

Mission and Meaning
Essays Presented to Peter
Cotterell

Edited by

Antony Billington

Tony Lane

Max Turner

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Jesus and the Marginalised in the Fourth Gospel

Stephen Motyer

Peter Cotterell's interest in mission to the poor has been a constant feature of his ministry.¹ I am therefore glad to offer this contribution to his *Festschrift*, knowing that it touches themes close to his heart.

Why does the Fourth Gospel show no interest in the poor? Luke is fascinated by the issues of wealth and poverty, and the related issues of social stratification and marginalisation. For him, the gospel is *designed* for the poor (Luke 4:18; 6:20), wealth is gravely deceptive (12:13-21; 16:14-15), worldly values are reversed by Christ (1:52-53; 16:19-31), and Jesus and his disciples set an example of poverty and summon others to it (2:7; 24; 6:20-21; 9:1-3; 18:18-30; 19:1-10). But this interest is missing from John – in spite of the fact that a reasonable case can be made on literary grounds for a direct dependence of John on Luke.² John 13:29, in a throw-away line, leads us to believe that Jesus and the disciples regularly gave to the poor. But so did all other God-fearing Jews. And the only saying that touches on the poor apparently demotes concern for them to the margin of Christian discipleship: 'The poor you always have with you, but me you do not always have' (12:8). Why this strange difference?

This problem can be addressed in connection with another

1 His seventeen years as a missionary in Ethiopia brought him into contact with some of the poorest people on earth. His reflections on these experiences run as a *leit motif* through his writings. See particularly 'A Theology of the Poor', *Mission and Meaninglessness: The Good News in a World of Suffering and Disorder* (London: SPCK, 1990), 188-206.

2 The evidence is summarised by C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: SPCK, 1978 2nd edn), 46.

strange phenomenon: the silence of scholarship on this issue. So far as I am aware, only five writers have raised and discussed this issue in the last twenty years – and in the context of Johannine studies, this represents a tiny seminar held on the fringe of a vast congress.³ The reasons for this strange neglect arise from deep within the soul of contemporary Johannine scholarship. We may point to three factors in particular:

(1) *The emphasis on christology as a focus of doctrinal debate.* This is the reason identified by Rensberger, although he shifts the blame from Johannine scholars onto John himself:

[Instead of the radical social pronouncements of the historical Jesus], John's focus instead is on Christology itself, with an almost tedious insistence... the inwardness of the 'spiritual gospel' has generally seemed to imply an individualism that would offer little light on the specific issues addressed by liberation theology.⁴

Older scholarship treated the Fourth Gospel as a kind of doctrinal treatise in gospel form, giving the biblical raw material for the christological debates of the early church and finally for the Chalcedonian definition. Romans was treated similarly – Paul in reflective mood, writing 'doctrine' unrelated to specific needs. But just as this view of Romans has been abandoned in the last twenty years,⁵ so a parallel movement has taken place in the study of John. As a result of the epoch-making work of J. Louis Martyn,⁶ John's Gospel is now related to the particular circumstances of one struggling Christian community.

But this dramatic change in scholarly viewpoint has not affected the way in which John's christology is handled. It is still treated as a

3 All five attempt in different ways to 'rescue' John for the poor or for liberation theology: Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology: Liberation in the Light of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Seabury, 1972); José Miranda, *Being and the Messiah: The Message of St. John* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977); Samuel Rayan, 'Jesus and the Poor in the Fourth Gospel', *Biblehashyam* 4 (1978), 213-28; David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1989; also published as *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988]); Robert J. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1990).

4 Rensberger, *Community*, 110.

5 See Karl P. Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991 2nd edn); A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).

6 *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; rev. edn. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). Martyn's reconstruction is accepted in its essentials – with adjustments, of course – by the vast majority of scholars.

'doctrine' over which argument raged. The argument has simply been moved back from the early church into the life of the community which purportedly gave birth to the gospel. In fact, it was their 'high' christology which led to their expulsion from the synagogue – the centrepiece of all Martyn-inspired reconstructions of the community history reflected in the gospel.⁷

I will suggest below that this focus on christology as a *doctrine*, a set of *ideas* about Christ, does not help us to appreciate the real dynamic of John's Gospel.

(2) *The neglect of economic factors in sociological studies of the Johannine community.* One of the innovations in recent scholarship, in this case adding to the work of Martyn, has been the application of various sociological insights and theories to the study of John. Martyn's picture was of a small community of Jewish Christians facing a huge and hostile synagogue, and trying to come to terms with their expulsion from it. So they sought to reinforce their sense of solidarity with Jesus by re-telling the stories of his ministry in a way which reflected their own experience: he too had been persecuted for doing good, unjustly accused of blasphemy, and thrown out of the synagogue. This turned the gospel into what Martyn called a 'drama... on a two-level stage', with the story of Jesus matching the story of the community.⁸

This approach has provided much raw material for social psychology and socio-linguistics. Several major monographs and articles have applied sociological theories dealing with alienation and sectarianism to the Fourth Gospel⁹ – most notably the 'group-grid' theory associated with Mary Douglas, and the work of Peter

7 See for instance another highly influential book, Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979), esp. e.g. 43-47.

