


The true vine and the branches: Exploring the community ideation in John 15:1–16:3



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An exploration of the Johannine narrative reveals that John addresses the problem of the relational dimension of a believing community as one of its 'authorial intentions'. With its concomitant emphasis on communalism, the characterisation of community in John 15:1–16:3 makes it legitimate to propose that it is one of the narratives that address this problem. Therefore, the article aimed to contribute to the discussions on the Johannine community, focusing preponderantly on how the vine metaphor guides the reader to explore the community theme as the Johannine prescription for this sociocultural malady. The study employed a narratological analysis because it studies the poetics and meaning of the narrative, thereby helping to recreate the theological ideation of community in the narrative. The findings indicated that a believing community is defined by its relationship with Christ – the vine – and its concomitant incarnation of the divine community's communalistic values. It also established that the incarnation of these collectivistic values in the believing community is a product of a divine-human partnership: the members of the divine and believing communities perform various roles, corporately and idiosyncratically to fulfil this mission.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The portrayal of the believing community in John 15:1–16:3 redefines a community as people participating in the divine community and reflecting its values, replacing the anthropocentric and anthropological characterisation of community with a theocentric classification. Consequently, the research intersects with the disciplines of anthropology and sociology.

Keywords: vine metaphor; the true vine; divine community; believing the paraclete, the spirit of truth.

Introduction

In the New Testament, the church is presented as a group with the calling to be the community of God in anticipation of the kingdom (Grenz 2000:22–24). And one of the books that cast the community of God as a preponderant theme is John. The reason is that John wrote to a community plagued by internal and external conflicts (Kruse 2003:36; Van der Watt 2007:20–21). These relationship problems prompted John's emphasis on the community theme in the Johannine prologue – the compendium of the major themes in John – to legitimise its narratological development in the rest of the book (Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:1–8).

In John, one of the narratives that develop the community theme as a panacea to the 'relationship problem' is John 15:1–16:3. In this narrative, Jesus unveils what belonging to the community of God entails and what must characterise the believing community's horizontal (community members) and vertical (divine community) relationships.

Consequently, the article employs a narratological analysis to analyse the community theme in John 15:1–16:3. This is done by paying attention to the poetics and the meaning of the narrative (Osborne 2006:203). The article employs this method because it analyses and guides the reader to recreate John's theological concept of community (Marguerat & Bourquin 1999:8; Osborne 2006:202–203).

The analysis of community theme in John 15:1–16:3

The delimitation and structure

There is a general concurrence that John 15:1 marks the beginning of the narrative (Harris 2015:266; Keener 2003:988). However, there are various positions concerning where it ends. Scholars who focus only on the 'vine metaphor' provide the shortest demarcations (cf. Carson 1991:510–524;

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Segovia 1982:118; Van der Watt 2000:30–48). Van der Watt (2000:30–48), for example, delimits John 15:1–8 as a narrative, arguing that the use of semantically related words within this textual locality makes it an independent unit (Van der Watt 2000:31).

However, those who think of this as an ‘extended metaphor’ (Jn 15:1–17) agree on the delimitation but present divergent arguments, concentrating on the metaphor and its application. Consequently, in their opinion, the vine metaphor (Jn 15:1–8) and its application (Jn 15:9–17) are one inextricable narrative (Carson 1991:510–524; Whitacre 1999:371–380). Even though Segovia (1982:118) also affirms the literary unity of the narrative, he avers that John 15:1–17 is an originally dependent discourse. He argues further that from John 15:18, an entirely new focus predominates the narrative. Thus, he posits that the argument from content supports his position that John 15:1–17 forms a unit on its own (Segovia 1983:217).

Nonetheless, some scholars support the literary coherence of John 15:1–16:4a (Brodie 1993:475; Schnackenburg 1982:91). For these scholars, John 15:18–6:4a puts John 15:1–17 in a proper context by establishing that the significance of the teachings (on ‘abiding’ and ‘mutual love’) in the vine imagery (Jn 15:1–17) is meaningful in their connection to the world’s hatred towards Jesus and his disciples.

Others, such as Moloney (1987:36, 1998:55) and like-minded scholars, propose John 15–16:3 as a coherent unit. Moloney (1987:36, 1998a:55) maintains that John 15:21 and John 16:3 form an inclusion (Moloney 1987:35). Further, Moloney (1987:35) suggests a link between the identical Greek expressions used towards the end of the vine metaphor and at the end of the section on hatred (Jn 15:11 and Jn 16:1 [ταῦτα λέλαληκα ὑμῖν]). He clarifies that even though the same expression appears in John 16:4a, the strong adversative ἀλλὰ distinguishes John 16:4a from John 16:3, making John 15–16:3 an independent literary unit. Thus, the article follows this delimitation because it finds the argument of Moloney (1987:36) more convincing, cogent and pellucid.

