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Abstract

This essay examines the missionary calling and character of the people of God. The argument is made that the call to discipleship has significant implications for how Christians understand their identity. To be a disciple means to submit to a kingdom and a way of life that challenge the powers of this world and nationalistic understandings of identity. Discipleship also implies that following Christ entails bearing the wounds of a broken world as a testimony to the work of Christ. The key themes of discipleship, suffering and identity are examined through an analysis of biblical passages in the Gospel of John and some of Paul's letters.

Keywords

1 Introduction

One of the most common questions in missionary contexts is, ‘Where are you from?’. Whether it is a village in Togo asking the Benedictine monk where he came from, or a church in Toronto inquiring about the home country of the new mission pastor, or students in a Brazilian seminary asking where their lecturer is from. At one level it is a frequent and natural question to ask when one meets a new person. But if we consider this question within the contexts of the history of mission, especially Western missions, at a deeper level it can also
be a question about allegiance. To whom or to what place are you most loyal? It is a question about the markers of our identities.

One of the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to bring to light the inequalities and power imbalances that shape the world’s societies. These inequalities and vulnerabilities have been there all along, but are now cast onto the centre stage of the world arena. Whether these be issues of racism or the exploitation of the planet, issues of nationalism and growing hostile attitudes towards immigrants, access to vaccines and universal health care – all these and many other wounds fill the front pages of our newspapers. Occasionally, they are the subject of sermons.

Even a cursory reading of the biblical narratives suggests that God’s invitation to his people is one that takes them, as a community and as individuals, on a journey of learning a new sense of identity and belonging. To become part of the people of God, one must submit to a new understanding of national identity and citizenship that is cruciform. This is a journey forged by Christ himself and marked by the wounds of his suffering in the flesh.

There are many examples in the biblical narratives about the ways the identities of those whom God calls are challenged or turned upside down. From the disruption of Babel and the calling of Abram, Sarai and their family, to the scattering of the faithful after Pentecost, there is a thread of divine disruption whenever God’s people try to do things following the patterns of the world. This essay will look at some of this disruption as it appears around the themes of identity and discipleship in the gospel of John and some of Paul’s letters. More specifically, the proposal here is that God’s demand that God’s people exist as a missionary people – one that witnesses to the new order inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth – is a call to bear the wounds of the world precisely because it challenges those worldly patterns of loyalty and identity. That is, the very call to mission is a call to a new kind of citizenship that leads, in the words of African-American civil rights leader John Lewis (1940–2020), to ‘good trouble; necessary trouble’. We shall return to this theme later.

2 The Gospel of John

Another way of talking about how an individual Christian or a Christian community responds to God’s call to mission is to consider the ways Christians use and understand the term ‘discipleship’. How does our life of learning to follow Jesus reflect this call to bear the wounds of the world as we learn a new citizenship? Wes Howard-Brook argues that in order for us to understand properly the gospel of John we must step out of a dominant culture of individualism
and into the social world of the first-century Mediterranean world, where the concern is with the “communal ‘conspiracy’ to become children of God” (Howard-Brook 2002:80). He further suggests that John's gospel is an image carefully crafted so that we “see” (rather than read in a linear fashion) the subversive and powerful call to discipleship – an authority given to us by Jesus himself (Howard-Brook 2002:82–84).

2.1 **John 4:1–42**

Howard-Brook's essay focuses on three specific narratives – Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus (John 3), Jesus' dispute with the Judeans (John 7–8), and the time spent in a Samaritan village (John 4). The last of these stories particularly illustrates both the way the world shapes our nationalistic tendencies and the challenge that discipleship and mission bring to such worldly allegiances. This central theme was already previewed for us in John's Prologue. Taken within its historical-sociological context, “the link with Jacob [John 4:12] and the historical specificity of the Samaritans place this passage squarely in the midst of Jesus' Johannine mission: to call people away from commitments to man-made systems of identity and into rebirth as children of God” (Howard-Brook 2002:89–90).

