, and the historical process viewed in terms of the biblical history of fallenness and redemption. The mission of the Son is explicable only in terms of his incarnated solidarity with us in our flesh and of the incredible grace and love which underlie and are expressed in it. This Johannine God of Sender and Sent is clearly a God who is for us and with us to the very core of his Godhead.

One obvious implication can be drawn at this point which is of the greatest practical and strategic relevance for the life of the local Church as well as contemporary forms of the life of discipleship - the overwhelming importance of mission! For if all this is so, mission assumes an importance which is literally incomparable. Since mission defines the Godhead to the very depths of his being, God ceaselessly reaching out from himself, sending and being sent, mission is given a primacy which is unequalled. If the ultimate destiny of the Church is conformation for the Christ (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:13f; Col. 3:10), then such conformation for the *ecclesia militans* must necessarily be a tangible and pervasive commitment to mission. Put another way - if godliness is our ultimate goal, whether as individuals, local churches, or denominations - then a fair test of our progress is the degree of our missionary and evangelistic passion. Where does mission come in our list of priorities? Putting the same question another way - how godly are we?

A directly exegetical issue brings us to our second area of concern - the *character* of mission. This concerns the respective tenses of the two verbs. The second is, as might be expected, a present indicative: 'I am [now] sending you'. The first, however, is, perhaps unexpectedly, a perfect ('.... has sent me'), with the sense of the continuation of this action in the present. Thus Jesus is seen as implicitly identifying a past action by the Father, 'sent me' (cf. 17:18), as one which has a continuing present realization. The former mission of the Father through the Son is not concluded, albeit its form may be about to change: his mission will continue in theirs.

This insight is a fundamental accord with the perspective of other New Testament witness. This is precisely Luke's viewpoint in Acts 1:1, understanding his 'second treatise', the Book of Acts, as in essence the continuation of what Jesus 'began to do and teach' in his first treatise, his gospel. Acts is to be understood as the action of the Risen Jesus through the apostles, their colleagues and successors. This is also the perspective of the Matthean form of the great commission, Matthew 28:20, where the concluding words, 'I am with you always', or 'to the end of the age', is a missiological statement - 'with you' as you carry out the commission, 'with you' *in mission*, as its Leader and Resource. Paul expresses an identical perspective in Romans 15:8, referring to his ministry as 'What [the Risen] Christ has accomplished through me'. In our text we have not two successive missions, that of the Son sent by the Father and then that of the disciples sent by the Son, but one essential action of mission proceeding from the heart of God to the world, a single, unified and indissoluble movement in mission which has two distinguishable parts. Both parts of the mission are the work of the Son, the continuing ministry in and through his body, the Church in all the world and through all the ages.

At this point the text appears to be drawing upon the Jewish notion of *Shaliah*, the principle of transferred authorization, 'one who is sent as the one who sends him' (compare 13:20; also Matthew 10:40; Luke 10:16). This principle of the *Shaliah* (ambassador, emissary) relates particularly to the issue of authority (Matthew 28:18, 'all authority [*ἐξουσία*] is given to me'). Jesus as the Sent One, having acted in the unqualified authority of the Father, the Sender, an authority sealed and affirmed in

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his Easter exaltation, now confers *his* authority on the messengers who go forth in his name. All of this has considerable implications for the Church's mission today. We are not alone in the task - Jesus, risen and exalted, is himself among us. Indeed, the mission is his and not ours. He is the Lord of the mission as he was proclaimed Lord in his earthly ministry. What this can mean in terms of our resource in mission we will explore below - for the moment we can let it stand in all of its wonder and impressiveness: *He is in the midst as we go forth for him to the world!*

Another implication for the character of mission is that the mission he exercised as the 'Sent One' of the Father becomes the model for ours (cf. *καθώς*, as). This principle is patient of almost limitless applications. It draws us anew to the gospel records of Jesus' ministry: from every page and paragraph sound the words 'Follow me!'. Specifically we may note the pervasive quality of *dependence* in the Fourth Gospel portrait of the Son in relation to the Father (cf. 5:19; 5:30; 6:38; 6:57; 7:16; 8:28; 8:42; 8:50; 12:49). This dependence motif is the more impressive both for its pervasiveness - covering the whole range of Jesus' ministry - and also because set in juxtaposition to the most audacious claims to deity (cf. 5:24-27; 6:33-37; 6:39-40; 7:37; 8:23ff; 8:51-58; 10:28-30; 14:6-11). This element which some see as a key to our understanding of the mystery of the incarnation becomes crucial for our mission. The Sent is to live out of the Sender. Just as Jesus, the Sent One, depends wholly and at every point on the Father, the Sender, so dependence on the Sender, Jesus, is the *modus operandi* of the disciples' mission.