8 Martyn, *History and Theology* (1968), 9-10, 17-18.

9 E.g. Wayne Meeks, 'The Man From Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism', *JBL* 91 (1972), 44-72; D. Bruce Woll, *Johannine Christianity in Conflict: Authority, Rank, and Succession in the First Farewell Discourse*, SBLDS 60 (Chico: Scholars, 1981); Takashi Onuki, *Gemeinde und Welt im Johannesevangelium: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der theologischen und pragmatischen Funktion des johanneischen 'Dualismus'*, WMANT 56 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984); Bruce Malina, 'The Gospel of John in Sociolinguistic Perspective', in H.C. Waetjen (ed.), *Protocol of the 48th Colloquy of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture* (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union and Univ. of California-Berkeley, 1985), 1-23; Walter Rebell, *Gemeinde als Gegenwelt: zur soziologischen und didaktischen Funktion des Johannesevangeliums*, BBET 20 (Frankfurt: Lang, 1987); Jerome H. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

Berger and Thomas Luckmann on the sociology of knowledge.¹⁰ The various treatments of John emerging from these approaches, for all their differences, are united in two things: (a) their acceptance of the basic 'Martyn' scenario, and (b) their consequent assumption that the 'issue' underlying the gospel is fundamentally ideological: groups are in conflict over rival *ideas*. Though economics is the stuff of sociology, none of these scholars have asked after the economic situation of the Johannine community, or explored its significance for our understanding of the gospel.

This assumption may be questioned. I shall suggest below that, while the 'conflict' underlying the gospel has an ideological element, it is more fundamentally related to the economic and political conditions of late first-century Judaism.

(3) *The inward-looking nature of Johannine Christianity according to the dominant explanation of it.* This third factor explaining the lack of interest in 'John and the marginalised' is probably the most significant, because it relates to the heart of Johannine theology as presently conceived. Rensberger is hard put to it to 'rescue' John for liberation theology, because (according to the 'Martyn' reconstruction, which he accepts) the Johannine community had no interest in outreach to the marginalised. Far from it: they felt themselves to be the marginalised, so that 'the Johannine attitude towards outsiders (let alone enemies), while not explicitly hateful, is nevertheless much more one of mistrust and even bitterness than love'.¹¹

While Martyn was ready to theorise that the Johannine church was still in conversation with the synagogue from which they had been expelled, subsequent scholarship drew the lines more tightly. All contact was broken off, and the Johannine Christians withdrew into themselves, reinforcing their sense of isolation and their intense group identity (a) by their idiosyncratic way of handling Scripture, (b) by their appropriation of the great festivals of Judaism for themselves alone, (c) by their hostile denunciation of 'the Jews', (d) by their private 'in'-language, and finally, (e) by their lofty

10 See Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975); Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Allen Lane, 1967). Neyrey employs Douglas' work; Meeks, Rebell and Onuki use that of Berger and Luckmann. For a description and analysis of Mary Douglas' development of her theories (not reflected in Neyrey's use of them), see James V. Spickard, 'A Revised Functionalism in the Sociology of Religion: Mary Douglas's Recent Work', *Religion* 21 (1991), 141-64.

11 Rensberger, *Community*, 125.

christology.

The view that John's gospel originated from a sectarian group on the fringes of 'orthodox' Christianity goes back to Käsemann.¹² But it was Wayne Meeks who first suggested that the christology of John might relate directly to this social marginalisation. In his epoch-making essay, 'The Man From Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism',¹³ he argued that the emphasis on Jesus' origin 'above', contrasting with the 'below' inhabited by his enemies and especially by 'the Jews' (e.g. 8:23), reflected the social situation of the Johannine community. They lived in a dualistic world in which they alone could understand the revelation brought from 'above' by Jesus. Jews like Nicodemus – representing the wider Jewish community – are effectively ridiculed for their inability to comprehend.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that the gospel apparently has no interest in reaching out to the poor. If this explanation is correct, it emanates from a group which has lost interest in outreach of any kind, and has become hostile and world-denying, regarding themselves as 'the poor'. All Rensberger can suggest, as he tries to draw liberation impulses from the gospel, is: (a) that 'ruling' figures like Nicodemus are challenged to join the oppressed disciples of Jesus;¹⁴ (b) that 'a liberation of consciousness' follows from realising that Jesus, not Caesar, is the King;¹⁵ (c) that the Johannine Jesus offers victory over the world to the oppressed Johannine community;¹⁶ and (d) that the Johannine love-ethic is community-building, even if it is also hostile towards outsiders!¹⁷

It would be good, if possible, to find more than this. Robert Karris, in the most recent contribution to the meagre discussion of this issue, does his best to do so. He ascribes the scholarly silence on this issue to the 'tapes' that run in our heads when we read John – habitual ways of reading him which deafen us to authentic notes of his text. Karris is convinced that interest in 'the poor' is one of these unheard notes. He points out that Jesus and his disciples gave alms

12 E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1968), esp. 39. Käsemann gave these lectures in 1966 in development of an idea first proposed in 1960 — well ahead of Martyn's work.

13 As above, n. 9: also published in John Ashton (ed.) *The Interpretation of John* (London: SPCK/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 141-73.

14 Rensberger, *Community*, 113-16.

15 Rensberger, *Community*, 118. Rensberger helpfully explores the political dimensions of the trial narrative, in which both Roman power and the Zealot response to it are set over against the way of Jesus.

16 Rensberger, *Community*, 118-24.

17 Rensberger, *Community*, 124-30.

regularly (12:5; 13:29), and that this forms the setting for the feeding sign in chapter 6 (6:5).¹⁸ We may therefore think of the healings in chapter 5 and chapter 9 specifically as ministry to *the poor*: the two men were both beggars. The woman at the well falls into the same category, and she further illustrates a deep concern in John with the *socially marginalised* – Samaritans, Galileans, and women.¹⁹

Karris moves us forward with this slim volume. I shall pick up his emphasis on the socially marginalised below. But it is doubtful whether the signs in chapters 5, 6 and 9 are rightly interpreted just as acts of benevolence to the poor equivalent to almsgiving. We only *infer* that the lame and blind men are beggars: this is not highlighted in the text. The two references to Jesus' own almsgiving (12:5; 13:29) are incidental. There is nothing christologically distinctive about such actions. And therein lies the main problem with Karris' treatment. He fails to raise concern for the poor from the margins of the gospel, because he does not relate it to its central christological interests. It stays on the take-it-or-leave-it fringe – which is certainly not where Luke puts it.