Furthermore, a narratological analysis requires a structure that provides a theological framework for the discussion. The purpose of structuring narratives is to discern their units and grasp the message being communicated (Fuhr & Köstenberger 2016:158; Marguerat & Bourquin 1999:5). Consequently, the article presents a modified version of Moloney’s proposed structure because it accentuates the community theme, thereby aiding to grasp the theological import of Jesus’ expositions on how the believing community must replicate the divine community.

The vine: A symbol for the believing community (Jn 15:1–11)

Abiding in Jesus (Jn 15:1–5)

Jesus makes the last of his ἐγὼ εἶμι statements in John unconventionally – ‘it is the only one to which an additional

predicate is conjoined (“and my Father is the Vinedresser”)’ (Beasley-Murray 1987:271; cf. Carson 1991:513). Despite the idiosyncratic nature of this statement, the vine imagery connected to it – the symbol of the community (Keener 2003:993) – is not peculiar to this narrative. The difference is, nonetheless, that he refers to himself as the true Vine (ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή). Jesus evokes the Old Testament vine imagery (cf. Harris 2015:266; Keener 2003:988). The Old Testament is replete with narratives that depict the believing community – Israel – like a vine or vineyard (Harris 2015:266; Köstenberger 2004:449–450).

One of the goals of this metaphorical representation is that it serves as a reminder of Israel’s failure to produce good fruits (Harris 2015:266; Köstenberger 2004:449–450). The prologue from which Israel’s failure developed presents the Son as one rejected by many in Israel – the only nation distinguished from the world and identified as his own (Jn 1:10–11). John 5 also reveals a community where even the marginalised groups are unfruitful in incarnating their religious and cultural values in such a religious-cultural context – where the testimony of John, the Scriptures and the works of Jesus do not produce the intended fruits in many religious leaders because of their attitude (Jn 5:33–39). Consequently, a reminder of the failures of the Old Testament believing community and that of John makes possible the anticipation of something that reflects God’s intentions for choosing Israel as God’s vineyard (cf. Isa 5:1–4).

Against this background, John presents Jesus as the one to whom Israel pointed (Carson 1991:513; Köstenberger 2004:15, 448). As the true Vine, Jesus ‘replaces’ Israel as the one through whom the blessings of God flow (Burge 2010:54; Carson 1991:514; Köstenberger 2004:15, 448), thereby demystifying the idea of tying the community of faith to a territory (Burge 2010:54). He becomes the perfect representation of the definition of community by epitomising the territorial dimension through the demystification of the idea of the ‘holy land’ (Burge 2010:54; Köstenberger 2004:449) and the relational dimension through the character of relationships expressed using the vine metaphor (Brant 2011:217). Thus, the vine image denotes the new community of God constituted by believing gentiles and Jews (Keener 2003:993; Köstenberger 2004:449).

Jesus introduces the Father into the discourse as the vinedresser and describes his role negatively and positively (cf. Harris 2015:266–267). The Father removes unproductive branches but prunes the ones that bear fruits to fulfil the purpose of the vineyard – fruit-bearing (Harris 2015:266; Talbert 2005:220). The fruit-bearing branches produce fruits because the message of Jesus prunes them (Harris 2015:267; Moloney 1998a:60).

From John 15:4, the idea of being in union with the Vine, with its accompanying results, is elaborated further.¹ The

¹The first sentence of John 15:4 may be interpreted in one of three ways: conditional, comparison or mutual imperative (Barrett 1978:474; Carson 1991:516). Barrett

fruitfulness of the disciples depends on remaining in the relationship of 'mutual indwelling', where they abide in the Vine and vice versa (Brodie 1993:480; Köstenberger 2004:451–453). Abiding in the Vine includes but is not limited to 'continuing to believe' (Beasley-Murray 1987:272; Harris 2015:267). It connotes a vibrant and intimate spiritual fellowship (Harris 2015:267) – continuing to live in union with Jesus (Beasley-Murray 1987:272). Köstenberger (2004:453) adds that primarily, it is to remain in the love of Jesus by obeying his commandments. The focus is on nurturing one's spiritual communion with Christ, which is the ground for fruitfulness (Köstenberger 2004:454). The application of the metaphor is a reverberation of Jesus' relationship with his Father, intended to produce a perlocutionary effect – fruitfulness flows naturally from 'mutual abiding' just as Jesus' works outflow from his union and communion with the Father (Jn 15:5; Beasley-Murray 1987:273; Keener 2003:998; cf. Jn 5:19–23).

The effects of abiding and not abiding in Jesus (Jn 15:6–8)

Jesus contrasts the effects of abiding and not abiding in him. The people who do not dwell in him are like unproductive branches: they are thrown away, dried up, gathered and burned. Though not explicitly mentioned, the passive voice employed in describing the condition of the unfruitful branches (Jn 15:6b) points to the Father as the one who destroys (Moloney 1998a:62; Van der Watt 2000:46). Conversely, those who abide in Jesus by allowing his teachings to govern their lives and practices receive the assurance of answered prayers (Harris 2015:268; Köstenberger 2004:455). As God's word governs their lives, the assurance of answered prayers stems from the understanding that they pray according to God's will (Carson 1991:518).