Two specific applications are in order. First, against the Jewish background, the issue of authority is most clearly raised. The *Shaliah* embodies the authority of the sender in his person. Thus the unimpressiveness or similar personal disqualification of the messenger in no way detracts from his authority. Here is the secret of the otherwise impossible crisis of confidence which arises for any Christian witness the moment we reflect seriously on the nature of the task committed to us. We are ourselves 'clay pots', to use Paul's metaphor (II Cor. 4:7); we are to commend a 'treasure' which is nothing less than the revelation of 'the glory of God in the face of Christ' (v.6). Who is, or can ever be, sufficient for such a task? This insoluble dilemma is resolved in terms of the *Shaliah* - we go for him, sent by him and hence in his person and with his divine authority as the exalted one. But the degree of the authority we shall exercise will be dependent finally on the degree to which we subordinate ourselves to his rule, 'the transaction could not be properly concluded without a resolute subordination of the will of the representative to that of the one who commissioned him.' At this point the paradox of ministry is confronted - we find freedom in so far as we permit his enslavement of us; we bring life to others to the degree that we lose our own; we have authority and power to the degree that we are willing to become helpless. However, positively, in that submission there lies the unimaginable possibility of the exercise of Jesus' authority through us, as verse 23 of John illustrates in terms of the 'loosing' and the 'retaining' of sins. As we subordinate our lives to the rule of the exalted Lord, so in our ministry men and women will find themselves confronted directly by the person of the Risen One and hence by the grace and judgement of his kingdom.

The other specific application is seen in verses 20-21. The Risen One who is the model of our mission is identified not by his kingly glory but by the marks of his cross and passion (v.20). To be invited to follow such a Master in the work of mission could not but have had the most profound effect on the apostles. 'As the Father' had meant costly self-sacrifice to the point of the hell of Calvary, it could not henceforth mean less in principle for them. There is no evading the element of pain and suffering in mission. The earlier statement of the principle of the *Shaliah* (13:20) is in the context of the foot washing. Lowly servanthood, the path of

suffering love, even unto death (John 12:24; cf. 12:26 'whoever serves me must follow me'), is implicit in the text and hence in the mission which is its burden.

These considerations bring us finally to the resources for mission. Up to now, we have generally implied this to be the Risen One himself; the Sender in the midst of the Sent. It is, however, appropriate to ask: In what way is Christ present for us? Can the resource he represents be given sharper focus and fuller authentication?

We can answer that in two ways. First, we notice an earlier occurrence of the Johannine commission in chapter 17:18: 'As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world'. This earlier form, linguistically almost identical, falls within Jesus' prayer for the disciples. This context is crucial for our consideration of the resources for the Christian mission, which makes it the more surprising and regrettable that in all the wealth of commentary of the Fourth Gospel, and the Farewell discourses in particular, comparatively little attention is given to the simple fact that Jesus concludes his instruction of the disciples *with a prayer for them*. It is in that context and as a part of the prayer that the 'Great Commission' is first promulgated. The commentators concern themselves in the main with a search for literary parallels. Kasemann, in his influential study of the prayer, effectively questions whether it is a prayer at all. Others, mainly Roman Catholic commentators, explore the possibility of liturgical sources. None of this really grapples with the fundamental question, why does Jesus pray at this point? What does the fact that he prays signify?

Here the missiological setting becomes crucial. Jesus, facing the climax of his own mission, uses the upper room discourse to prepare the disciples for *their* mission beyond the crisis of his passion. Hence, 17:18 is in effect a summary text for the whole discourse. The point to be noted, however, in chapter 17 is that he not only instructs them, *he prays for them*. This can mean nothing less than that *the mission of the Church is taken up into the inner dialogue of the Trinity*. More specifically, Jesus in his God-manhood prays for his Church. Thus our mission as the sent ones of the Son takes place in the setting of his prayer, is gathered up by it, and presented in it to the Father. The immediate setting of verse 18 is crucial: self-consecration of the Son ('for their sake I consecrate myself'). The mainly British tradition of interpretation of the prayer appears to be right, as against some of the continental pre-occupations noted above, in finding the key to the prayer in verses 17-19. But the self-consecration of Jesus is not only the uniting theme of the prayer but also its essential *basis*. The prayer is the fruit of the self-consecration of Jesus and it is on the basis of his self-consecration that the power of prayer is released. This prayer embraces the historic mission of the Church, both immediately (vv. 6-19), and across all the ages until his glorification (vv.20-26). *Thus the mission of the Church in history partakes of, and is enabled by, the self-oblation of the Son of God in which he offers in our humanity a perfect response to the Father in us and for us.*

