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Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John

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REVIEWED BY JOHN DOSS

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The print version of the 2016 Didsbury Lectures, *Abide and Go* presents an invigorating, new reading of the Gospel of John as God's invitation for his people to participate with the mission of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Chapter 1, Gorman defines his task of interpreting the fourth Gospel through a missional, participationist lens as well as explains his terminology. The heart of *Abide and Go* is Chapters 2-5 in which Gorman presents the findings of his missional theotic reading of John. In Chapter 6, which was not originally part of the Didsbury Lectures, Gorman responds to the oft-leveled criticism that John lacks the ethic of love towards enemies. The concluding chapter summarizes

the findings and contribution of *Abide and Go* as well as offering practical implications for Christian spirituality.

Before delving into the meaning of missional theosis, Gorman defines his work as “an exercise in missional hermeneutics” (2), which is defined as the interpretation of Scripture through the lens of the *missio Dei* with a view to its application for one’s own context. Gorman’s basic claim is that the Gospel of John centers on the perichoresis or mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and invitation for all to participate in this union and mission of giving God’s love and life to the world. Much attention is devoted to clarifying the controversial term “theosis”, a favorite of Gorman’s. He is careful to clarify that this does not mean believers become divine and offers “participation” as an alternative for those who remain uncomfortable with it.

In Chapter 2, Gorman presents his missional theotic reading of John’s account of Jesus’ public ministry (Chapters 1-12). He begins with the claim made by some that the fourth Gospel advocates a sectarian spirituality and responds by noting the theme of mission throughout the whole of John. From the Prologue’s explication of the Father’s mission in sending His Son, to the accomplishment of this mission in the account of Jesus’ works and words, culminating in his death and resurrection, and concluding with the Son’s mission of sending his disciples just as the Father sent him, Gorman’s anti-sectarian reading of John is one of the major features of *Abide and Go*. He notes that “the Gospel of John is indeed the Gospel of life” (48), yet this theme is implicitly missional in that disciples are invited both to participate in God’s love, light, and life as well as to go and share it with others.

Gorman moves on to the Farewell Discourse in Chapters 3 and 4, which he claims should more appropriately be titled “Mission Discourse” (77). In particular, he focuses on the foot washing (John 13) and the vine parable (John 15) as prime examples of missional theosis, which is ironic given that these passages are often used in support of a sectarian reading of John. By washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus was not only inviting them to the believer’s fellowship in his cleansing death and mutual service towards one another, but also commissioning his disciples to go and participate in his cruciform pattern of sacrificial love to the world. Similarly, the vine parable is “the most potent symbiosis of spirituality and mission in the New Testament” (102). Indeed, the title *Abide and Go* is derived from this teaching (cf. 15:6, 16). Gorman’s innovation of the “creeping” or “mobile vine” elucidates the missional nature of this metaphor.

Chapter 4 focuses on a single chapter, Jesus’ prayer, and thus affords Gorman the greatest latitude to expound on the text of John 17. In the Lord’s prayer for himself (v. 1-5), his immediate disciples (v. 6-19), and his future disciples

(v. 20-26), Gorman emphasizes the believer's participation in the life, the love, and the mission of God to the world. Chapter 5 is the conclusion of Gorman's survey of John, focusing on his resurrection account (John 20-21). Here the Gospel comes full circle as the disciples are now sent by Christ into the world to participate in the *missio Dei* just as Christ was sent by the Father (20:21). Gorman's exposition of John 20:19-23 emphasizes both the disciples' participation in the peace and forgiveness of the Spirit as well as their commissioning to go and share this gift with others. He moves on to the miraculous catch (John 21:1-14) and Jesus' restoration of Peter (v. 15-19), emphasizing the connection between theosis and mission in Jesus' commissioning of Peter to shepherd his flock out of love for him.

In Chapter 6, Gorman responds to the critique that the Gospel of John fails to include the emphasis on loving one's enemies as in the Synoptics. He begins with the Johannine theme of God's love for the whole world, not just the elect, and goes on to discuss examples of this love in the life of Christ. In particular, Gorman demonstrates how Jesus' ministry to "a Jew, a half-Jew, and a non-Jew" (p. 163) in Chapters 3-5, washing the feet of Judas and Peter (chapter 13), as well as his response to Peter cutting off Malchus' ear (Chapter 18) constitute an implicit enemy-love in John's Gospel. The final chapter of *Abide and Go* shifts to the practical implications of Gorman's missional theosis for the personal and corporate Christian life. Gorman summarizes Chapters 1-6 and then discusses his work in light of contemporary Johannine research. Lastly, he provides five examples of missional theosis at work in the contemporary church.

With *Abide and Go*, Gorman the Pauline scholar has made a valuable contribution to the field of Johannine studies. Though he is not the first to expound on the themes of mission, participation, and theosis in John, his genius lies in his seamless synthesis and brilliant exegesis of these themes in the fourth Gospel. Of course, *Abide and Go* is not without its weaknesses, chief among them its adaptation from a lecture series. The additional work Gorman accomplished to transform the lectures into a scholarly monograph must be highly appreciated. However, would he, for example, have devoted an entire chapter to enemy-love if *Abide and Go* had from the outset been a written volume? The implicit ethic of love for enemies is not a necessary element of missional theosis in John but belongs elsewhere (e.g., in a subsequent volume on Johannine ethics). At times, Gorman's missional hermeneutic obscures John's message, e.g., his claim that missional theosis in John is just as "cruciform" as in Paul (128). Such efforts to establish uniformity between Pauline and Johannine theology fail to appreciate their unique *Sitze im Leben*. Finally, *Abide and Go* is, in Gorman's own words, "primarily text-centered" (180), and thus its implications for personal

and corporate Christian spirituality necessitate further elaboration. Indeed, in the concluding reflection on the practical implications of his study, only one of Gorman's five examples of missional theosis is a church. Three are faith-based organizations, and one is a monastic fraternity, which leaves the reader wondering how feasibly Gorman's theology applies to the local church. Nevertheless, *Abide and Go* remains a helpful resource in Johannine studies, particularly as concerns the themes of mission and participation, and will hopefully serve as an inspiration for further academic research in these areas.