

# **Is There Still a Way from Humans to God? A Reconstructive Interpretation of John 14:6**

**Samuel Benjamin Hakh**

## **Abstract**

This article is a reconstructive interpretation of John 14:6, to elevate the theological meaning behind the text. The text is discussed in connection with the material in the Gospel of John as a whole. The aim is to offer a new perspective on theological understanding of Jesus' words, focusing on the premise that human alienation from God is caused by the gap that separates human beings from God. To bridge the gap, Jesus becomes the way that connects human beings and God. In elevating the theological meaning, I use an exegetical analysis. The article concludes with some suggestions for how the text can promote inclusivity and openness of the church towards the world at large especially in Indonesia.

Key Words: alienation, inclusivity, abyss, open door, the way, sin, humankind

## **Introduction**

The interpretation of John 14:6 continues to cause problems among readers of the Gospel of John. The problem is that most scholars of John only discuss John 14:6 textually and do not make the text a 'window' to see the reason behind the text. The question is, why did Jesus say to His disciples, 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one reaches the Father except with Me'? The answer to this question is illustrated throughout the rest of the Gospel of John. Therefore, to understand the reasons behind Jesus' words, John 14:6 needs to be interpreted in relation to all the materials in the

Gospel. With this approach, it will become clear how God's work in Christ is able to end human alienation from God.

Therefore, in this article I offer a reconstructive approach to the text of John 14:6 by making it a 'window' to see the theological reasoning behind the text. My argument is that John 14:6 is a statement Jesus made to show the gap that alienates people from God. To bridge the gap, Jesus offered Himself as the way, truth and life so that people could come to God. This argument will unfold through the following points. First, I begin with the views of experts who discuss John 14:6. Second, I reveal how human alienation from God results from sin. Third, I explore the theological meaning of Jesus' words about 'the way, that provide for all who are alienated from God. Fourth, I propose that the phrase 'except with me' functions as a 'door' that is opened for everyone. Finally, I end this article with a summary of how the church can practice inclusivity and openness in order to reduce human alienation from God as caused by sin.

### **Scholarly interpretation of John 14:6**

To understand how Jesus' words in John 14:6 have been interpreted, I begin with the views of scholars of John who discuss the words of Jesus. The scholars whose views I will discuss are, in this order: Raymond E. Brown, Leon Morris, Craig S. Keener, Andreas J. Köstenberger, Paul N. Anderson, and Miroslav Volf.

Raymond E. Brown gives a fairly extensive interpretation of John 14:6. He studies the first sentence, 'I am the way, the truth and the life', and reveals that the word 'way' is a common word in the Bible used by communities around Israel. In the law, 'the truth' is a way of life. Therefore, in the Psalms, 'way' and 'living' are placed in parallel (Ps. 86:11). Further, Brown said that 'the way' meant, 'here is the truth'. This way is sometimes eschatological because it has led from death to life (Prov. 15:24). A way of life and a way of mortality

are disputed by the prophet Jeremiah, who said, 'This is what the Lord says, verily I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death' (Jer. 21:8).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the way of truth according to the Old Testament is seen in the laws of God that have a moral aspect.

Brown revealed that a similar view was shared by the community at Qumran. They saw themselves as people who lived in 'God's way' in the wilderness. Someone who entered the community was seen as people who had chosen that way (1 QS IX:17-18), while those who turned away were seen as people who deviated from that way. For the Qumran community, the way was the Mosaic law as interpreted by their Supreme Teacher, and the regulations of the community were seen as the rule of life (1 QS IX:21).

In contrast to the view of the Old Testament and the Qumran movement, Brown continues, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord. The way is human life. That is why John the Baptist preached repentance as preparation for the coming of the Lord (Matt. 3:3). Christians adopted this idea by speaking of 'the way of the Lord' (Acts. 9:2; 19:9-23; 22:4; 24:14-22) and see themselves as 'the Lord's way'. Thus, it can be said that John 14:6 reflects a chain that has its origin in the Old Testament, was modified by the Qumran community, and then adopted by the Christian community as a designation for themselves. Such adopting is something that was common among early Christian communities.<sup>2</sup> Brown asserts that the words of Jesus, 'I am the way' do not primarily portray Jesus as a moral mentor or as a leader for his disciples. John's intention here is to show Jesus as the way in the sense of a 'door' (John 10:9).

