

VOICES from the
MISSIONAL MOVEMENT



VOLUME TWO

GOSPEL, KINGDOM, AND LEADERSHIP



NORTH AMERICAN BAPTIST CONFERENCE

GOSPEL, KINGDOM, AND LEADERSHIP

VOICES FROM THE MISSIONAL MOVEMENT
-VOLUME 2-

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INTRODUCTION – MISSIONAL VOICES

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This e-book is a compilation of articles originally published between 2008 and 2015 in *The Missional Voice*, the journal of Forge Missional Training Network. The articles were written by a variety of authors with a wide variety of academic and practical experience as a way to encourage pastors, church leaders, and thinking Christians everywhere to reflect on the challenges facing the church in North America. Our hope in gathering this collection is that we will once again challenge your thinking and encourage you as you seek to follow the missional God.

THE WHOLE GOSPEL¹

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Let me be very clear.

The Gospel is about the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and its power to save those who believe. This death and resurrection of Christ pays the debt for our sin and provides us with the only way to a relationship with God. This is true, and not simply because I have experienced and know it in my life.

As I write this, the third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism in Cape Town is in the forefront of my mind. The Lausanne movement began in 1974 with the call of people like Billy Graham and John Stott to followers of Jesus all over the world to come together and to encourage one another towards the goal of completing the Great Commission. Who can argue with that? One of the reasons that this call came was to wrestle with a growing issue among believers from different parts of the world. Some were stating that to properly evangelize, we must start with action and deal with social issues and justice. Others stood firmly on the idea that the evangelism must start with proclamation.

I am thrilled to report that this issue of social justice versus proclamation is no longer the greatest issue that the Congress wrestled with. There were many indicators that most Christians see the great value of both in the process of evangelism. The term given to this both/and approach is *integral mission*. God is on mission and He calls His people to both proclaim and practice what it means for Jesus to free us from slavery.

There is another emerging issue that will bring the need for us to work hard, both from a theological perspective and for the sake of unity. At this Congress, one theme was, "The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World." How can one argue with that? However, there seemed to be conflicting messages about what the whole Gospel really is.

Some took the position that the Gospel is best articulated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Paul says here that he has passed onto the Corinthian church that which is of first importance. He carries on to say that this is about the death and resurrection of Jesus and about His appearances to the disciples and then to a multitude. How can we not celebrate the liberation that we have through the cross of Jesus and the power that God displayed at

¹ This article was written after the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 2010, where Cam was selected as a delegate from Canada. -Editor

the cross to redeem us as individuals and draw us into a relationship with Himself? “I once was lost, but now I am found!”

The problem is not that we emphasize this, but that we truncate the good news of Jesus to be only this.

There were other positions offered at Lausanne that did not contradict the weight of 1 Corinthians 15, but included a broader understanding of the good news. These broader understandings of the Gospel followed two paths:

The first path was about what happened at the cross. Not only were we as individuals redeemed, but in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus all things were redeemed—the individual, the people of God, social structures, even all of creation. God demonstrated His power to redeem all things through His Son and through the victory won at Calvary.

The second path is summed up in the opening words of another speaker at Lausanne. “We all know that the Gospel began before the incarnation of Jesus Christ.” Here is where things got the stickiest. One group hears these words and is afraid of losing the importance of the cross and going down liberal rabbit trails. We must hear the cry to guard against that. But, the point of such a statement is to remind us that since the beginning of creation—and some might argue before—God has been on a mission to create, call, and redeem a people to be His very own. It is in His nature of existing in community that He loves and therefore creates a people to be His own. It has always been so; even in the Old Testament there is much evidence of God desiring to call all people to Himself and to bring freedom to all in relationship with Him and with one another. His covenant with Abraham was about God creating a nation blessed to be a blessing to all the nations and demonstrating the love of God. This story continues throughout the Old Testament.

In the Gospels, we not only read about the death and resurrection of Jesus, but about the good news of His life. Jesus spoke often of the good news that the Kingdom of God was present, that it was now a reality, that people could live in the power of God and not in their own power to live life to the fullest. This is a part of the good news.

I returned from Lausanne convinced of two things:

First, the conversation around the nature of the Gospel may only be just beginning. I have started to realize the implications of the different positions and the potential this issue has to distract us.

Second, I returned with a deep conviction that I must not only choose where I stand, but seek to work with everything I have to maintain the unity that is ours in Jesus (Ephesians 4:3). I will seek to put forth the positives of a more missional position while at the same time speaking well of those whose position differs from my own. For we are one in Christ Jesus.

That is also good news.

HOW ARE WE TO RELATE TO THE KINGDOM?

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Why did Jesus come? The usual responses I hear include the following:

- Because God so loved the world.
- So that our sins could be forgiven and those who believe could have eternal life.
- To conquer sin, evil, and death and reconcile us to God.

But I wonder about how these responses relate to what Jesus says about why He came. Not just what we say Jesus said, but what Jesus says about Himself, His mission, and His purpose. After all, if we're going to proclaim the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus Christ, then we want to proclaim what Jesus proclaimed. Right?

The Gospel of Mark begins with a reference to Jesus's baptism and His temptation in the desert before giving this statement:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14-15 NRSV).

Matthew and Luke say the same thing:

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17).

But he said to them, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43).