The narrative highlights the ethnic tensions between the Samaritans and the Jews. The Samaritans were the group oppressed by the empire and seen as second-class by their Judean cousins. Both claim Jacob as their father, but with their heritage on different mountains (cf. John 4:20–21). From the point of view of the disciples who see Jesus speaking with the woman, the Samaritans are cultural and religious deviants. Perhaps the arrogant view and sense of superiority which shaped the disciples' perspective of Samaritans is not unlike the ways many Christians today approach those who are different from themselves, whether religiously, socially or ethnically. Yet Jesus disrupts both the Samaritan and the Judean understandings of heritage, citizenship and identity. “Just as [Jesus] told Nicodemus that God’s Spirit blows like the wind and hence can't be contained by religious institutions, so he tells [the Samaritan woman] and her people that it cannot be contained by national or ethnic boundaries” (Howard-Brook 2002:90).

Traditionally, the lens through which we tend to read the story of the Samaritan woman is that of a woman of questionable reputation. After all, Jesus himself pointed out that she has had many husbands or partners. Yet in the gospel of John this is not the central aspect of the narrative. Again, with

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1 The author does not use gender inclusive language because of the specific link with "will of man" in this passage.
Howard-Brook, the woman’s response to Jesus makes her the first “apostle” in John’s Gospel. She is the missionary who goes to call the townspeople to meet Jesus. “The numerous interpretations that denigrate this woman as an ‘outcast’ overlook the fact” that the people would not be so quick to follow a person of ‘tainted’ reputation or agree that she might actually be right about the Messiah” (Howard-Brook 2002:90).

What cannot be overlooked in this narrative is the language used to acknowledge who Jesus is and how he calls both the Samaritans and the disciples to a new kind of identity and belonging. In John 4:42 the Samaritans declare to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.” This is incredibly subversive language and is “in direct opposition to the proclamation of the Roman emperor as ‘saviour of the world’. No longer will the Samaritans claim Jacob or Caesar as their ‘father’, but God alone” (Howard-Brook 2002:90).

The call to discipleship is a call to be uncomfortable, to have one’s identity and boundaries of self-understanding challenged and undermined by the journey with Jesus. The text in John 4 says that Jesus and the disciples stayed in the village for two days (4:40, 43). Jewish men sleeping in Samaritan beds, eating meals with Samaritan people – scandalous! What would this have done to the self-understanding that Peter, James and John might have had of their allegiance to Messiah Jesus and their own Jewish identity? And yet they knew that if they wanted to follow Jesus, they would also have to enter the places and cross the boundaries that Jesus himself had crossed. Moreover, they would have to learn a new form of community with people, in this case, the Samaritans, who were very different from themselves. In a world that declared that they did not belong together, it was precisely there, staying in the village and their interactions in that place that witnessed to a new kind of communal identity that resisted the divisive powers of the empire.

2.2 John 17:13–19
The themes of identity, citizenship and the suffering life of the disciple unfold in different ways throughout John’s gospel and reach a particular climax in what are known as the ‘Farewell Discourses’ of John 13–17. It is also in these chapters that we see Jesus’ deep desire to prepare his little band of followers for the wounds they are to see inflicted on Jesus himself and that they might also have to suffer. Just as the Samaritans had to choose to accept Christ as the messiah and submit to God’s lordship, so also do the disciples – even though this goes against the boundaries and identities set by the world. “To follow Jesus is to choose God’s ‘glory’ over the glory people offer to each other ... yet
Jesus’ glory … is most visible according to [John] on the cross” (Howard-Brook 2002:93). The disciples are sent to announce the Messiah, just as the Samaritan woman had been sent, and they are promised God’s glory and joy, yet exactly there is the juxtaposition of suffering and glory.