So what is the way forward? While the 'Martyn' hypothesis prevails, it will be impossible to reconcile John with Luke. I am personally convinced that this hypothesis is fundamentally flawed, and that its burial is long overdue.²⁰ But to attempt that here is impossible. Instead I shall propose and defend *four theses* which both rest upon, and contribute to, a different approach to the gospel, and I shall draw out some of their implications for mission today.

Thesis (1): *John is deeply concerned about social reconciliation.* In this respect he is much closer to Luke than appears at first sight. In Luke, Jesus' ministry to the economically poor is not distinguished from his outreach to marginalised groups. Several of these would also undoubtedly have been poor, like the 'sinners' in 15:1 and the Samaritan lepers in 17:11-19.²¹ But others were marginalised and *rich*, like the tax collectors of 15:1 (cf. 19:1-10), and the wealthy women of 8:2-3, and indeed the wealthy Samaritan of 10:30-37. It becomes clear that, in Luke, Jesus' ministry is not just socially

18 Karris, *Marginalized*, 22-32.

19 Karris' longest chapters concern the 'Geographically Marginalized' (54-72, the Samaritans and the Royal Official, whose chief characteristic according to Karris is simply that he is *Galilean*), and 'The Women in John's Gospel' (73-95).

20 See my forthcoming book, *'Your Father the Devil'? A New Approach to John and 'the Jews'* (Paternoster).

21 Cf. also the shepherds in 2:8-20: Luke makes great play of the fact that this socially marginalised group received the announcement of the Saviour's birth.

motivated – i.e. he is not *just* concerned to reach out to the socially marginalised, for the Pharisees are treated in exactly the same way, as a group of wealthy people cut off from the Kingdom of God (Luke 7:30; 14:1-24; 16:14-31).²²

In John, too, we see a profligate wasting of social barriers, as Jesus moves from the nationalist Nathanael, the ‘true Israelite’ (1:47),²³ to the Pharisee Nicodemus, the ‘ruler of the Jews’ and ‘the teacher of Israel’ (3:1, 10), to the Samaritan woman at the well, marginalised even among her own people (4:6-7),²⁴ and thence to the Herodian official (4:46), with whom none of the others would have had anything to do. In fact, each of these four would naturally have regarded the other three as untouchable, if not as an enemy.

John goes further than Luke, however, in his treatment of Jesus’ barrier-crossing ministry. The creation of the new community, the restored Israel in which ‘sinners’, Samaritans and eventually Gentiles are at home, is the focus of Luke’s interest.²⁵ But John gives the same theme a christological focus, as well as an ecclesiological one.

Christologically, Jesus is presented as the one who alone meets the distinctive needs and aspirations of each ‘type’. All four are offered exactly what they need, but not in the way they expect. And all four are thus required to give up their distinctive claim or position in favour of the claim Jesus makes upon them.

22 Joel Green suggests that the expression ‘the poor’, for Luke, *denotes* social marginalisation rather than just economic deprivation: ‘Good News to Whom? Jesus and the “Poor” in the Gospel of Luke’, in Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.) *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 59-74.

23 The vast majority of scholars understand ‘true Israelite’ spiritually: Nathanael deserves this title because he believes in Jesus (e.g. at random: Schlatter, Barrett, Pancaro, Dahl, Dodd, Culpepper, Baumbach). The difficulty with this is that Jesus offers this title to Nathanael (a) before he believes, and (b) as an indication of his supernatural insight (‘how do you know me?’, 1:48). We need some meaning of ‘true Israelite’ which is compatible with the narrative setting in which it is employed. John Painter supplies the answer, I believe, with the suggestion that it is a nationalist/political address here: Jesus identifies Nathanael as a mighty champion of Israel’s cause, a Zealot in spirit, if not in action (and in return Nathanael calls Jesus ‘King of Israel’, that is, identifies him as a political liberator): so Painter ‘Christ and the Church in John 1, 45-51’, in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L’Évangile de Jean: sources, rédaction, théologie*, BETL 44 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1977), 359-63. Sadly Painter does not take up this excellent suggestion in his later study of the passage in *The Quest for the Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 150-51.

24 This seems to be the implication of her appearance at the well in the middle of the day.

25 I am indebted to my friend and colleague Max Turner for help here.

Nathanael finds the King of Israel for whom he is searching, but this King brings not political security but revelation from heaven like that disclosed to Jacob himself (1:49-51). So he must stop being a *nationalist 'Israelite'*, and start being 'truly like Israel his father.

Similarly *Nicodemus* receives the teaching for which he asks,²⁶ but this teaching requires him to renounce his prized status as 'the teacher of Israel', and simply receive the new birth prophesied by *Ezekiel*.²⁷

The *Samaritan woman* finds the Messiah, the *Taheb* whom she and her fellow-Samaritans have long expected, but this Messiah requires her and them to give up their distinctive claim to a Samaritan Temple and religion, and to confess one who is universally 'the Saviour of the world' (4:42).