Furthermore, by living and praying within the parameters of the will of God, they bring glory to God (the Vinedresser) for fulfilling God's purpose for the vine (Harris 2015:266; Talbert 2005:220; Van der Watt 2000:44), that is, being fruitful (Keener 2003:1003; Köstenberger 2004:45). Thus, they show that they are genuine disciples of Jesus (Köstenberger 2004:455; Ridderbos 1997:518)² because their mission culminates in bringing glory to the Father just as Jesus (cf. Moloney 1998a:62).

Abiding in the love of Jesus (Jn 15:9–11)

John establishes a connection between the eternal relationship and the implications for its appropriation by the community of God. The word *καθώς* implies that the disciples enjoy the same manner of love that the Father lavishes on the Son (Harris 2015:269). The Son patterns his love for them after what he sees the Father display towards him (Carson 1991:520; Köstenberger 2004:456). It is naturally

incessant (cf. Barrett 1978:475; Moloney 1998a:64). And in response, the Son keeps the commands of the Father out of love (Köstenberger 2004:456). Similarly, they are required to remain in Jesus' love by obeying his commands, not by compulsion, but as the expression of love (Carson 1991:520; Ridderbos 1997:519). As Barrett (1978:476) appositely notes: 'the parallel shows that love and obedience are mutually dependent'. Further, their obedience inures to their benefits – just as Jesus' obedience to the Father is the ground of his joy, those who obey him also partake of this joy (Carson 1991:506; Ridderbos 1997:519).

The commandment for the believing community (Jn 15:12–17)

The commandment to love as Jesus loved (Jn 15:12–14)

The command to abide in his love is clarified as mutual love (Carson 1991:521; Köstenberger 2004:457). Therefore, a chain of love is created where the divine and human community of faith are united (Carson 1991:521–522; Moloney 1998b:424). Flowing from and patterned after the divine community, they must replicate it by demonstrating what Jesus exemplified – sacrificial love (cf. Keener 2003:1004; Schnackenburg 1982:103). Just as he sacrificed his life for his 'friends', they are commanded to express reciprocal sacrificial love (Carson 1991:521–522). Their obedience to the command identifies them as his friends (Carson 1991:522; Harris 2015:269).

Jesus' love has established a new relationship (Jn 15:15–16)

The introduction of the theme of friendship establishes a new relationship (Beasley-Murray 1987:274; cf. Brant 2011:218–219). Throughout the gospel, the followers of Jesus are considered his disciples. The change of identity to friends, thus, reflects a more elevated status (Köstenberger 2004:459). They are called friends and not servants because of his love for them (Beasley-Murray 1987:274; Brodie 1993:483) and the privilege of the intimate knowledge he shares with them (Carson 1991:522–523; Harris 2015:270). Nevertheless, these are not two divergent reasons; his love is the substratum of the intimate knowledge he shares with his friends (cf. Beasley-Murray 1987:274; Brodie 1993:483). And because it flows from Jesus to his friends (disciples), the 'friendship' is not strictly reciprocal. Thus, the disciples never referred to Jesus as their friend (Carson 1991:522; Harris 2015:270).

Apart from the unrequited nature of the friendship, and contrary to their cultural practice of selecting one's teacher (Harris 2015:270; Köstenberger 2004:460), Jesus reminds his 'friends' that their selection is solely dependent on him (as the emphatic *ἐγὼ* affirms; Barrett 1978:478; Schnackenburg 1982:111). In this way, they become aware of the obligations associated with their elevated status (Schnackenburg 1982:111). Their responsibility is to go and bear fruit that will last (Carson 1991:523; Köstenberger 2004:460). Though

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 (1978:474) contends that the next verse (Jn 15:5) warrants mutual indwelling as the interpretation.

2.The new community demonstrates what the religious authorities lack – bringing honour to God (cf. Jn 5:44–47).

this has been interpreted predominantly as the missionary activity of soul-winning (Brodie 1993:484; Carson 1991:523), others argue that it includes the fruitfulness of Christian life (Ridderbos 1997:522). Finally, as they bear fruit, they have an assurance of answered prayers (cf. Harris 2015:270; Moloney 1998a:66).

The commandment to love (Jn 15:17)

The command in John 15:12 is repeated as a literary closure (Keener 2003:1004; Moloney 1998a:66). By closing the unit in this manner, John returns to the command in John 15:12 to reinforce the point that the love lavished on the faith community by Jesus must be the paradigm of the reciprocal love expected of them (Keener 2003:1004; Moloney 1998a:66–67).