In his recent commentary on the gospel of John, David Ford stresses the importance of holding together the strands of Jesus’ identity, the work of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus’ relationship to the Father as guiding threads throughout the gospel. In particular, Ford notes that the “most intensive focus on the Holy Spirit comes in the Farewell Discourses as Jesus prepares his disciples for his death and for their part in the ongoing drama afterward … John is far more explicitly concerned than the other Gospels with what I call the ongoing drama of following Jesus after his crucifixion and resurrection” (Ford 2021: 8–9). What John makes clear is that the life of discipleship, the life of those who witness in truth to Christ, is a life marked by the path that Jesus walked and the wounds that Christ himself bore.

Jesus says, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ (John 20:21). This “requires continual learning from how Jesus was sent, as seen in the drama of his ministry (especially gathering a new family of disciples/learners, … entering into deep and challenging conversations and setting an example of witnessing to truth, loving service, friendship and intimate prayer) and in his passion …” (Ford 2021:9, italics by the author). The call to be sent as witnesses to Christ is a call to a new understanding of identity that is shaped precisely by the life and ministry of Jesus. Moreover, it is a life for which Jesus has empowered his followers with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

John 17 “gives the vision of what [Jesus] is laying down his life for, his ultimate desire: the fullest conceivable unity in love and peace” (Ford 2021:10). Jesus’ particular prayer to the Father for the belonging and protection of the disciples in John 17:13–19 highlights the tensions between being given the power to be children of God (cf. John 1:12–13) and suffering for such an identity. It is a prayer set within the context of Jesus’ love and care for his disciples. It is a prayer that mixes up present and future. In John 16:33 Jesus speaks of being of good cheer because he has already overcome the world, yet this is all before the crucifixion. It is a prayer about unity and evangelism, and living as God’s people in a world that does not like God’s people. Christian prayers are often made up of requests and so it should come as no surprise to find requests in this text as well.

Jesus makes four requests in this selection of seven verses:
1. He prays that the disciples may have his joy: “I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves …” (v. 13).
2. He prays that they be protected from the evil one: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (v. 15).

3. He prays that they be sanctified in the truth (v. 17).

4. And again, he prays that they may be sanctified in the truth: “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth” (v. 19).

Jesus’ prayer raises epistemological questions about what is truth and how might we recognise it. It also questions the relationship between being sanctified in such truth and the joy that is made complete. Finally, one might ask how and why being hated fits into Jesus’ understanding of identity, citizenship, and the fulness of joy. As Raymond Brown and other scholars have pointed out, Jesus’ language in the gospel of John is more solemn. The same word can have many meanings, nuances. Although he comes from above and speaks of what is “true” or “real” ... Jesus, the Word made flesh, must use language from below to convey his message’ (Brown 1999:333–335). The evangelist’s language is not meant to cause confusion for his readers, nor for us, but to draw each one ever deeper into the journey with Jesus. As Ford says, we are invited to see ourselves as the unnamed ‘beloved disciple’ and to learn about who we are and where we belong as we journey with Christ.

Concerning truth, John already gives us a hint in v. 17: Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. Truth and word are big themes in John’s writings. These are terms that appear over and over again in key parts of the gospel and help shape that image that Howard-Brook argues is the picture John is painting for his readers. Examples include not only John’s Prologue, but also subsequent texts that connect the Incarnation with the glory of the Father and the truth in which this reality takes place. Furthermore, in John’s gospel, word and truth are often associated with light. It is light that shines in the darkness, it is light that exposes sin, light that is not overcome by darkness, but is unwelcome by the darkness. John chooses his words very carefully. Even as he uses words that harken back to Hellenistic culture and beliefs, “John’s Gospel introduces familiar ideas in order to subvert them ... it [is] a matter ... of recognizing one of the central ways in which the God of Israel, and hence of Jesus, differs from the gods of neighbouring peoples” (Howard-Brook 2002:81, italics by the author).