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, 'The Gospel according to John XIII-XXI, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary', in *Anchor Bible* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970), pp. 628-29.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, 'The Gospel according to John', p. 629.

Brown comes to the conclusion that Jesus, according to the author of John, refers to himself as 'truth' (*alētheia*) for he is the truth that God has revealed. Because no one can see the Father except Jesus (John 1:18), by calling himself the 'truth' he is describing his mission to the world as giving witness to the truth (John 18:37).<sup>3</sup> He is the way in the sense that he is the truth; and he is also the way in the sense that he is alive. This expression refers to his mission to humans. 'I have come that they might have life and have it in all its fullness' (John 10:10). The Father has given life to the Son (John 10:26) and the Son gives life to those who believe in him (John 10:28).

In interpreting John 14:6, Leon Morris argues that 'the way' that Jesus spoke in verse six is a repeat of what He said in verses four and five. Jesus not only showed that way, but He is 'the way' itself. While 'the truth' has the meaning of salvation namely from the Gospel, likewise 'the life' has its contents in the Gospel, which is Jesus. Jesus not only is 'the life' but He is also the source of life for believers. Morris further states that the 'way' talks about the relationship between God and sinners, and 'truth' refers to the work of Christ as a mainstay for all people, whereas 'the life' emphasizes that the only decent life is in fellowship with Jesus because He is life itself. Morris came to the conclusion that through his words, Jesus revealed the uniqueness and worthiness of his work for sinners.<sup>4</sup>

Craig S. Keener in his book, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, interprets John 14:6, and argues that when Jesus said those words, he pointed to 'the way' that he would take, namely, the way of the cross. Those who want to follow

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, 'The Gospel according to John', p. 630.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 572.

him must follow the same path. It was the way that leads them to the Father.<sup>5</sup>

Similar to Brown, Keener also outlines his background for understanding the way that Jesus spoke of by tracing it in Old Testament materials. He analyzes the Jewish tradition and says that the way is not only ethical but Christological. This Christological picture sharpens an exclusive christocentric claim by drawing a boundary around Jesus and declaring that Jesus is the only way to the Father.<sup>6</sup> Keener asserts that Jesus' words, 'I am the way', is meant in the sense that he is 'the door'. People who do not enter through that door are thieves. This last phrase, Keener continues, refers to Jewish religious leaders. Therefore, Keener rejects the assumption that Jesus addressed the words to pagans, because both the listeners of John and the listeners of Jesus at that time were Jewish, namely the politicians and religious leaders of the Jews. If the Qumran community considered themselves and their lifestyle as a 'way', early Christianity saw Jesus himself as the way.<sup>7</sup>

Andreas J. Köstenberger, in his book *Encountering John*, argues that when Jesus spoke his words, he was stating that loyalty to himself was the way. Because Jesus is the way, he is also the superior truth and life. Köstenberger further argues that Jesus' claim to be 'the way' implies that no one comes to the Father except with Him. According to Köstenberger, in the present era with its spirit of pluralism, the claim is considered exclusive and even intolerant because pluralism does not accept claims of absolute truth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2003), p. 939.

<sup>6</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary*, pp. 940-41.

<sup>7</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary*, p. 942.

<sup>8</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John, The Gospel in Historical Literary and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1999), pp. 141, 42.

Paul N. Anderson, in his discussion of John 14:6, asks the question, if Jesus is the only way to the Father, how could the light of salvation of Christ be made available to the whole world? John 1:9 says, 'The real light which enlightens every person was coming into the world'. Indeed, on the one hand, *Ioudaioi* are described as enemies of Jesus (5:16, 18) and the typology of the 'world' refers to those who do not believe (1:10). But on the other hand *Ioudaioi* are described as Jewish leaders (3:1; 18:14) and some of the *Ioudaioi* believed in Jesus (7:15; 8:31; 11:36-45; 12:19). Jesus himself declares that 'salvation comes from the Jews' (4:22), and he wants no one to be left out so that all people will be saved (John 3:17; 5:34; 6:39; 10:9; 12:47; 17:12; 18:9).<sup>9</sup>

Miroslav Volf provides an interpretation similar to Anderson. In interpreting the apparent exclusivism of the Gospel of John, he contends that a crucial point for the religious person is not only the ways of salvation but also how to understand his or her identity in relation to others. Negative expressions toward Jews refer to those who persecute Jesus and not to the Jewish people as a whole or to Judaism. John's author has a positive attitude toward Jewish religious institutions. But the author of John thinks that Jewish law was flawed for Christians. The same attitude is shown in the purification of the temple by Jesus. Although Jesus foretold that in time true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, John's author interprets Jesus' purification of the temple of God not as a denial of it, because Jesus described the temple as 'the house of my Father' (John 2:16-17).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Paul N. Anderson, 'On Guessing Points and Naming Stars: Epistemological Origins of John's Christological Tensions', in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 316-17.