And finally the *Herodian official* receives the life he needs, but he has to give up all attempt to 'pull rank' and bring the healer back home with him. He must set out for his home alone, simply trusting the word of the healer, and learning that faith in Jesus is even more important than the life of his son.²⁸

In each case, though so different from each other, the answer is the same: they need to discover Jesus and to believe in him. If they are willing to abandon *their* perception of their need, they will find their *real* need met by him: he is the giver of revelation, the fulfiller of prophecy, the giver of water far more life-giving than Jacob's well, indeed the source of life itself.

Ecclesiologically, therefore, these opening chapters of John amount to a massive appeal for reconciliation between conflicting groups – groups which were still at odds with each other in the closing decades of the first century when the gospel first circulated, after the disaster of the Roman war and the destruction of the Temple. The zealot option was still very much alive, as various activist groups looked for the leader who would reverse the disaster and destroy the Roman hegemony. At the opposite end of the political spectrum the

26 Of all the rival explanations of Nicodemus, by far the most satisfactory is that which sees him as a sincere seeker after truth. He comes to one whom he recognises as 'a teacher from God' seeking the kind of revelation which may only be disclosed in secret, at night.

27 See Linda Belleville, 'Born of Water and Spirit: John 3:5', *TrinJ* 1 (1980), 125-41 for an argument establishing the view that Ezekiel 36:25-27, taken together with the following resurrection vision in Ezekiel 37:1-14, is the vital background to John 3:1-10.

28 This exegesis of the story is unusual and cannot be defended here. See particularly the discussion of it in M.M. Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 70-76.

'royal official' still had his counterpart in those who, like Josephus the historian, were happy to affirm the legitimacy and acceptability of Roman rule. In between were many like Nicodemus, Jews who were following the lead of the ascendant Jamnian academy and re-emphasising the life of Torah and its meticulous study and application. And still the division between Judea and Samaria persisted with its age-long antagonism, fuelled in the minds of some by Samaritan complicity with the Roman invasion.

Particularly the parallel between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman constitutes an appeal. The Ezekiel passage behind the Nicodemus dialogue looks forward to the reunification of the northern and southern kingdoms (Ezek. 37:15-23): this reunification will be the visible sign of the spiritual resurrection of the nation and her restoration to the Lord. One of the noblest sons of Judea hears an offer and a summons to enter this age of the Spirit. Then Jesus goes to Samaria, and issues the same offer and summons to one of Samaria's poorest daughters. Each is representative of the group, and together they illustrate the breadth of Jesus' relevance. None can fall outside the spectrum they encompass.

The Samaritan woman hears in more detail how this reunification of north and south is to be achieved. Each must give up their distinctive claim to be 'the place' where God commands his worship (4:20), and enter the new age of the Spirit, where 'the Spirit and truth' is the location to be occupied by the worshippers of God (4:23-24). She responds gladly, and so do her fellow-countrymen and women – perhaps reflecting the success of the Christian mission in Samaria in the first century. Will Judea respond likewise? Nicodemus remains silent. His last words are the ambiguous 'How can this be?' (3:9). And throughout the gospel his response is ambivalent – perhaps reflecting comparative lack of success amongst the Torah-loyal Jews of Judea.²⁹

Both Christian and Jewish readers of the late first century would be in no doubt: this gospel requires the followers of Jesus Christ to abandon distinctive claims to revelation, 'place' and obedience, and to cross all social and economic barriers hindering the unity that comes from confessing this 'Saviour of the world'. The great theme

29 Jouette M. Bassler is probably right in suggesting that Nicodemus' response is left deliberately 'open' as a literary technique designed to provoke a reaction from the reader ('Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel', *JBL* 108 (1989), 635-46). She is certainly right in arguing (against e.g. Brown) that Nicodemus' response becomes no clearer, with his subsequent appearances in the narrative (7:50-52; 19:39-42). But its openness may also have a historical reference.

of Jesus' prayer in John 17, 'that they may be one', is anticipated in these opening chapters.

John's apparently hostile attitude to 'the Jews' has frequently produced the opposite verdict to that defended here: he cannot be 'deeply concerned about social reconciliation', it is argued, or else he would not denounce 'the Jews' as the devil's offspring (8:44). But this easy verdict reads a judgment off the surface of the text, and fails to sense its real dynamic. Nicodemus is sensitively and sympathetically portrayed. By his believing approach to Jesus, he illustrates the principle that 'he who does the truth comes to the light, that it might be plain that his deeds have been done in God' (3:21). But he, and the believing Jews of 8:31, are in the same state: ready to receive Jesus' teaching, but only on their terms. So long as he and they insist that they are *already* free (8:33), and that they are *already* sure to enter the Kingdom of God (3:5 – the expectation of all pious Jews), they in fact align themselves with those who murder Jesus, and are therefore acting under the influence of the devil.³⁰

John's concern for social reconciliation is christological at heart. As people unite around the Christ, the hatreds will fall away, and the people of God will be rebuilt.

The relevance of this for today's world and church need hardly be elaborated. A particular concern of Peter Cotterell's ministry is reconciliation between Orthodox and Protestant believers – having experienced at first hand the persecution of Protestant believers in Ethiopia at the hands of the Orthodox church. In Greece and in Eastern Europe the same scandal occurs daily. The Jesus of John's Gospel welcomes both, and tells both to sink their precious distinctives and cling only to him – and to each other.