Furthermore, the discourse shifts towards examining the association of the community with the external world subsequent to focusing on its association with divinity and its constituents (cf. Harris 2015:271).

The world's hatred for the believing community (Jn 15:18–16:3)

An explanation for the hatred of the world (Jn 15:18–21)

Jesus explains the hatred of the world with the intention of preempting any potential astonishment (Barrett 1978:480; Köstenberger 2004:463; Talbert 2005:224) and encouraging the community to remain steadfast in its mission to the world as witnesses (Schnackenburg 1982:114). Thus, he prepares them to embrace the fact of being bound to be opposed by the world (Ridderbos 1997:523) – individuals who are in opposition to God and the emerging messianic community (Harris 2015:272). The conditional clause serves to express a statement pertaining to a past experience (Schnackenburg 1982:114). Additionally, the opposition is futuristic and stems from the messianic community's union with Jesus (Harris 2015:272; Köstenberger 2004:464).

This union conditions a lifestyle that contradicts the prevailing societal norms and values (cf. Carson 1991:525; Ridderbos 1997:523). As they have been called out of the world to unite with Jesus, the members of the messianic community do not allow the world to condition their conduct (Carson 1991:525; Keener 2003:1019). Therefore, the world hates them (Keener 2003:1019; Ridderbos 1997:523). In numerous Mediterranean cities, the act of befriending an individual's adversary inherently results in the classification of oneself as an adversary as well (Keener 2003:1019). Likewise, establishing a friendship with Jesus entails assuming the adversaries he possesses and the animosity they harbour towards him. Consequently, Jesus reminds them that a servant is not greater than his lord (Jn 15:20; Keener 2003:1020).

The world's opposition can be attributed to the rejection of Jesus, the individual who chose and sent them

(Moloney 1998a:68). They rejected Jesus because they did not know the sender (cf. Jn 15:21). The statement elaborates on the theme of the world announced in the prologue (Jn 1:10–12), where the idea of the world not knowing Jesus originates (cf. Jn 1:10). The prologue further clarifies what rejecting or accepting the Logos means. Accepting Jesus is equated with believing in his name (cf. Jn 1:12). Consequently, those who received him or believed in his name are the believing community. Thus, it is legitimate to label the world as the unbelieving community (cf. Jn 1:12; 5:46–47; 15:21). Moreover, because the world does not know the sender, the disciples should expect to be opposed on account of Jesus' name (cf. Harris 2015:273; Ridderbos 1997:523).

The results of the world's hatred (Jn 15:22–25)

John discusses the effects of the world's rejection on the unbelieving community by evoking the theme of light in the prologue (cf. Jn 1:4–5; Jn 1:7–9). Building on the theme, he indicates that since Jesus (the Logos) came as the Light (Jn 1:7–10) – divine revelation – rejecting him is tantamount to rejecting God's revelation (Barrett 1978:481; Harris 2015:273). Furthermore, it is a rejection and hatred for the Father, the Sender (cf. Jn 15:23; Moloney 1998a:69; Talbert 2005:224). The rejection was prompted by unbelief (Carson 1991:526; Harris 2015:273). Therefore, it is unexcused because it makes them culpable for rejecting God's revelation (Harris 2015:273; Talbert 2005:224).

Jesus reinforces the argument regarding the inexcusability of their sin and the culpability of the unbelieving community by appealing to his works (Ridderbos 1997:525; cf. Jn 5:36). Ridderbos (1997:525) affirms that the two 'both ... and' constructions serve to effectively convey, within a single impactful sentence, the culpability associated with observing the works of Jesus while simultaneously harbouring disdain towards him and his father. Jesus provided tangible evidence to the world through the works he performed (Jn 15:24; Keener 2003:1021; Moloney 1998a:69–70; Ridderbos 1997:525). But in response, they rather hated him and his Father (Harris 2015:273).

The shift from the all-embracing term (the world to they) helps to identify 'the Jews', who fail to live up to their Scriptures, as the focus (cf. Moloney 1998a:72). This failure contributes to their inability to grasp what the Son reveals in words and works (cf. Jn 5:45–47). Thus, their hatred is unfounded (Keener 2003:1021); it fulfils what is in their law (Ridderbos 1997:525; Talbert 2005:224). Consequently, the law convicts them (Carson 1991:527; Moloney 1998a:70) and heightens their inexcusable culpability (cf. Carson 1991:527; Harris 2015:273).

Witnessing in times of hatred (Jn 15:26–16:3)

According to Ridderbos (1997:526–527), the testimony of the Paraclete refers to the support that the Spirit will provide to the disciples in the dispute between the church and the world regarding the veracity of Jesus' self-disclosure through his

words and actions as the one who was sent. Furthermore, in the face of opposition, the companion demonstrates active engagement in their mission (Brodie 1993:490), alleviating their apprehensions and bestowing upon them a sense of tranquilly (Moloney 1998a:71). The aforementioned phenomenon entails a singular process in which the disciples engage in testifying about Jesus to the world that holds opposing views, facilitated by the empowering influence of the Paraclete (Keener 2003:1022; Moloney 1998a:71).