If the word is truth and light, why is it hated (v. 14)? It is this hatred as it connects to witness and discipleship that displays how the wounds for the gospel serve as resistance to the powers of nationalism that divide peoples and Christian communities. Jesus prays, “sanctify them in your truth; sanctify them in your word.” It is a prayer for holiness. It is a prayer that this little band of disciples will be a rather peculiar band – a strange group of people who are only together because Jesus brought them together. Towards the end of his
time with these disciples, they are still not a community that is able to withstand the pressures that will come from the murder of their teacher or from the persecution that they themselves will face (cf. John 20). Intimacy is “what is lacking amidst this fledgling discipleship community, as is revealed when Jesus tells them ominously, ‘One of you will betray me’ (13:21). But not one of them has a clue who the betrayer is!” (Howard-Brook 2002:94). Sadly, “the intimacy that marks Christian history is a painful one, one in which the joining [of peoples] often meant oppression, violence and death, if not of bodies, then most certainly of ways of life, forms of language, and visions of the world” (Jennings 2011:8). To follow Jennings, Jesus’ prayer for the new type of citizenship for the disciples is not the type of belonging or intimacy that characterised the expansion and growth of Christianity. To challenge this misappropriation of the gospel we must return to Jesus’ words and their implications for what mission might mean in the world today.

Even more pertinent to the discussion at hand about belonging and identity, this text in John’s gospel is a prayer that brings to the fore the wounds that a disciple and an apostle – one sent to announce the coming of the Messiah – must bear for carrying that message. It was precisely in trying to establish itself in the patterns of the world that Christianity led to the destruction of God’s vision of intimacy and belonging. The modern missionary movements largely failed in understanding the cruciform character of Christian witness. Rather than a journey towards triumph, what we learn from the biblical narratives and what is highlighted in the gospel of John is precisely that the nature of Christian identity is based on following Jesus all the way to the cross. This is not to deny the importance of the resurrection and how that shapes our hope. However, while embracing the hope and wonder of the resurrection, Christians have often forgotten that first there is this cross-shaped witness.

Cruciformity is the mark of mission and love, argues David Purves, following the arguments developed by Michael Gorman. Concerning mission, he writes, “Cruciform love, in a word, continues the story of the cross in new times and places. Cruciform love is imaginative” (Purves 2016:178). If the cross of Christ becomes the lens through which we reconsider our calling to be disciples and witnesses of the good news, then we have better ways to reimagine our own identities and the place of suffering of those who are called to belong to Jesus.

Let us read ourselves into this biblical story as the biblical text reads us – Jesus’ prayer for the disciples becomes his prayer for us. Is not that what mission is all about – participating in God’s call to serve in this beautiful mosaic of God’s plan of redemption? John 17:21–23 says, “May we be one ... as we are one ... then the world will know ...”. Perhaps it should read, may we be one so that the world might hate us. Do we really expect or want God to answer Jesus’
prayer? Has God answered Jesus’ prayer to sanctify the church today and thus make the world hate it? In our analyses of the wounds of the world, how do we consider whether these wounds are the results of the faithful witness of Christians who refuse to conform to the identity boundaries set by the world’s powers, or whether they are the result of the failure of our witness?

When Jesus prayed that the disciples be sanctified by the word, he meant not some sort of abstract holiness, but rather, that they be a community that shared such intimacy, such love for one another – love that knows nothing greater than to lay one’s life down for one’s friends (cf. John 10:15–18, 15:12–13) – that the world would see a new kind of belonging. This belonging, this citizenship was made possible only by Jesus himself, identified by the revolutionary word of God that is truth and light that exposes the darkness. To be this very peculiar people is to be distinctly unlike the rest of the world (cf. Hauerwas and Willimon 1989).

Journeying with Jesus, sanctification, is not just about purity or discipline, though it may include those; it is not about separatism or removing oneself from societies that demand a different allegiance. Rather, it is about displaying our radical difference, showing the marks of God’s ownership. This text in John is a text about identity, about answering the question: where are you from? It is a story that began in John’s Prologue: The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. Consider once more these two passages:

He was in the world and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own did not accept him.