Thesis (2): *The signs have exemplary as well as christological significance.*

I want to argue this for all the signs, but we will focus on the healings in chapters 5 and 9, which feature prominently in Karris' treatment. Here we see Jesus reaching out directly to the poor. But the effect of these stories is muted by their status as *signs*. Are they just meant to teach christological truth? – respectively, that Jesus is the giver of life and the light of the world? Or are they also meant to function as examples for us to follow? In response to them, should we just confess truth about Jesus, or should we also heal the lame

30 'You are of your father the devil' (8:44) is surely not an ontological statement about the Jews' essential origins (as maintained by many). It functions rather as a *warning* in relation to the behaviour there being attacked, the desire to execute Jesus – just as 'Satan is your ruler' warns against ethical rebellion in *Testament of Dan* 5:6.

and the blind? This second thesis maintains that these actions are indeed exemplary, like Jesus' action in crossing social barriers.

One of the revolutions accomplished by Martyn was in precisely this area. In reaction against a scholarly tradition in which the signs were treated as *parables* containing truth about Jesus, Martyn saw a direct connection between the actions of Jesus and the actions of the Johannine church. To be sure, the imitation actually runs in the other direction for Martyn: such healings were taking place in the life of the community, he argues, and the stories were written to reflect this. Those who feel inclined to dispute this theory may yet ask whether he does not point us in a helpful direction here.

Jesus describes one 'significant' action as exemplary in 13:14-15: 'If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, then you ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, so that you may do as I have done to you.' This action, of course, is not precisely an act of mercy to the poor. But is it typical of the Johannine understanding of discipleship? Is the church, the company of the disciples, meant to imitate *all* the actions of its Lord and Teacher?

14:12 seems to say so: 'Truly, truly I say to you, those who believe in me will themselves do the works that I do. And they will do greater works than these, because I go to the Father.' 'Works' here certainly includes a reference to the miraculous signs such as the healings in chapters 5 and 9. The expectation is that such actions – and indeed 'greater' actions – will mark the life of the church. This coheres with the remarkable (and emphatic) 'we' by which Jesus associates his disciples with the healing of the blind man in 9:4: 'We must do the works of him who sent me, while it is day. Night comes, when no one can work.' The 'we' is so surprising that it has prompted textual variation. But it is almost certainly original.³¹ The duty of doing the works of God, like the healing which follows, rests on the disciples as well as on Jesus himself.³²

We will consider in connection with Thesis (3) whether this means that Johannine Christians are meant to perform miracles like Jesus. But we can record at this point the *prima facie* likelihood that

31 The MS support preponderates only slightly in favour of *hēmas* ('we') rather than *eme* ('I'), but it is much more likely that a scribe would have changed 'we' to 'I' rather than the other way round.

32 The disciples are emphatically presented as Jesus' co-workers in chapter 4: the chapter opens with them baptising on behalf of Jesus, and reaches a climax with his teaching about their co-operation in his mission: he sows, and they reap (4:35-38). Cf. also 11:9-10, which likewise draws in the disciples by attaching a piece of *generalised* teaching to the action Jesus is about to undertake.

these actions are *typical* for the church, just as John has presented them as typical for Jesus (20:30). In other words, the church is not meant exactly to replicate them, but to act in such a way as to continue and develop the mission of which these signs formed a part – engaging in actions which express the same truths as these.

This approach opens new windows onto the interpretation of the Johannine signs. It means that, instead of looking just for their christological content, we can also ask after their *pastoral impetus*.

The parallels between the stories in chapters 5 and 9 have been noted by several scholars.³³ But one factor common to both has not generally been observed: both men are marginalised from the cult, and are approached by Jesus in that marginalisation.³⁴ Certainly in the eyes of some – stricter Pharisees and Essenes – their disabilities disqualified them from participation in the cult.³⁵ Readers who did not belong to such groups would nonetheless have been aware of their marginal state – and would have felt the significance of Jesus approaching and touching (9:6) them, whether they approved of it or not!

Poignantly, the lame man has been lying near the pool, within sight of the Temple, for almost as long as the Temple has been under construction (5:5; 2:20). And even though the Temple is supposed to be able to deal with the sin which has caused his condition (5:14), yet it has done him no good at all. Far from providing an answer, it has excluded him. Implicitly, therefore, Jesus deals not just with his physical need but also with its underlying spiritual cause, stepping into the role of the Temple, just as he said he would in 2:19-21.

Similarly, Jesus and the disciples encounter the blind man immediately after leaving the Temple (8:59), and once again the question of sin is raised (9:2). Who is to blame for his condition? How could it be a result of his own sin, since he was blind from birth? But then would it not violate the principle expressed in Ezekiel 18:19-20 if he is blind as a result of his parents' sin? The

33 See e.g. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 39-40.

34 Karris, *Marginalized*, 43, notes this but does not develop its significance. Cf. also Rayan, 'The Poor', 217.

35 The Qumran *Messianic Rule* does not permit any man who is 'lame in his feet or hands, limping or blind or deaf or dumb or afflicted with a visible blemish' to appear in the assembled congregation (1QS^a 2:5-10). This appears to draw on the rules for priests in Leviticus 21:16-23, and on the tendency attested amongst some Pharisees and in later Rabbinic Judaism, to extend to every-day life the rules of purity appropriate for the Temple. In *m. Hag.* 1:1 'a lame man and a blind man' are included in the list of those with various physical disabilities who are exempted from the three pilgrimage festivals.

Pharisees give their answer to this theological dilemma in 9:34: they balance Ezekiel 18 with Psalm 51:5 and tell him that his whole existence has been sinful from the start. But however the blame is apportioned, the disciples and the Pharisees seem to agree that nothing can be done about this sin and its consequences. The Temple cannot atone for it. In fact, he ends up doubly marginalised: already excluded from the Temple, he is also thrown out of the synagogue (9:34).