Jesus gives further elucidations on what he has already revealed to his 'friends' to prevent them from falling into apostasy amid impending persecutions (Harris 2015:74; Ridderbos 1997:528). He states clearly that future persecution is both a certainty (Morris 1995:615) and an escalation of the present persecution (Ridderbos 1997:529). The rejection of Jesus will result in individuals being expelled from synagogues and subjected to capital punishment (Moloney 1998a:72–73; Talbert 2005:225). However, the irony is that the perpetrators will attach pious motives to these acts and consider them expressions of service to God (Carson 1991:531; Talbert 2005:226). But, repeating the thought of John 15:21 (Ridderbos 1997:529), Jesus reveals that the root of their conduct is the nonrecognition of God (Moloney 1998a:73).

The perlocutionary effect on the community theme

The analysis indicates that Jesus makes an utterance with an imperative illocutionary force: it prescribes various calls to action as the prerequisite for incarnating God's community concept, focusing on the relational and territorial dimensions of community and the partnership required for the incarnation of these attributes by the believing community. Consequently, what follows discusses these elements.

The divine portrait of a community

The believing community's relationship with the divine community

The term community is generally employed with relational (the quality of relationships) or territorial connotation, encompassing physical territory, location and geographical continuity (Gusfield 1975:xv–xvi). In this narrative, however, John redefines community as people who 'participate in the social life' of the divine community by reflecting its values, a development of what the prologue prognosticates (cf. Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:4; Grenz 2000:112). This replaces the anthropocentric and anthropological characterisation of community with a theocentric classification, making their participation in the community of God the substratum of the quality relationship they enjoy, thereby making God the determinant of the qualitative character of the relationship.

Thus, the narrative characterises the believing community as a group of people who belong to the community of God and have a relationship with Christ – the vine. The theological import of the relationship is evident in the imagery employed by Jesus to describe his relationship with the disciples: true

vine (God's original purpose for the believing community) and branches. It is worth noting that unlike any vine and its branches where the relationship is an 'attachment', the branches (disciples) are 'in' the vine and vice versa – a relationship of mutual indwelling (Harris 2015:267; Köstenberger 2004:451–453).

This relationship reveals what their identity prescribes as members of the believing community. Belonging to the community of God requires a certain type of relationship with the divine (and human communities). One of these is the command to abide in the vine (Jn 15:4). The focus is to nurture their spiritual communion with Christ (Köstenberger 2004:454) by 'continuing to believe' and maintaining a vivacious and intimate spiritual communion with Jesus (cf. Harris 2015:267). This requires that the community allows Jesus' word to abide in them (Jn 15:7), that is, to allow his teachings to govern their lives and practices (Carson 1991:518; Harris 2015:268).

Abiding in the vine and the word are critical to their mission for these putative reasons: (1) They bring glory to God – the vinedresser – for fulfilling his purpose for the vine when they live within the confines of his will (Harris 2015:266; Talbert 2005:220; Van der Watt 2000:44); (2) They demonstrate that they are genuine disciples of Jesus (Harris 2015:268; Köstenberger 2004:455); (3) The pruning of Jesus' message is a *sine qua non* of fruitfulness (Harris 2015:267; Keener 2003:997; Moloney 1998a:60) and (4) Fruitfulness flows naturally from 'mutual abiding' (Jn 15:5; Keener 2003:998). Thus, without Jesus, the believing community can do nothing (Jn 15:4–5).

The community members' relationship with each other

Given that the call to be fruitful features prominently in Jesus' illocutionary act and its meaning includes the believing community's *modus vivendi*, the command casts the community's relationship with the divine community as the theological foundation for their interpersonal relationships, thereby establishing a link between the community's tenets (orthodoxy) and orthopraxy (cf. Keener 2003:997; Talbert 2005:220). Thus, the invitation to participate in the community of God enjoins the believing community to take actions defined by the word 'fruitful': Christian character (mission as *living*) and soul-winning (mission as *going*) (Carson 1991:523; Ridderbos 1997:522).

Being members of God's community must reflect in their way of living, considering their membership as a call to replicate the divine paradigm, seeing themselves as people who belong to the community and being collectivistic. This is implied in the vine imagery – the symbol of true community and the characterisation of a divine community, constituted by Jesus and the Father³ (cf. Jn 1:1–2, 18; Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:2). It is also affirmed by the group-oriented

³The other narratives present the Spirit as a member of this community and an active participant of its mission (Jn 15:26–27).

character of the commands – *μείνατε* (Jn 15:4, 9) and *ἀγαπάτε* (Jn 15:12, 17) – and some elements of the illocutionary act. For instance, the repetitive use of the ‘you plural’ (ὕμεις, ὑμῖν, ὑμῶν and ὑμᾶς) and the instructions Jesus gives (φέρητε [you bear, Jn 15:8], τηρήσητε [you keep, Jn 15:10] ὑπάγητε [you go] and αἰτήσητε [you ask, Jn 15:16]) which also bear the mark of community, indicate that he expects the disciples to act communally in performing these actions.