**John 1:9–11**

I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

**John 17:15–17**

These are texts about belonging, about showing where our true citizenship lies through our lives, our character, our behaviour, our words and deeds, displaying that we bear the marks of Christ in our individual and collective lives. It is the strangeness of trusting in a God who has given us power to become his children. We are never more holy than when we trust God on the basis of his word. And it is in trusting that we become more unlike everyone else. It was Jesus’ complete trust in God the Father and his obedience to God’s call that both enabled and empowered him to submit to the journey to the cross. Precisely
in this cruciform witness we find a model for mission, as Purves argues, and
a model for understanding Christian identity and belonging. We shall return
below to a discussion of this point.

In this passage of John 17 Jesus also says, “I have given them your word and
the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I
do not belong to the world” (v. 14). This is not new language in this gospel. In
chapter 15:18ff Jesus had already warned: “If the world hates you be aware that
it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world the world would
love you as its own … Because you do not belong to the world, the world hates
you.” It is distinctly uncomfortable not to belong; it is even worse to be hated.
Consider the stories, the biographies of famous missionaries who travelled
across the world and found themselves in contexts where they did not fit in,
or returned to their home countries and again did not belong because of the
changes they and their home contexts had undergone during the time away.
There is a certain humility in not belonging and not being able to give a simple
answer to the question, “Where are you from?” Our cultures tend to privilege
clear identity markers and boundaries to how we define where people are
from, whether politically, socially or even around sporting events. Thus, when
one hesitates about belonging to any particular nation/football club/political
party, one can be greeted with mockery or worse. But in this text of John's gos-
pel Jesus is not simply talking about being mocked or humiliated. He pushes
it further and says it is not just uncomfortable not to belong to this world, it
actually means you will be hated.

According to Christopher M. Hays, one distinctive characteristic of Christian
identity is what social scientists call “identity hybridity and migrant integra-
tion” (Hays 2021:1). Basing his arguments on the Stephen narrative of Acts 6–7,
Hays argues that Christian existence and identity is best understood as hybrid.
This refers to the emphasis in Stephen's sermon in Acts on (i) Israel's history as
primarily the story of a migrant people; (ii) those whom God favours will often
live through suffering, migration and diaspora; and (iii) God is with God's peo-
ple in their suffering, in their migrations and oppression (Hays, 2021:4–6). The
emphasis in the argument, as we can also see in this text of the gospel of John,
is that suffering and persecution are actually to be expected in the Christian
life. They are marks of our belonging to the One who gave himself up on the
cross and who has sent us, as he was sent by the Father.

When we consider the character and witness of Christian mission and the
demands for a new kind of belonging that leads to being hated, joy is most
likely not the first sentiment that comes to mind. And yet this is the first
request Jesus makes in this passage: “I speak these things so that they may
have my joy made complete” (v. 13). Be joyful, the world will hate you. Jesus is
not suggesting to the disciples or to Christians today that we laugh at hatred or dismiss the suffering and persecution that so many Christians face for the sake of their faith. There is indeed the need for mourning, for lament, for coming together alongside those who suffer. John's gospel is not a text about making light of suffering or hatred. Rather, this is a text about belonging and learning to be joyful because we have been called to such a new citizenship, enabled to become children of God and sent out to announce the good news.

What Jesus prays for in this text is for the disciples to learn a new type of belonging to God and to one another. It is a prayer for which the time in the Samaritan village was but a short lesson, a workshop in being a witness. It is what Willie James Jennings calls the possibility “of a truly cosmopolitan citizenship. Such a world citizenship imagines cultural transactions that signal the emergence of people whose sense of agency and belonging breaks open not only the geopolitical and nationalist confines but also the strictures of ethnic and racial identities” (Jennings 2011:10–11).