May we discern a pastoral principle here? The Johannine church is encouraged to reach out to those who have been let down by their own religion, or abandoned by their own culture. If the signs have exemplary force, then we *must* draw this conclusion. Following this Christ, the church will reach out to the hopeless and speak a word of hope³⁶ – or to put it in a more Johannine way, *‘speak a word of judgment’ and of ‘life’*.

‘Judgment’ and ‘life’ are the two themes of the discourse that follows the healing of the lame man in chapter 5. Within the *inclusio* formed by 5:19 and 30, these two terms alternate as the two ‘works’ of the Father which the Son exercises on his behalf. Some scholars dispute the logic of the connection with the preceding sign,³⁷ but it becomes close and clear when the full meaning of the term ‘judgment’ (*krisis*) is drawn out.

Miranda is on the right lines, I believe, when he explains the term as ‘justice’ even though he retains the translation ‘judgment’ when he examines 5:21-30.³⁸ He emphasises that the *life* which Jesus gives entails *justice now* for the oppressed, and the burden of his argument is to underline strongly the *realised eschatology* of the passage. But he does not actually produce arguments to defend this inclusion of ‘justice’ within the semantic range of the Greek word *krisis* as employed here.

But they can be produced! *Krisis* covers a similar semantic range to the Hebrew term *mišpāt*, which connotes at root the *decision* of a *šōpēt*, a judge.³⁹ In the Old Testament the judge who issues such ‘judgments’ may be God himself (e.g. Deut. 6:1; Ps. 89:14; Mal. 2:17) or it may be a prophet (1 Sam. 7:15), or the king (1 Kings 20:40), or some other judge (Exod. 21:31). Such a decision may relate to the fate of an individual accused before the judge, or to the right course of

36 This pastoral impetus coheres exactly with the primary thrust of Peter Cotterell’s *Mission and Meaninglessness*.

37 E.g. B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, NCBC (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 217-19.

38 Miranda, *Being*, 177-82.

39 See BDB, 1048-49.

action in a disputed case. In a broad way, the term can refer to all the 'regulations' by which God expects his people to live (e.g. Num. 36:13). Whoever issues such 'judgments', they are expected to be *good* judgments, that is, they must uphold right, rescue the oppressed, and punish the guilty: 'Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God!' (Deut. 1:17).

The role of judging falls particularly to the king, and it is interesting to see the end which this activity is meant to serve, according to Psalm 72:

Endow the king with your justice, O God,
 the royal son with your righteousness.
 He will judge your people in righteousness,
 your afflicted ones with justice.
 The mountains will bring prosperity to the people,
 the hills the fruit of righteousness.
 He will defend the afflicted among the people
 and save the children of the needy;
 he will crush the oppressor. (72:1-4)

The king's role in defending the weak is strongly underlined later in the Psalm:

For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
 the afflicted who have no one to help.
 He will take pity on the weak and the needy
 and save the needy from death.
 He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
 for precious is their blood in his sight. (72:12-14)

I contend that these are the associations of *krisis* in John 5. Jesus the Son of Man (5:27) speaks the judgment of God to the lame man, (a) in that he delivers him from his weakness, (b) in that he fulfils the role of the failed Temple for him, delivering him from sin, and (c) in that he defines what will or will not be sin for him: it will *not* be sin for him to carry his mat on the Sabbath. The connection between sign and discourse is very close.

Krisis is of course also eschatological in John 5. In 5:29 it is focused upon the eschatological treatment of the wicked. But the wicked are not the only possible recipients of justice, nor is the eschaton the only time when it is meted out. Here Miranda is right.⁴⁰ And this

⁴⁰ But he takes his point too far: he completely demythologises the doing of judgment into present-tense action for the poor and against oppression (*Being*,

'judgment' for the poor, here and now, is surely an ethical impulse which the church may rightly derive from this story, as it ministers in the name of this 'Son of Man'.

Thesis (3): *The Fourth Gospel is fundamentally world-affirming and mission-oriented.*

The second thesis depends also upon this third one for its support. But this one is even more contentious. A deafening roar from the adherents of the 'Martyn' hypothesis has jammed the still small voices of the few who want to argue that the Fourth Gospel is interested in the world – indeed, that it seeks to address the world and to persuade it to believe.⁴¹

The field has been taken by those who believe that the statement of purpose in 20:31 is inward-looking, so that the gospel aims to strengthen faith, not to create it:

These [things] are written [1] that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and [2] that believing you may have life in his name.

But there can be no doubt, I believe, that the more likely meaning of this statement is that it expresses an evangelistic, that is, faith-creating, intention. Even if the present subjunctive, expressing continuous action, is the original reading, its force cannot be pressed so far as to *exclude* the idea of coming to faith.⁴² Further, the second purpose-clause is clearly not a mere repetition of the first (although the relation between them is rarely explored).⁴³ In fact, it makes

177-82).

41 Though it is necessary to underline again that Martyn himself envisaged plenty of contact between the expelled Johannine community and the synagogue. Part 3 of *History and Theology* (91-142) explored the 'Major Theological Terms of the Conversation' between them. But in subsequent scholarship the fronts have hardened and the Johannine community has become inward-looking and world-denying. The 'dinosaurs' who resist this trend in post-Martyn scholarship include A.A. Trites and D.A. Carson, joining an earlier company which included Bornhäuser, van Unnik, Dodd, Moule, and Robinson. Carson's essay represents the fullest recent defence: 'The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: John 20:31 Reconsidered', *JBL* 106 (1987), 639-51.