Additionally, the invitation calls for a universalised community. Jesus’ self-identification as the true vine implies that he perfectly epitomises God’s purpose for humanity – a universal community of God – because he demystifies the idea of the ‘holy land’, uniting believing gentiles and Jews as one family of God (cf. Burge 2010:54; Köstenberger 2004:449). This is a development of the universalisation of God’s family prognosticated in the prologue (Jn 1:12–13; Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:4). Thus, the believing community’s participation in the divine community directs it to reflect God’s approved territorial dimension of community: a universal community of God.

Furthermore, Jesus prescribes love as one of the collectivistic values that must characterise the *modus vivendi* of this community (Jn 15:12, 17; cf. Jn 13:34–35). The significance of love to communalism in the believing community can be gleaned from the repetition, its place as the only new commandment in John and its importance to their communal identity and mission (Jn 13:34–35; Jn 15:9, 12, 17): it unites the divine and believing community (Carson 1991:521–522; Moloney 1998b:424).

Though the kind of love expected from the community is designated as τῆ ἀγάπῃ τῆ ἐμῆ (my love), Jesus indicates that it originates from the Father and is analogous to the Father’s love (Jn 15:9). The implication is that he replicated the character of love he experienced with the Father to his disciples (Jn 15:12; cf. Jn 13:34–35). This love is characterised as eternal (Jn 17:24) and mutual (Jn 15:9; cf. Jn 14:31). Building on this, Jesus adds another trait that must characterise it: sacrificial love (Jn 15:13; Brodie 1993:483; Keener 2003:1004; Ridderbos 1997:520). Thus, to ‘continue in (my) love’ necessitates the incarnation of love that has these attributes embedded in it.

The believing community’s responsibility to the unbelieving community

Apart from the mission as *living* (abiding in Jesus and his love, and allowing his word to abide in them), sharing in the community of God charges believers to become a community of witnesses. Whereas mission as *living* reveals their communal responsibility to the community of God, mission as *going* describes their collective responsibility to the world. The Johannine prologue characterises believers as a community of witnesses, thereby prognosticating that the narrative casts witnessing as a means of expanding the community of God and establishing an inextricable connection between witnessing and genuine discipleship (cf. Jn 1:14; Carson

1991:159; Gharbin & Van Eck 2022:7). Similarly, the vine metaphor reiterates these, linking genuine discipleship (Jn 15:8) and soul-winning (Jn 15:16, 27). Probably, this connection stems from the Johannine depiction of witnesses: people who identify Jesus for others based on their experience with Christ – what they have seen and heard (Brant 2011:31; cf. Keener 2003:392; Jn 15:26–27). Thus, by portraying them as people who participate in the divine community (Jn 15:1–2, 27) and have heard all that he learned from his Father (Jn 15:15), Jesus is reminding the believers to perform their role as witnesses to expand the community of God. As the foundational principle, Christian expansion materialises through an unremitting practice of witnessing whereby new disciples testify about Jesus to others (Carson 1991:159).

The incarnation of the communal values of the divine community: A divine-human partnership

The narratological analysis reveals that the incarnation of the communalistic values of the divine community rests on a divine–human partnership. This is evident in the various participatory roles performed corporately and idiosyncratically to facilitate the believing community’s mission – replicating the divine community. Thus, this section discusses these roles.

The divine community

The Father is depicted, for instance, as the vinedresser of the Vine (Jn 15:1). As the vinedresser, John assigns ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ roles to the Father. The negative aspect describes how he deals with unproductive branches. In the first statement, the pronoun points to the Father as the one who removes them (Jn 15:2). However, John employs the passive voice in the detailed description of the unfruitful branches’ fate, pointing to the Father as the one who destroys them (Jn 15:6; Moloney 1998a:62; Van der Watt 2000:46).

Conversely, the Father prunes the fruitful branches to fulfil the purpose of the vineyard – fruit-bearing (Jn 15:1; Harris 2015:266). Scholars interpret fruitfulness in this context as the ‘missionary’ activity of leading others to Christ (Köstenberger 2004:453) and Christian character (Brodie 1993:480; Morris 1995:595). Given the narrative context, Moloney (1998b:420–421) includes love in the list.