A personal analogy may be helpful at this point. My family heritage is very mixed. There are North Africans, Europeans, North Americans, the South American tribe Tupi-Guarani and some unknown figures in the family tree. I have also lived on three different continents. And yet, when the football world cup is being played, all these different backgrounds fade away and I am fully 1000% Brazilian. This is not a thoughtful, rational decision, made under careful consideration whether ours is a good team or not – that does not matter. I am Brazilian! That is my identity and that is where I belong. In Portuguese we say during a match, Eu vibro! It refers to that thrill and the exciting joy of watching a match. It can also refer to the anxious anticipation of the outcome, whether good or bad. The important aspect to understand here is that football brings out a sense of belonging that trumps any other loyalties, at least during the game. Perhaps this is a small snapshot of what Jesus is suggesting to his disciples in this text – be joyful in your heavenly origins, share that excitement when it comes to your belonging to God – be thrilled because you have been chosen from above and you are not of this world! This is not a temporary joy or sense of belonging. It is one given to God’s children through all eternity.

In a world shaped by so many kinds of wounds, wounds in history, inequalities and injustice, in this world we are called to show God’s light, to be the joy and love of Jesus to those around us. As Jesus said in John 16:33 – “there will be tribulations, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world”. Through Jesus, God has given us a new orientation to life, another origin, another belonging, another identity in which we are to be joyful. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, it is an identity born from above and it is an identity that we share with Jesus himself. John 17:18: “As you have sent me into the world, so
I have sent them into the world." Jesus sends those who share in his homeland. What Christ opens up for us is the possibility of new spaces that do not conform to the boundaries of identity and belonging set by the world. But in challenging these divisions and inhabiting these new spaces, we should expect resistance and even hatred. As David Ford writes, “There is a tragic dimension to this Gospel. It is not only starkly realistic about the ways the world goes tragically wrong [wounds and inequalities]; it shows the same grim realism of those who follow Jesus. Disciples are shown to be mistaken, misled ... lacking in faith and love ... this fallible community has continued through history in its tragic vulnerability to all sorts of sin, including ... the lack of trust in and commitment to Jesus” (Ford 2021:18).

As witnesses to Christ, the gospel demands that we follow a new type of belonging. “Such living spaces may open up the possibilities of different ways of life that announce invitations for joining ... To change one’s way of imagining connection and one’s way of desiring joining is no small thing. Yet ... such a change is not only necessary but now stands before human communities as the only real option for survival in a world of dwindling natural resources and tightening global economic chains of commodification ... [If] Christian life is indeed a way forward for the world then it must reemerge as a compelling new invitation to life together” (Jennings 2011:294).

3 Examples from Paul’s Letters

How do we do this life of discipleship and what are the implications for missiological studies? How can we be a joyful, odd and peculiar people, a people marked by love and trust in the word, and therefore hated by the world? Perhaps the most striking example of this is Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul was in jail, threatened by civil and religious authorities, his future was very uncertain. And yet that letter is full of joy and hope. As Pedro Arana from Peru once said, “Philippians is a call to subversion” because in it, the light shines brighter and the life of that little community that gathered by the river exposed the corruption, the abuse, the darkness of their society and called people into the light, into belonging to a community shaped by Jesus (Arana 2019:1547).

The story of the first Christians at Philippi is not a typical example of strategic mission planning or church planting. A slave girl, a business woman, a jailer are the founders of the first church in Europe. But that mix of people in Philippi learned to share an identity that is of heavenly origin. Paul’s letter is about encouraging and helping them sort out how best to display the marks of this new citizenship, of this godly identity. As Myrto Theocharous argues,
for Paul the body is “the greatest instrument of the believer for the purpose of demonstrating where one belongs” (Theocharous 2019:2). For Theocharous, Paul’s missionary impetus is certainly not Gnostic. On the contrary – it is precisely through the body that one witnesses most powerfully to the good news of Jesus Christ. This is clearly evident when Paul talks about the marks on his own body in his letter to the Philippians:

Paul moves beyond the ethnic bodily sign of circumcision to other ways through which the body expresses allegiance and glorifies his saviour. He sees that it is through physical suffering that the gospel is advanced (1:12). The chains that constrained his body were actually effective in dispelling all fear from his brothers and sisters. One would have expected that Paul’s chains would impart fear in the church, but the exact opposite had happened. His chained body infused the church with confidence for a bold witness.