<sup>10</sup> Miroslav Volf, 'Johannine Dualism and Contemporary Pluralism', in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. by Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 36, 37.

Reflecting on the interpretations of these experts, my position is that Brown in his study emphasizes the background of the use of Jesus' words, originating in the Old Testament, modified by the Qumran movement, and finally adopted by Christians and applied to themselves as followers of 'the Lord's way'. Brown has provided a very valuable view of the background of Jesus' words in John. 14: 6, but he did not analyze human alienation as the reason behind Jesus' words in John 14:6, where Jesus calls himself the way that bridges the gap that exists between human beings and God. Anderson, on the one hand, shows evidence from the texts regarding the attitude of the Jews who are shown as the enemies of Jesus, and on the other hand, shows evidence from the texts regarding the pluralistic and accommodating aspects of the Johannine community, because this community both introduces religious institutions and also they affirm their faith in Jesus. Like Brown, Anderson does not analyze human alienation as a theological understanding that lies behind Jesus' words that he is the way that bridges the gap that alienates people from God. The same view is offered by Volf who says that the negative attitudes toward Jews only refer to those who killed Jesus or to the persecuted Johannine community, but not to the Jewish religion because the author of John still has a positive attitude towards Judaism. Volf ignores the question, why did Jesus call himself the way, the truth and the life? The experts who have carried out deeper and more interesting analyses of Jesus' words are Leon Morris<sup>11</sup> and Keener.<sup>12</sup> These two experts assert that the 'way' talks about the relationship between two entities, namely God and sinful humans (Morris). An interesting statement from Keener is that the 'way' that Jesus intended in conversation with His disciples was the suffering on the cross. But neither of these scholars explicitly elaborates on human alienation from God.

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 572.

<sup>12</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary*, pp. 939-41.

## **Human alienation from God because of Sin**

Human alienation from God is confirmed by Jesus himself when he states, 'No one comes to the Father...' (14:6b). In these words of Jesus, the emphasis lies on the phrase 'no one'. It means that neither Jesus' disciples who were with him every day nor the Jews, nor any human beings, could come to the Father. The question that arises is, why could no one come to the Father? The answer is because there is a separation between humans and God. This separation is caused by a gap that separates everyone from God. Motyer, indeed, interprets 'No one comes to the Father except through me,' as an example of a text pertaining to anti-Judaism, which reads as an expression of the 'unimaginable' and 'scary' in Judaism because the phrase collides with God's freedom and implies that God has cut off the divine covenant with the Jews.<sup>13</sup> But I disagree with Motyer because of Jesus' words, 'No one comes to the Father' not only include the Jews but include all people. I agree with Craig R. Koester's view that human alienation from God is a prominent theme in the Gospel of John.<sup>14</sup> He begins his description in the prologue and says that he is in the world he made, but the world does not know him (1:10) He came to his own people but his people did not accept him (1:11). Human acquaintance with and rejection of Jesus is caused by the gap that separates human beings from God. Koester further argues that the separation between humans and God not only includes Jewish leaders who want to capture and kill Jesus but also includes his

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Motyer, 'Bridging the Gap: How Might the Fourth Gospel Help Us Cope with the Legacy of Christianity's Exclusive Claim over against Judaism?' in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> Craig R. Koester, 'Jesus the Way, the Cross, and the World according to the Gospel of John', Luther Seminary Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary, Faculty Publication 132 (2001), p. 361;  
[http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty\\_articles/132](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/132).



disciples.<sup>15</sup> Koester further states that the phrase, 'No one comes to the Father', was not only conveyed to the disciples but also to Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, in the phrase, 'No one can see the kingdom of God' (3:3a). Then, after Nicodemus asked about the possibility of someone being born again, Jesus answered, 'No one can enter the kingdom of God' (3:5). Similar words, Koester continues, were conveyed to the people when Jesus fed them, 'No one can come to me' (6:44).<sup>16</sup>