These interpretations suggest that the divine work expands the family and help to incarnate God’s purpose for the human community. Whereas the missionary activities populate the community because they aim at leading others to Christ, demonstrating Christian character and love are natural constituent elements of the community of God (cf. Jn 15:9, 12; Köstenberger 2004:453; Schnackenburg 1982:100). The implication is that the community performs these activities through the pruning work of the Father.

Furthermore, Jesus’ role is embedded in his characterisation as the true Vine – the true community symbol (Jn 15:1;

cf. Keener 2003:993). Thus, one of the goals of this symbolic depiction is to remind the reader of the failure of Israel to reflect its intended purpose as a covenant community. This reminder makes possible the anticipation of something that reflects the divine intentions for choosing Israel as the vineyard of God (cf. Is 5:1–4; Beasley-Murray 1987:272; Schnackenburg 1982:106). Avowing to be the true Vine, Jesus 'replaces' Israel as the one through whom the blessings of God flow and demystifies the idea of attaching the believing community to a specific topographical location (cf. Burge 2010:54; Van der Watt 2000:52). He embodies God's ideal design of a community, epitomising the territorial dimension through the demystification of the idea of the holy land (Burge 2010:54; Whitacre 1999:372) and the relational aspect through the communalistic values he promulgates in the vine metaphor (Brant 2011:217; cf. Cohen 1985:12). Consequently, the imagery denotes the universalised community of God comprising believing gentiles and Jews (Keener 2003:993; Ridderbos 1997:516). The ramification is that Jesus is the true or genuine *community* in which the believers dwell – the true Vine.

The union with Christ, the true Vine, introduces the Son as the initiator of the fruitfulness of the believing community (Jn 15:2, 15:4–5). The narrative explains fruitfulness as resulting from two interconnected theological concepts: mutual abiding and the pruning of the Father. Jesus employs the vine metaphor to juxtapose the fruitfulness of the believing community to a vine and its branches (Jn 15:4–5). The juxtaposition aims to demonstrate the impossibility of pursuing fruitfulness outside the community's relationship with Christ (Jn 15:4–5; cf. Harris 2015:267; Keener 2003:998). Thus, the narrative positions the Son as the cause or source of fruitfulness: the fruit-bearing branches produce fruits because his message prunes them (Harris 2015:267; Moloney 1998a:60).

Furthermore, the second reason for fruitfulness justifies the above: divine pruning. Jesus attributes fruitfulness to the pruning activity of the Father (Jn 15:1–2). Nevertheless, the narrative indicates that the Father is not the initiator of fruitfulness; he only develops his Son's work (cf. Jn 15:2). His responsibility is to prune fruitful branches to be exceedingly fruitful (Jn 15:2; Harris 2015:266; Talbert 2005:220). Therefore, the outcome could also be attributed to the participatory role of the Son, who initiates fruitfulness.

In addition, the Spirit also plays a pertinent role in this mission. Jesus explicates the Spirit's functions in the community, revealing that the work of the Spirit concentrates on the mission of the Son and the disciples. He characterises the Spirit as the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17, 15:26, 16:13) because he communicates the truth; he bears witness to vindicate Jesus, the truth (Jn 15:26, 14:6). He also glorifies Jesus, revealing him to the disciples after his departure (Jn 16:14; cf. Harris 2015:278).

Moreover, Jesus associates the role of the Spirit with the mission of the believers through two designations: the

Paraclete (Jn 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7) and the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17, 15:26, 16:13). He characterises the Spirit as the Paraclete to portray him as their Comforter and Helper (Jn 14:16–19, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7). The title 'Comforter' accurately describes the work of a person coming after the deprivation of a friend. The Spirit is another Comforter who succeeds Jesus as the friend of the disciples (Jn 15:13–15, 14:16). The implication is that Jesus is the first Comforter, thus legitimising one of the interpretations of the word orphan: a friendless state (cf. Harris 2015:261). Furthermore, it portrays the Spirit as the Comforter for a community in need of divine help. The narrative context defines the type of assistance that necessitates the presence of the Comforter. The thought of Jesus' departure occasioned fear in the believing community. Therefore, Jesus reminds them repeatedly not to let their hearts be troubled or succumb to fear (Jn 14:1, 27, 16:20–22). He also addressed the issue of forthcoming persecutions, intensifying the already heart-throbbing condition (Jn 15:20–21, 16:2–3). Amid these conditions, the community has a mission to fulfil that requires divine assistance. Thus, the Companion fills the gap by being actively involved in their mission (Brodie 1993:490), taking away their fears and granting them peace (Moloney 1998a:71). The Paraclete's assistance produces a single process where the disciples witness about Jesus to the opposing world through the strengthening of the Comforter (Keener 2003:1022; Moloney 1998a:71; Ridderbos 1997:527).