Theocharous 2019:2

The term for joy or the command to rejoice appear over ten times in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Similar to what we see in John’s gospel, there is a strange parallel between suffering and joy. To rejoice in the Lord makes sense in light of the ways Paul describes his own suffering in Philippians. The apostle makes clear that one suffers not to achieve/gain salvation – that would be a source of fear and anxiety and would also suggest a confidence in ‘the flesh’. Rather, “it is Christ who is the generating power, the cause, the one who controls and secures power over death, and the one who is faithful to bring about the Resurrection” (Theocharous 2019:8). Paul’s argument is that we are joyful precisely as we await the resurrection, even in our suffering, because in such waiting we display our heavenly citizenship: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself” (Phil 3:20–21).

Paul calls on the Philippians to stand firm in Christ precisely because they share their citizenship with Jesus himself. It is this understanding and concrete hope that enables both Paul and his readers to rejoice in the midst of persecution and suffering. Their witness, their belonging to one another challenges the powers of death, the economic systems of oppression and the societal norms that dictated belonging. They should expect their new form of life together to bring upon it the wrath of the empire. Yet it is in bearing such witness that
the world will know the one true God. This “surrendering to [Christ] who is guaranteed to take us through the waters of death, is Paul's source of joy and ours (1:6). We are safe, even when we fall into the unsafe hands of our oppressors. We stand secure, even when we are threatened by our enemies, because our bodies have a future, they are firmly held through the grave and beyond” (Theocharous 2019:9).

The earlier reference to the words of civil rights leader John Lewis is an allusion to Paul's words in Romans 12. The call to witness and to grow as a disciple entails learning more deeply and practicing more faithfully that missionary identity given to us by Christ – this is a call to create “good trouble.” That is, the path of Christian witness and discipleship is one that leads to trouble, to being challenged and even persecuted for one's witness. We should not expect anything less. Christian identity leads to trouble because it does not conform to the patterns of this world (Romans 12:2a). The goal is not to avoid trouble – we are in it. The context of our witness is this world of inequalities. Yet the gospel good news is that we do not have to be defined by these inequalities and injustices. The trouble we cause through our witness is good because it is aligned with God's purposes for the world (Romans 12:2b). In this passage Paul links the renewing of our minds (v. 2) with the practices of love, hospitality, monetary contributions to mission, blessing of enemies, and so forth (vv. 9–21). For Paul, our identities as Christians are shaped by the wounds we bear for the world for the sake of Christ. Just as he had urged the Philippians to live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ in the smallest details, also here in Romans he points to the daily tasks of sharing food, tears and bearing evil for the integrity of our witness.

According to Purves, “Cruciformity originates in an understanding of Paul's writings beginning with the assertion that “the Cross is the interpretive, or hermeneutical, lens through which God is seen. The pattern of faith or faithfulness, of self-giving, other-affirming love revealed in the narrative of Christ's obedience to death on the cross is the starting point for Christian faith” (Purves 2016:178). Following Gorman, and in parallel with Theocharous, Purves sees the cross as the distinctive path through which the Christian identity is shaped and on which the journey of discipleship takes place. “It is central to cruciformity that Paul never separates faith as belief and belonging from the related actions of love the Spirit-empowered master pattern requires and entails” (Purves 2016:81). The same could be said of the gospel of John. The response of faith (mission) is inseparable from a life characterized by love, even or especially when such love receives the ire of the powers of the world – that is, when such love is hated, to use the language from the gospel of John. “The believer
joins the cruciform ministry of Christ in the Christian community, choosing to emulate Christ, empowered by the Spirit” (Purves 2016:180). This is evidenced throughout Paul’s writings and is integral to Paul’s self-understanding (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:6–8, 1 Corinthians 9, Philippians 2:7).