Koester's view of the impossibility of humans coming to God because of the gap that alienates all people from God is fitting. My argument is that the gulf cannot be crossed by anyone, not by Jesus' enemies and not by Jewish religious leaders. Even the disciples of Jesus who followed him daily as the group closest to him were people who were estranged from God. That impossibility is seen in what Jesus said when Peter asked him, 'Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you'. Responding to Peter's question, Jesus said, 'Before the cock crows you will have denied me three times' (13:37-38). What Jesus said was proven when in front of the court of Annas, Peter denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed (John 18:17, 26, 27). The denial proves that, even though he promised to risk his life for Jesus (18:27), he actually denied Jesus. The denial of Peter positions him within the group that is hostile and wants to kill Jesus. He did not have a strong commitment to his promise to Jesus.

Other estranged disciples are Thomas and Philip. Thomas did not understand the place where Jesus went. Therefore he said to Jesus, 'Lord, we do not know where you have gone. How do we know the way to it?' (14:5). Thomas's question illustrates his lack of understanding about where Jesus went, just like the incomprehension of those who were hostile to Jesus (cf. 7:35, 36; 8:22). Philip asked Jesus, 'Lord show the Father to us, that is enough for us' (14:8). The request proved Philip's

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<sup>15</sup> Koester, 'Jesus the Way, the Cross, and the World', p. 362.

<sup>16</sup> Koester, 'Jesus the Way, the Cross, and the World', p. 363.

estrangement, similar to Jesus' opponents who wanted to find out who his Father was (8:19). Jesus' answer to Philip proved that as long as he followed Jesus, he, like Jesus' enemies, did not know him.<sup>17</sup> In John 13:33, Jesus said to His disciples, 'O my children, just for an instant, I am with you. You will seek me, and as I have said to the Jews: Where I go you cannot come, nor do I say to you now' (13:33). These words of Jesus prove that Jesus' disciples also had the same position as the Jewish leaders who were hostile to him. The meaning is that the students, as the group closest to Jesus, cannot boast because they also have the same status as those who are hostile and intend to kill Him. They could not have gone to the place where Jesus went because there was a gap between them and God.

The abyss meant here is sin. The abyss can cause people to die in their sins. As a result, Jesus confirmed three times to the crowd when he taught in the temple. 'I will go ..., but you will die in your sins' (once in 8:21 and twice in 8:24) because the person who sins is the slave of sin (8:36). Indeed, Jesus crossed the abyss and came into the world to wash away sins (1:29) so that people would be set free from the bondage of sin (8:36).<sup>18</sup> However, because people refuse to believe in Jesus, they will die in their sins (8:24). This affirmation of Jesus illustrates the condition of humans who live apart from God because of their sins.<sup>19</sup> The world as meant by John refers to the 'public' or people who live in darkness. They were ruled by demonic powers and alienated from God so they opposed Jesus.<sup>20</sup> This alienated world is the object of Jesus' salvation.

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<sup>17</sup> Koester, 'Jesus the Way, the Cross, and the World', p. 362.

<sup>18</sup> In the Old Testament, sin is a burden borne by everyone or an offense that must be forgiven (Lev. 24:15; 1 Sam. 15:25; Mic. 7:18) in order to avoid divine punishment (see, Joseph Lam, *Pattern of Sin in the Hebrew Bible, Metaphor, Culture and the Making of a Religious Concept* (Oxford: University Press, 2016), pp. 16-21.

<sup>19</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John A Commentary*, p. 743.

<sup>20</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John A Commentary*, p. 329.