This truly is the most enormous and all-sufficient resource since it anchors our work in mission in all its particularity and brokenness firmly in the perfect and completed work of the Son. There is imparted to our mission the most profound and pervasive note of confidence. The great affirmation of 16:33 carries over into the prayer and echoes around the world and embraces all the aeons. 'I have overcome the world': that is, 'take heart, my mission, *which includes yours*, is triumphant and prevailing'. We go forth in mission within the prayer of Jesus.

If the prayers we are to offer in mission are assured of efficacy (14:13-14; 15:16; 16:24), *how much more* the prayer of Jesus! More theologically, our prayers are answered primarily on the basis of the fact that they are surrounded and enclosed within his prayer for us. This is the supreme resource of our mission, not just the presence of Jesus as the risen companion, but the fact that our work and witness in

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all its variety is already grasped, healed, sanctified, renewed and perfected within the one mission of Jesus as he takes up our mission into his perfected mission for the Father. Thus the sins of our mission, its unworthiness, unbelief, disobedience, all its sordid self-promotion, its cowardice and worldly compromise is overcome. Mission, therefore, becomes *celebration*, an act of adoration, an affirmation, a demonstration of the triumph of the victorious and exalted Lord who sends us.

This leads to the second aspect of the passage as far as the resources in mission are concerned (v.22), 'receive the Holy Spirit'. That the divine Spirit is the resource in mission is a commonplace of biblical missiology. What the text does here is to root the giving of the Spirit firmly in the Christological reality of the accomplishment of Jesus. Here we are shown the risen Jesus, the victor over the world, the perfected missionary, breathing on the apostolic community, with the words, 'receive [the] Holy Spirit'. Commentators here commonly and correctly draw attention to the parallels with Genesis 2 and Ezekiel 37. However not too much should be made of these precedents. The setting is *mission*, our human mission in the world, Christ's mission through us. The Spirit's resource is here defined for us - he is the life-breath of the risen Jesus, i.e. the completed mission of the Son becomes expressed in us by the Spirit (Acts 2:33, etc.). John 20:22 is the actualizing of John 17:19 - it is the impartation by the Spirit of the missionary humanity of Jesus to his body in history.

This connection is crucial both for our interpretation of this passage and for our experience of the Spirit of the Church, for it teaches that the Spirit is always *the Spirit of Jesus*. An independent and freely operating 'Spirit - mission' is therefore excluded. The one mission is the mission of Jesus in and through his Spirit. But further, the work of the Spirit lies not in some sheerly supernatural sphere detached from historical continuum in which our mission is set, any more than the mission of Jesus was thus detached. Rather the Spirit makes available and brings to realization in the Church the reality of the perfected humanity of the Son. While works of power are certainly not excluded, as they were not excluded for Jesus, the primary evidence of the Spirit's operation remains the Christ - imaging humanity and missionary zeal of a people who look like Jesus and who share his passion for the world! (Acts 1:8; 4:22; Gal. 5:22).

If, according to John 20:21, mission partakes of the Divine Being, then we have no excuse for making it a secondary issue as far as the agenda of the church in our day is concerned. We dare not live within the church, careless of the world, but rather must go and go again in his Name. In the end, godliness as a church or as individuals lies to an important extent with the degree of our identification with the missionary heart of God. Somehow the church needs to break through its narcissistic self-absorption and rediscover itself as a community *pro mundum*, a people for the world. Further if, according to John 20:21, mission is Christ's mission continued in us, then the key to our experiencing the divine authority in our witness lies paradoxically in the degree to which we are prepared to surrender our leadership to the leadership of the Lord in our midst. Again, if identification with him inevitably implies an identification with him in his suffering love, then precisely in that identification our mission will become authentically the reflection of his and the continuation of his authority-bearing mission in the world. Finally if, according to John 20:21, our resources are none other than the triumphant and perfected humanity of Jesus in mission offered to the Father for us, there is inserted into our whole endeavour a note of hope and even triumph as the spirit of the exalted Jesus moves among us, imparting to us the power of the perfected mission of the one who still says to us, 'As the Father sent me, I am sending you'.

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