

THE CHURCH IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN¹

Dongsoo Kim

The view of the Church in the Gospel of John has been a volatile issue in Johannine studies for the last several decades, with the discussions focused on the following issues. The first issue, arising from John's failure to use traditional ecclesiastical terms found in other New Testament writings or to mention church order or sacraments, is whether there is a concrete ecclesiology in John. At the beginning of the 1970s, many scholars reached the conclusion that a theology of the Church does exist in John. Thus, a second issue concerns distinctively Johannine expressions of ecclesiology. A third main issue of Johannine ecclesiology is its *Sitz im Leben* of Johannine ecclesiology. This focuses on the social history of the Johannine community in which the Johannine idea of Christian community originated. Related to this issue, it has been claimed by a majority of scholars that the distinctive Johannine ecclesiology originated from a concrete, living community which was sectarian in nature, removed from most of the other Christian communities in the late first century.

First, what has been lacking in the previous works is an extensive and systematic study of the concept of the Church in the Gospel of John, although there have been plenty of scholarly works devoted to one or more themes or aspects of Johannine ecclesiology. Second, there have been few comprehensive works which show that Johannine ecclesiology is a major area of concern for the Fourth Evangelist and that it is closely related to the other subjects of Johannine theology. Third, the issue of *Sitz im Leben* of Johannine ecclesiology still remains an open question.

This thesis attempts to make an extensive study of the concept of the Church in the Gospel of John regarding the following questions: Can we speak of the Church in the Gospel of John? If we can, what is its distinctiveness? Is the Johannine ecclesiology, if anything, of a sectarian type?

¹ Kim, Dongsoo, *The Church in the Gospel of John* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1999); supervisor Dr Andrew Chester.

The Fourth Evangelist does not use the word *ejkkllhsiva*. Further, he does not include 'the kingdom of God' as a subject of Jesus' teaching, which is an important theme for the Church in the Synoptic Gospels (but cf. Jn. 3:3, 5; 18:36). Moreover, scholars even disagree about whether or not John has in mind such important ecclesiastical themes as sacrament or church order. Thus, we must be cautious when we speak of a Johannine ecclesiology. Is it, then, impossible or fruitless to speak of a Johannine ecclesiology? To begin with, it is wrong to claim that there exists no ecclesiology in the Gospel of John based on the data that the Fourth Evangelist does not use the word *ejkkllhsiva*. As a matter of fact, it is a Matthean peculiarity in the gospels (Matt.16:18; 18:17). Further, it must not be overlooked that the word *ejkkllhsiva* is used in the Johannine corpus (3 Jn. 6, 9, 10).

The existence of an ecclesiology in the Gospel of John depends on the definition of the Church. If one refers to the Church exclusively in such terms as the 'body of Christ', 'people of God', or 'Kingdom of God', one can hardly trace such terminologies in John. However, if one means the Church as the 'corporate identity and relationship among those who believe in Jesus as Christ' (cf. Jn. 1:12; Rom. 10:9), one may speak of an ecclesiology in John. In particular, if it is correct that in John the story of Jesus is portrayed from a post-Easter viewpoint of Christian community (cf. 2:17, 22; 7:39; 12:16; 20:9), it is not difficult to suppose that the self-understanding of the believing community is reflected in the portrayals of Jesus, the disciples, and their relations. Thus it is not unwarranted in John to speak of the Church.

In my definition of the Church, that is 'the corporate identity and relationship among those who believe in Jesus as Christ,' John does not necessarily share the traditional ecclesiastical terms with the other NT writers. Therefore, the task of Johannine ecclesiology is to find Johannine terms, ideas, images or concepts of the Church in the Gospel of John. It is a typical methodological error with regard to Johannine ecclesiology to suppose that John would express his idea of the Church in the same way as other New Testament writings. It is wrong to expect for John the Pauline or the Synoptic terms of the Church.

This study demonstrates that Johannine ideas and concepts of the Church are delineated particularly in the following themes, symbols or ideas: (i) images of Christ and the Church (chs. 2 and 3), (ii) the unity of believers (ch. 4), (iii) the 'children of God' (ch. 5), (iv) discipleship (ch. 6), and (v) the Paraclete (ch. 7). This undertaking

naturally leads to a consideration of the distinctiveness of Johannine ecclesiology. It is concluded that Johannine ecclesiology is closely related to its eschatology, pneumatology, and particularly its christology, and that ecclesiology is one of the major concerns for the Fourth Evangelist.

The Johannine concept of the Church is distinctive, if not unique, in the New Testament. Then, presupposing that distinctive Johannine theology has something more to do with a different set of historical circumstances than 'a personal, literary, or theological idiosyncrasy', scholars have tried to find the *Sitz im Leben* of Johannine ecclesiology. It has become especially popular among Johannine scholars to reconstruct the development of the Johannine community diachronically. Recently, however, strong reactions have arisen against this scholarly trend. In particular, Richard Bauckham and others in their cooperative objection to this trend deny even the relevance of a specific community behind each of the various canonical Gospels. In chapter 9 I have pointed out that both of these extreme stances have weaknesses in their approaches. The existence of some sort of Johannine community is hardly disputable in that there exist the Epistles of John, which are community documents. At the same time, I have shown that attempting to write a concrete history of the Johannine community is equally problematic in that the process of such attempts involves to a large extent, building hypothesis upon hypothesis.

A more fruitful area of research in investigating the *Sitz im Leben* of Johannine ecclesiology is a study of the various salient characteristics of the Johannine community for which the Gospel and the Epistles of John provide reliable data. Related to this issue, it is often claimed among scholars that Johannine distinctiveness originates from the sectarian nature of the Johannine community. In chapters 8 and 9 I have established that Johannine Christianity was not sectarian in its stance *vis-à-vis* apostolic Christianity, a fact which may be detected in the sophisticated relationship that is depicted between the Beloved Disciple and Peter. Scholars generally agree that some symbolism lies behind these two disciples. In the Johannine narrative Peter makes an appearance as the representative of the 'Twelve'; the Beloved Disciple stands for the Johannine community. Their relationship is characterised by a certain rivalry or competition. However, it does not go so far as to break communion between them. This suggests that the Johannine community represented by the Beloved Disciple coexisted peacefully with the apostolic community

represented by Peter. Although the Johannine community claims superiority in its close relationship with Christ, it does not go so far as to deny Peter's special role among the 'Twelve'. Considering this Johannine attitude towards the apostolic community, it is hard to claim that the Johannine community was sectarian in its stance towards apostolic Christianity.