4 Conclusion

Christian identity and belonging are shaped by the cross of Christ and propelled forward into mission by the Holy Spirit. This missional impetus does not leave the cross behind. Rather, it follows that very same path, that journey to which Jesus calls his followers to be witnesses for his kingdom.

In John’s gospel Jesus prayed that God would set the disciples aside and make them a people of the word and of truth. What had come into being in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. And Paul writes in Philippians: “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure ... it is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast that I did not run in vain ... I am glad and joyful with all of you and in the same way you also must be glad and joyful with me” (Phil 2:13–17).

It is the Spirit sent by Jesus to us, the Spirit that enlivened the Philippians, that same Spirit is at work in the church today. Paul says, do the small things: speak well of one another, show God’s love to strangers, show hospitality and kindness. “Do all these things so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God who shine like stars in the world” (Phil 2:14). What sort of commitment in the church today would display such a belonging and such trust that God might answer Jesus’ prayer? To follow Christ, to be disciples and to belong to a community that bears the cruciform marks of Jesus is to exist as a people that challenge the powers of the world. It is to this kind of belonging that we are called and empowered by God’s Spirit. And to the question, “Where are you from?” The answer is, “from Christ”.

References Cited


Este ensayo examina el llamado misionero y el carácter del pueblo de Dios. Se argumenta que el llamado al discipulado tiene implicaciones importantes para la manera en la que los cristianos comprenden su identidad. Ser discípulo implica someterse a un reino y una forma de vida que desafían los poderes de este mundo y los conceptos nacionalistas de identidad. El discipulado también implica que seguir a Cristo es llevar las heridas de un mundo quebrantado como un testimonio de la obra de Cristo. El discipulado, el sufrimiento y la identidad, temas clave del discipulado, se examinan mediante el análisis de pasajes bíblicos del evangelio de Juan y de algunas cartas de Pablo.

Resumen

Este ensayo examina el llamado misionero y el carácter del pueblo de Dios. Se argumenta que el llamado al discipulado tiene implicaciones importantes para la manera en la que los cristianos comprenden su identidad. Ser discípulo implica someterse a un reino y una forma de vida que desafían los poderes de este mundo y los conceptos nacionalistas de identidad. El discipulado también implica que seguir a Cristo es llevar las heridas de un mundo quebrantado como un testimonio de la obra de Cristo. El discipulado, el sufrimiento y la identidad, temas clave del discipulado, se examinan mediante el análisis de pasajes bíblicos del evangelio de Juan y de algunas cartas de Pablo.

摘要

Missio Dei 已成为教会大多数分支中常见且受重视的表达方式。当我们使用这个词时，我们在多大程度上是指同一件事吗？本文探讨在当代公会和福音派背景下对 missio Dei 概念的理解，特别强调《开普敦的承诺》和《共同迈向生活》这些文件。尽管在相对较短的时间跨度内，missio Dei 经历了动荡的生活，定义多样，兴趣多种，但其用法似乎越来越趋同。这个共同点主要与从以教会为中心到三位一体的使命范式的转变，以及将上帝的国度理解为使命的目标有关。然而，这些文件
存在差异，这些差异在它们对基督的中心地位和圣灵的角色的相对强调中显而易见的。

这篇文章探讨了上帝子民的宣教呼召和品格。本文认为，门徒训练的呼召对基督徒如何理解他们的身份具有重要意义。成为门徒意味着服从一个挑战这个世界的国度和生活方式。门徒训练也暗示跟随基督需要承受破碎世界的创伤，作为基督工作的见证。通过对约翰福音和保罗书信中的圣经段落的分析，本文研究了门徒训练、苦难和身份这些关键主题。