Further, the Paraclete performs a teaching role in the believing community. It is one of the reasons Jesus identifies the Paraclete as the Spirit of Truth (cf. Jn 15:26, 16:13). In this capacity, the Paraclete teaches the disciples all things, bringing to their remembrance all that Jesus taught (Jn 14:26). This means that the Spirit will guide the believing community in all truth and show them things to come (cf. Jn 16:13). The former denotes two successive events in which the Spirit expounds the teachings of Jesus for the disciples to grasp the communicative intent (cf. Carson 1991:505; Harris 2015:263; Keener 2003:977; Ridderbos 1997:511). The latter reinforces what Jesus said earlier, revealing the mode through which the Spirit teaches the messianic community. In this regard, the Spirit will guide the community to understand the truth already unveiled through the incarnation without revealing new things (cf. Carson 1991:539; Harris 2015:278; Ridderbos 1997:536).

The Spirit also functions as a witness. As the Spirit of truth, his testimony vindicates Jesus as the truth (Jn 14:6, 15:26, 16:13; cf. Keener 2003:1022; Ridderbos 1997:526). This witness is the assistance the disciples receive from the Spirit in the controversy between the church and the world about the truth concerning Jesus' self-revelation in word and works as the sent one (Ridderbos 1997:526–527).

The believing community

As partners with God in incarnating the ideal community concept, the disciples are responsible for continuing God's

mission of anthropomorphising the divine purpose. To manifest this, they must act in cooperation with God. Thus, Jesus reveals what their assignment entails, focusing on their relationship with God, themselves and their role as partners to God.

Their role begins with maintaining their participation in the community of God. Given that they are part of the community at this stage, the vine metaphor addresses them as people who have already entered it. Consequently, the narrative accentuates the perpetuation of their union with Christ. In this regard, Jesus commands them to abide in the Vine (Jn 15:4). The import of this imperative includes 'continuing to believe' and remaining in union with Jesus (Beasley-Murray 1987:272; Harris 2015:267) or nurturing their spiritual communion with Christ (Köstenberger 2004:454).

Remaining in the Vine is the divine requirement for the believing community's response to Christ's indwelling; it establishes a relationship of reciprocal indwelling, necessary to implement the divine mission (cf. Jn 15:4; Köstenberger 2004:451; Ridderbos 1997:517). Akin to the Vine-branches relationship, they can do nothing without Christ (Jn 15:4–5). The narrative context suggests that fruitfulness is in view (Harris 2015:267). Their fruitfulness depends on abiding in the Vine and vice versa – reciprocal indwelling (Brodie 1993:480; Harris 2015:267; Köstenberger 2004:451–453). Fruitfulness in this context hinges on two areas of Christian mission that the community must epitomise: *going* (Christian outreaches [Köstenberger 2004:453; Talbert 2005:220]) and *living* (cultivating Christian character [Morris 1995:595], such as love (Moloney 1998b:420–21; Talbert 2005:220)). Given that these attributes outflow from this relationship, it is impossible to fulfil their mission without it. Jesus restates this idea, applying the metaphor to his relationship with the Father to produce a perlocutionary effect – fruitfulness flows naturally from 'mutual abiding' just as Jesus' works outflow from his union and communion with the Father (Jn 15:5; Beasley-Murray 1987:273; Keener 2003:998; Moloney 1998a:61).

The second imperative Jesus ties to fruitfulness – the goal of discipleship – is to abide in his love (cf. Jn 15:9–10; Carson 1991:510). Jesus juxtaposes his relationship with the Father to the disciples to clarify the import of the divine imperative (cf. Jn 15:9–10). In the eternal relationship, love and commands are inseparable because they are mutually dependent (Barrett 1978:476). The Father's love flows from the Son's obedience, the Son's obedience from love (Jn 15:10; cf. Barrett 1978:476). As the Father loves the obedient Son, he reciprocates it by keeping the commandments of the Father out of love (Köstenberger 2004:456; cf. Harris 2015:269). As Harris (2015:269) puts it, obedience is evidence of love and reinforces love. Similarly, Jesus requires the believing community to remain in his love by adhering to his commands out of love, not by compulsion (Ridderbos 1997:519).

Furthermore, the love command extends to the community members' responsibility to each other – the quality of relationships expected within the believing community (cf. Jn 13:34–35). Jesus requires that the disciples incarnate this theological value within the believing community (cf. Jn 13:34–35, 15:12). Thus, members must demonstrate reciprocal love, thereby uniting the divine and the human community (Carson 1991:521; Köstenberger 2004:457; Ridderbos 1997:520). Finally, being obedient to this command identifies them as disciples of Jesus (Carson 1991:522; Harris 2015:269).

Conclusion

The analyses indicate that God wants a universalised community that replicates the divine concept of a community and its values on earth. Nevertheless, this is impossible without the involvement of all partners – the divine and the believing communities. Whereas its incarnation requires some responsibilities from believers, they can perform these roles only in partnership with the divine community if they become obedient to his commands – abide in Jesus, his love and let his word abide in them.

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