42 The NIV margin expresses the force of the present subjunctive with the translation 'may continue to' believe. But this is too strong. The present tense would have the force 'may believe and go on believing', naturally *including* the beginning of the process.

43 Schnackenburg is typical: in six pages of comment on these two verses (*The Gospel According to St John, Volume 3* [London: Burns & Oates, 1982], 335-40), he does not even raise the question whether the second purpose-clause expresses a second purpose. Alone (I think) among recent writers Martin Warner maintains that the two clauses express different but related purposes for

much better sense to see the first clause as expressing a *faith-creating* purpose, and the second a *faith-enhancing* purpose. John's aim is first to lead readers to the confession of faith exemplified by the Samaritans (4:42), by Peter (6:69), by Martha (11:27) and by Thomas (20:28), and then to make sure that their faith is of the kind that leads to life (unlike the faith of Nicodemus, 2:23-3:2, or that of the Jews in 8:31).⁴⁴

This understanding of 20:31 is greatly strengthened by observation of the other explicit or implicit statements of missionary motivation in the gospel. We may point briefly to four:

(1) *The 'other sheep' of 10:16.* Martyn, followed by R.E. Brown, interpreted these as other Christians who have been forced out of the synagogue like the Johannine group, but who are not yet in fellowship with them.⁴⁵ But this allegorising approach hardly does justice to the text itself, which points us to 'others' like the blind man of chapter 9. These others are 'not of this fold', but are to be brought to faith in Jesus like the blind man. The most natural referent of 'fold' is Israel, and therefore the gospel envisages a Gentile mission in which others like the blind man are brought to the same faith.⁴⁶ This outlook is confirmed by 11:52 (which applies 'return from exile' imagery to the *Gentile* world), and by 12:32.

(2) *The puzzled question of 14:22.* Mission themes and impulses can easily be overlooked in John – and this is an example. Judas'

the gospel: 'The Fourth Gospel's Art of Rational Persuasion', in M. Warner (ed.), *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility* (London: Routledge, 1990), 153-77 (esp. 154).

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note the view of several influential scholars that 20:30-31 does indeed express an evangelistic purpose, but therefore for *that reason* cannot be regarded as a statement of aim for the gospel as we have it! R.T. Fortna first suggested (in his *The Gospel of Signs*, SNTSMS 11 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970]) that it was originally the conclusion of the hypothetical collection of miracle-stories which he regarded as one of the chief sources of the gospel – and which did indeed have an evangelistic purpose, in his view. The evangelist, he maintained, employed it for the conclusion of the gospel, but radically reinterpreted it in its new setting. Cf. also R.T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 201-204; D. Moody Smith, *Johannine Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 82; Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:411, *John*, 3:336-37; W. Nicol, *The Semeia in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 30, 78-79.

⁴⁵ J.L. Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 115-19; R.E. Brown, "'Other Sheep Not of This Fold": The Johannine Perspective on Christian Diversity in the Late First Century', *JBL* 97 (1978), 5-22, esp. 20.

⁴⁶ This is the view of many: Barrett, Schnackenburg, Beasley-Murray, Lindars, Becker, Bultmann, Dahl – to name a few.

question may be paraphrased, 'Lord, what's going on? Are you intending to reveal yourself only to us, and not to the world?' Johannine discourse often depends upon a subtle interplay in which context shapes reference to a marked degree. And in this case it is easy to overlook the way in which Judas' question is the key to what follows. Schnackenburg lamely comments, 'Jesus' reply to this question does not seem to deal directly with it,' and then ignores the question completely in his explanation of verses 23-27.⁴⁷

But actually, read as a response to the question, 14:23-27 commits the disciples to mission. Jesus does not intend to reveal himself only to them. The world will hear – through them. Jesus tells them that this revelation depends upon *love for him* and upon *holding his word* (14:23-24a). The person ('anyone') who loves him and embraces the word will receive the revelation. But how is this response of love and obedience to be evoked? In vs. 24b-26 the disciples are commissioned to speak: Jesus has given them his word – which is God's word – while with them (14:24b-25), and the Holy Spirit will equip them to speak it (14:26). The thought of the Spirit *as the Spirit of prophecy, empowering speech in God's name*, is implicit in v. 26.

(3) The 'greater works' of 14:12, to be done because Jesus has returned to the Father. What are these? A 'mission' motif is unmistakable here. If the 'works' of Jesus are (in part) works of outreach to the marginalised, then his disciples are to undertake an even greater ministry of the same type – speaking words of hope to the lost in the name of Christ. They are to 'go and bear fruit' (15:16). The world will hate them and seek to kill them (15:18-25; 16:2), but their response to this must be to bear witness, empowered by the Spirit (15:26-27). *Because Jesus returns to the Father (cf. 14:12 with 16:7)*, the Paraclete will come, enabling the world's hatred to be turned to conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment.⁴⁸

This will be an altogether 'greater' work than Jesus did, because the world's hatred of him was never turned, during his ministry. His testimony never led to the 'conviction' of the world, but instead to his 'conviction' and execution.⁴⁹ But Jesus looks forward to the time

⁴⁷ Schnackenburg, *John*, 2:81. He introduces a paragraph-division at 14:25 which disrupts the flow of thought.

⁴⁸ Brown is surely wrong to maintain that this 'conviction' is something that comes only to the disciples as the Spirit reveals to them the true state of the world before God (*The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 2 [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971], 711-12). Rather, the unbelieving world itself learns to think differently about Christ, because of the Spirit. We cannot discuss the intricacies of this passage here! But it is hard to deny that mission is in the air.