## **The way, truth and life for humans who are alienated from God**

In order to bridge the gap that alienates people from God, Jesus reveals himself as 'the way, the truth and the life'. In analyzing the words 'the truth' and 'the life', Keener indicates that for John, truth was the center of his theology because the focus was on revelation, but according to John 'the truth' was truth in Christ. 'The life' is a term that is appropriate for behavior but also appropriate to apply to Jesus himself as the source of life.<sup>21</sup> Even more clearly, Koester argues that before Jesus called himself the way, he spoke of his going to the Father's house to provide a place for the disciples. Jesus' departure is mentioned repeatedly in John 13 and 14. According to Koester, Jesus' departure was of two levels: the destination and the route. The goal was to return to the Father who sent him (5:23-24; 6:38-39; 13:1, 3). The route was through denial, crucifixion, death and resurrection and it was indeed through that route that Jesus returned to the Father.<sup>22</sup> Regarding 'the truth', Koester argues that Jesus is the truth as stated in John 1:14. That truth was witnessed to by Jesus before Pilate's court (18:37, 38); after that encounter Jesus walked the way to the cross to reveal God's truth. Whereas 'the life', continues Koester, means to live in relationship with God. The intended life not only has a physical dimension, but also has to do with 'eternal life'. Thus, Koester argues, 'the life' is life in faith that goes beyond death and resurrection to eternal life.<sup>23</sup>

A similar study was carried out by Otniel L. Veres. He argues that the three nouns 'path, truth and life' express three things about Jesus. Therefore, Veres rejects Lindars's view that the

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<sup>21</sup> Keener, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary*, pp. 385, 943.

<sup>22</sup> Koester, 'Jesus the Way, the Cross, and the World', pp. 364, 365. See also, C. R. Koester, 'Jesus as the Way in the Fourth Gospel' Luther Seminary Digital Commons at Luther Seminary, Faculty Publications (2005), pp. 126-33.

<sup>23</sup> Koester, 'Jesus the Way, the Cross, and the World', p. 368.

words 'the truth' and 'the life' are explanations of the word 'the way'. According to Veres there is not enough evidence and there is no specific reason that truth and life are exclusively attributes of the road. Veres goes on to say that although the word 'the way' first appears in the verse, the truth and the life are the main themes of John's Gospel. Veres reasons that the three words describing Jesus' uniqueness also identifies him as God.<sup>24</sup> But Veres did not go deeper into the theological meaning of the three words as Koester did.

Nuzagl also interprets the verse along the same lines. He criticizes Schnackenburg who argues that the emphasis mainly lies in the words 'I am the way'. Quoting Brown, Nuzagl argues that Jesus does not present himself as a moral guide or leader for his disciples but he is the way, he is the truth, and he is also the life itself. According to Nuzagl, that phrase has to do with his mission, that Jesus came so that humans might have life and have it in abundance (10:10).<sup>25</sup> But like Veres, Nuzagl also does not discuss in depth the theological meaning of the three words spoken by Jesus.

Following the pattern of Keener, Koester, Veres and Nuzagl, Robert W. Thomson argues, Jesus' words 'I am the way' refer to himself. But unlike Keener, Koester, Veres and Nuzagl, Thomson adds that through the faith Jesus taught, he guided the disciples to the place where he went and illuminated the thinking of everyone who came to him because he was the light that had come to earth. Truth is a gift given to all who believe in Him. While in life it is certain that even those who

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<sup>24</sup> Otniel L. Veres, 'A Study of the 'I Am' Phrases in John's Gospel', *Perichoresis*, 6.1 (2008), p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> Kuupine Timothy Nuzagl, 'Jesus' 'I am saying in the Gospel of John, A Key to understanding the Christ-event', A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts in Theology (Nairobi: 2014), pp. 55-57.

believe in him will suffer torture and death, he will raise them up and give them eternal life in the Father's house.<sup>26</sup>

Based on discussion of the above views, I agree with Keener, Koester, Veres and Nuzagl that the three words refer to Jesus and describe his divine identity. But I do not fully agree with Veres, Nuzagl and Thomson. In my opinion, Keener and Koester's views have a more objective and in-depth theological analysis. My argument is that the 'way' that Jesus meant not only referred to himself but also to the route he took to get to the Father. My reason is, when Jesus in a farewell conversation with his disciples repeatedly said 'I'm leaving',<sup>27</sup> he refers to the 'way' that he would travel to the cross. The path that Jesus took was not understood by Peter, Thomas or Philip when Jesus talked with them. In the face of that ignorance, Jesus told Peter that 'to the place where I am going, you cannot follow me now,' but someday 'you will follow me' (13:36). This last sentence of Jesus is a prophecy for Peter and the other disciples, predicting that in the future they will understand the way that Jesus went and they will follow him. As for 'the truth', the author of John borrowed from the Jewish tradition the idea that the truth not only refers to a person's moral integrity to do right actions (3:21) but also refers to God and Jesus because God is in Jesus and Jesus is in God (14:10, 11). Because Jesus and the Father are one (10:30), so Jesus is the truth itself. 'Life' is a central point in the Gospel of John. The term 'the life' occurs forty-seven times in the Gospel of John. Those words are very important to the author of the Gospel of John. In fact, several times Jesus refers to himself as 'I am'.<sup>28</sup> Those sayings reinforce the belief

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<sup>26</sup> Robert W. Thomson, *Nonnus of Nisibis, Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John Translation of the Armenian Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), p. 313.