⁴⁹ There is constant play with various judicial metaphors throughout this

when the world will recognise him and 'believe' through the 'word' of the disciples (17:20-23).

The 'greater works', therefore, are not 'more miraculous miracles', but 'works of the same sort (possibly miracles) with a greater effect'. The church which cares for the marginalised in the name of Christ will see faith born.

(4) *The continuing mission mandate in chapters 4, 17 and 20.* In three passages the thought is clearly expressed that the disciples are to carry on the ministry of Jesus apart from him, or after his departure: 4:35-38, 17:13-19, and 20:21-23. A world-denying, inward-looking Johannine community would be living in clear contravention of its own Scriptures. These passages express a very high view of the missionary calling: the church does not just repeat the message of Christ after him, but actually stands in his place, preserving the same ministry in unbroken continuity after his departure.

Can we gain from the gospel a sense of how that mission was conducted by the evangelist and his church? This leads us to the final thesis:

Thesis (4): *A reader-centred approach makes John a gospel of hope for the poor after AD 70.* We can briefly explore this thesis in relation to the texts on which we have concentrated.⁵⁰

The message of the Fourth Gospel was of enormous relevance to the situation in Palestine in the late first century, after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. In several respects it seems designed to address the needs and longings of Jews at this time. Physical poverty was widespread in the aftermath of the war. Karris lays emphasis on this as a clue to understanding the Fourth Gospel: surrounded by the victims of war, the Johannine community is encouraged to care for the poor.⁵¹ But the 'poverty' experienced by Jews after AD 70 meant far more than just the loss of property. This poverty had two further, interlinked dimensions which made the disaster much harder to bear: first there was what some sociologists call 'cognitive dissonance', a deep sense that Israel's theological foundations had been undermined, allied secondly to a sense of corporate social marginalisation. If God does not guarantee

passage. In 16:8-11 the fundamental thought (I contend) is that the Spirit reverses the verdict that the (Jewish) world passes on Jesus when it executes him as a blasphemer. See Antony Billington, 'The Paraclete and Mission in the Fourth Gospel', in this volume.

⁵⁰ This thesis is explored in depth in my forthcoming book, 'Your Father the Devil'? See the summary in Stephen Motyer, 'The Fourth Gospel: An Appeal to Jews', *TynB* 44.2 (1993), 201-205.

⁵¹ Karris, *Marginalized*, 32, 106.

Jerusalem and Israel's place among the nations, then what is the identity of the Jew? Obviously this crisis was felt most particularly by Palestinian Jews whose religion had been closely bound to Temple and cult. But it was felt widely by Jews of many types.

We can illustrate the crisis with reference to the *search for blame and for renewal*. All agreed that the disaster was judgment for sin. But whose sin? Was it the fault of the Temple authorities?⁵² Or of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, especially the warring factions there?⁵³ Or of the disobedient 'people of the land'?⁵⁴ Or of the godless Romans, inspired by the Devil?⁵⁵ And was such *total* destruction really deserved? What should now be done? Should there be further war against Rome? Should steps be taken to restore the cult, or not? Should Israel wait for God to intervene politically? Or is the answer to develop a private, a-political piety?⁵⁶ It was a time of great confusion and tension.

Into this situation the Fourth Gospel speaks with great power: offering a Jesus who is the Temple in himself, rebuilt in three days (2:19), who provides forgiveness and restoration apart from the Temple, who catches up and fulfils all the festivals of Judaism, especially Tabernacles, who sidelines debate about *blame* for disaster (9:3) and simply restores the blind man, dealing with his need as the Temple never could.

In fact Jesus pointedly restores *worship* to the blind man (9:38), as he delivers him from spiritual blindness. He has lost his roots, thrown out of the synagogue, but recovers true worship as he discovers the Son of Man. What had been a negative 'throwing out' now becomes a positive 'bringing out' of a sheep by the Good Shepherd: the same verb (*ekballō*) is pointedly used both in 9:34 and in 10:4. Rather than find reflected here the local history of the Johannine community, it is far more compelling to read the story as a powerful appeal to all Jews suffering loss and exile as a result of the awful events of AD 70.

If this is so – and space precludes a detailed outworking of this suggestion – then the Fourth Gospel steps among and alongside the marginalised. It stands alongside those who know that they are enslaved by their sinfulness, and fear that they are no longer the household of God (8:34-35) – and do not know what to do about it.

52 The view reflected in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and in *Sibylline Oracles*, Book 4.

53 The view of Josephus, reflected also in 4 Baruch.

54 The view of the emerging rabbinic movement.

55 The view expressed in *Sibylline Oracles*, Book 5.

56 All these questions and options are attested in contemporary writing.

In particular it encourages action toward those on the fringes of the power-groups – toward those who seek new revelation because they know they do not know (Nicodemus), toward the Samaritans, toward radicals (Nathanael) and collaborationists (the royal official), toward those who fear death (e.g. 8:51) and those who live it daily (the lame man), toward the 'unclean' and the displaced, toward the lost sheep and the mourning (Mary and Martha). To all of these it offers a Saviour who meets their need and who asks for their faith and their discipleship. The presentation of this Saviour is still the grand calling of the church, as Peter Cotterell has so emphatically taught and so effectively exemplified.

This is what I meant above by suggesting that the christology of John is not primarily a *doctrine*. Of course I do not deny that it takes its place in the world of ideas and makes an intellectual and conceptual claim. But it does so not in order simply to assert itself against other ideas. That is not the market-place in which it trades. The Jesus of John's Gospel seeks to bring hope to the hopeless, to give a home to the marginalised, and encourages his followers to do the same, in his name.