<sup>27</sup> Those verses include John 13:33, 36; 14:2, 3, 4, 13, 28; 16:5, 28.

<sup>28</sup> 'I am the bread of life' (6:35, 48, 51), 'I am the light of the world' (8:12); 'I am the door' (10:7, 9); 'I am the good shepherd' (10:11, 14), 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25); 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (14:6); 'I am the true vine' (15:1, 5).

that he is the source of life and he gives life to all people, not only physical life in the present but also eternal life.<sup>29</sup>

**‘Except with Me’ is ‘a door’ that is open for all people**

The words ‘except with me’ (14:6c) form an expression that offers hope as a ‘door’ that is open for all people to renounce their alienation and come to the Father. The question is, how can the phrase ‘except with me’ be like a door? I argue that the words ‘I am’ in this last sentence cannot be separated from the words ‘I am’ in the initial sentence because the speaker is the same. Therefore, the expression ‘I am’ needs to be explored so that the phrase ‘except with me’ is clearly understood.<sup>30</sup>

In his thesis, David Mark Ball argues that the saying ‘I am’ is a fulfillment of expectations in the Old Testament and in Judaism. Ball notes that the words ‘I am’ are divided into two groups, namely the words ‘I am’ with a predicate and without a predicate. Speeches without a predicate refer primarily to the identity of Jesus while words that use a predicate relate to the role in which He manifests to humankind.<sup>31</sup>

The same observation is made by Veres in his article entitled, ‘A Study of the “I Am” Phrases in John's Gospel’. He argues that the words ‘I am’ in John's Gospel make a statement about the personality or identity and role of Jesus so that hearers believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, and that by faith they may live in his name (20:31). Similar to Ball, Veres classifies the words ‘I am’ in two groups, the first being

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<sup>29</sup> Jeannine K. Brown, ‘Creation's Renewal in the Gospel of John’ *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010), pp. 277, 278; see also; Keener, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary*, p. 328.

<sup>30</sup> The words *ego eimi* occur 18 times in the Gospel of John (6:35, 48; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9; 10:14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5; 4:26; 18:5, 6; 6:20; 8:24, 28; 8:58).

<sup>31</sup> David Mark Ball, ‘‘I am’ in Context: The Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications of “I am” in John’s Gospel’. Thesis submitted by David Mark Ball for Doctor of Philosophy degree in the University of Sheffield, Department of Biblical Studies (September 1992), pp. 273, 274.

the words 'I am' that are completed with certain images, for example, 'I am the bread of life', and the second are the words 'I am' without a predicate ('I am he'). Veres remarks how at the beginning of this gospel, the author of John spoke of the pre-existence of the Word and the whole gospel was rooted in this truth. Furthermore, Veres refers to Exodus 3:14 as the background of Jesus' 'I am' saying in order to show that through this statement, Jesus identifies himself with God.<sup>32</sup>

Like Ball and Veres, Nuzagl in his thesis entitled, 'Jesus' "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John; A key to understanding the Christ-event' analyzes the background of the 'I am' expression from within the Old and New Testaments as well as from outside sources, along with the historical expression of 'I am'. He interprets seven occurrences of 'I am' sayings by Jesus that have predicates and argues that according to the author of John, the expression of 'I am' refers to Jesus as divine. He is not only a teacher of divine revelation; he is the revelation itself. He is a meeting place between God and humans.<sup>33</sup>

The latest research on Jesus' utterance, 'I am', is conducted by Okpako in his thesis entitled, 'The "I am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John and Questions of History: Two Case Studies (John 6 and 8)'. He examines the historicity of the words 'I am' in the Gospel of John and explores the views of scholars of John who discuss the words of Jesus. Next he conducts an exegetical investigation of the words 'I am' in John 6 and John 8. He comes to the conclusion that the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John reflect historically the words that were spoken in Palestine in the first century. He stresses that Jesus' words 'I am' cannot be explained outside

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<sup>32</sup> Veres, 'A Study of the 'I Am' Phrases in John's Gospel', p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Kuupine Timothy Nuzagl, 'Jesus' 'I am' saying in the Gospel of John: A Key to understanding the Christ-event', A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts in Theology (Nairobi: 2014), pp. 12-69.

of their historical setting.<sup>34</sup> The words are claims about the divinity of Jesus.<sup>35</sup>

Based on studies conducted on the words 'I am' as described above, I agree with the views of Ball, Veres, Nuzagl and Okpako in that they refer to Jesus' identity as divine. His divine identity enabled Jesus to erase human sin through his crucifixion, death and resurrection. His identity is revealed by the author of John at the beginning of the gospel with the explanation that Jesus is the Word that existed before everything was (1:1). In other words, the saying 'I am' refers to the divinity of Jesus as the only Son of the Father who was sent by God to become flesh in order that anyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (1:14; 3:16).

Statements about his divinity are spread throughout the Gospel of John in the words of Jesus, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (14:10, 11); 'I and the Father are one' (10:30); 'Therefore whoever sees me has seen the Father' (14:9); and 'Before Abraham actually became, I was' (8:58). These statements describe his divine identity. His divinity allows him to cross the abyss that alienates people from God, and thus provides a way and opens a door for all people. Therefore, Jesus can say, 'I am the door. Whoever comes in through me will be saved' (10:9). Through that door everyone can end their alienation and come to the Father.

## **Conclusion**

Behind the words of Jesus, there is a gap that can not be crossed by anyone. That chasm separates humans from God. As a result, everyone, both those who rejected Jesus and His

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<sup>34</sup> George Oghenetega Okpako, 'The 'I am' sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John and Questions of History: Two Case Studies (John 6 and 8)', A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for degree of Masters of Arts by Research in Biblical Studies Specialism (University of Birmingham: 2017), pp. 101, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Okpako, 'The 'I am' sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John and Questions of History, p. 77.



followers, have been alienated from God. That gap is sin. Jesus, according to John, asserted that sin had separated all people from God. That separation leads people to death. Jesus' words were a warning to the church in all places, and therefore are also meant equally for the churches in Indonesia, especially those who consider themselves better than others. The church should not consider itself to be free from sin, while others must be punished for their sins, because before God, sin alienates all people from God. But sin, which separates humans from God, has been removed by Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus offers Himself as a way from humans to God. Thus, everyone, both those who are followers of Jesus and those who have not followers, all have the opportunity to come to God. Because the door has been opened and the way has been provided by God from humans to God. This is a theological perspective which I offer to the churches to be the basis of doing theology so that the church becomes an inclusive and the open church for all people.<sup>36</sup> What I mean by an open and inclusive church is a church that opens up and develops a situation where everyone feels valued and can participate fully in serving others according to their background and identity, without distinctions of ethnicity, race, religion, and denomination. An open church is a church that reflects the attitude of Jesus, who opens the door and provides a way for everyone to come to God. I believe that Jesus' words about the 'way' in John. 14: 6 are not exclusive. This theological meaning needs to be internalized and lived by the churches in Indonesia so that they are willing to abandon an exclusive view when interpreting Jesus' words, because this exclusive interpretation is not only theologically contrary to Jesus' attitude, but also can lead to clashes in pluralistic Indonesian society, both within the church and between various denominations in Indonesia.

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<sup>36</sup> Joas Adiprasetya, "The Good yet Missing Innkeeper and the Possibility of Open Ecclesiology" *Ecclesiology* 14 (2018) 185-202

Hypocritically, there are certain churches that see themselves as saved churches, then label other churches as churches that live without salvation. Such labeling exposes an attitude of exclusivity that needs to be removed because it contrasts with Jesus' open attitude to all people. Through His death and resurrection, He offers a deep insight into the relationship of the church with all people, and how they are to respond together to God's offer through the Son Jesus Christ to enter through the door that Jesus has opened. The door is opened and the way has been provided for all who welcome the offer so that they can come to God. The task of the church is to proclaim that the door has been opened and the way has been provided for all people so that they will come to the Father.