For the first followers, the announcement of the Kingdom was representative of all Jesus taught; it was the central and guiding theme that He proclaimed. Biblical scholars agree that Jesus's message and ministry all serve and are derived from, directed toward, and understood in the context of this Kingdom proclamation. The message of the nearness of God's reign shapes both His mission and the mission invitation He gives to His followers:

As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 10:7).

Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (Luke 9:1-2).

But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60).

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:8–9).

And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

Jesus’s message seems clear: the Kingdom of God has come near. So the next question is, what does it mean that “the Kingdom of God has come near?”

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20–21).

Jesus among us is the Kingdom of God come near. The Kingdom of God is Jesus: risen, reigning, and with us. I wonder, if the Kingdom is Jesus in our midst, then how is it that the church has assumed so many different ways of understanding the Kingdom of God?

We’ve assumed, for example, that we can—and ought—to build the Kingdom. Christian leaders often declare their intention to build the Kingdom. We often assume that the church has been sent to build, develop, and construct the Kingdom. But have we? This belief and the resulting strategies seemed to fit well in a Christendom world where the church had power, position, and authority. Aligned with the politically and economically dominant in society and culture, we were confident in our capacity to reason, certain of social progress and our ability to make the world a better place. We sought to manage life and create structures and programs. In such a vision, we imagined that the Kingdom could be constructed like a kind of social project in which we are the architects and builders.

An alternative, yet similar, mistake is to describe our relationship to the Kingdom as one of extension. In such a view, we assume that the church is sent to extend the reign of God. We imagine our ministries spreading, growing, or expanding the Kingdom. It is as if, to put it crassly, the Kingdom is our sales project and we are the CEOs, sales reps, promoters, distributors, and marketers. And at times the church has done a pretty good job of “selling” it. At other times, we haven’t.

But Jesus does not use these approaches as He proclaims God’s Kingdom. Nor do we see much in the way of building, developing, constructing, or extending God’s Kingdom in the New Testament. The Bible talks about the Kingdom of God using words that suggest a different posture and therefore a different understanding of our relationship to the Kingdom.

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it (Luke 18:17).

Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24–25)

And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29–30).

The Gospel of Jesus invites us to receive and enter the reign of God. It is a gift. “It is [our] Father’s good pleasure to give [us] the Kingdom (Luke 12:32).

It is not something we can build or extend or possess. It is, rather, a gift we receive now and inherit in all its fullness when Jesus comes again.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him (James 2:5)?

Scripture suggests that the Kingdom is a realm, an arena that we enter, that we inhabit and live in. In fact, Jesus uses the preposition “in”—as in “in the Kingdom”—frequently (e.g. Matthew 5:19). Paul tells us we have been transferred “into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13); and Peter explains, “For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you” (2 Peter 1:11).

So we receive and enter the Kingdom that Jesus declares has come near. The Kingdom is not something we achieve, build, or enlarge. We don’t own it; we don’t endorse it; it is given in and through Jesus! It’s God’s gift—the gift of Jesus—both here now and yet to come, a present fact and a future promise.

So how can the church today enter, receive, and participate in the Kingdom with Jesus—and thereby proclaim it? Towards the end of the Luke 10 passage in which the seventy are sent (vs. 1–12), we get the command to “cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:9).

In this passage, Christ’s followers are sent to dwell with people and commanded to eat, heal, and proclaim. The three commands are linked as signs or demonstrations of the presence of the promised Kingdom. The fact that demonstration and proclamation come only after we have dwelled among or remained with those to whom Jesus sends us points to a posture that is so different from the assumptions of the modern church to build or extend. The disciples are to eat, to rest, to remain, to dwell among while also proclaiming

and healing. These verses provide us with assurance that God is in the midst with the power to heal, restore, renew and, redeem. By sending His followers into the edgy places of their neighbourhoods, Jesus shows us that the King Himself has arrived. It is not up to us! It is not our Kingdom. God's redemptive power and love are breaking in to "make all things new" (Revelation 21:5) and to welcome all who will receive and enter in.

Thus, Luke 10 draws us into the healing, shalom, good news work of God, not in a moralistic or dogmatic way but as an invitation to discover and partner with the Spirit right where we live, just as we are. As we seek to discern what it means to "remain," we are free to live among without worrying when and how we will share the Gospel or get our neighbours to church. We are called to bear witness to God's Kingdom in our truly human lives—words and deeds. Relationships take time, and so does discerning what God is up to.

How? Perhaps it begins by daily asking how can we move more fully into the realm of God's reign and welcome and receive its character and activity ourselves. How do we participate in what God is already up to in our neighbourhoods without trying to control, manage, persuade, or sell the Kingdom to others? What does it look like for us to journey together in our ordinary, everyday lives with our neighbours such that others will see and know that the Kingdom is near? And how will we see and know? For Luke, the Kingdom is present when "God's power to heal and save has flowed into history."² Thus, when these signs of healing and works of shalom appear in our homes and neighbourhoods—when the community eats and celebrates together, when families are reconciled, parks are cleaned, and the marginalized are cared for—we declare, "Look, the Kingdom of God has come near!"

And for John, the first sign of the Kingdom is good wine and plenty of it (John 2)! At the wedding in Cana, Jesus turns the water in "six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons" into really good wine (v. 6). And the steward says, what kind of father is this—who serves the best stuff when the guests couldn't care less? Jesus does away with the ceremonial water, the distinction between clean and unclean, and welcomes all to receive and enter in. We and our neighbours are invited, just as we are, to join the celebration. The Kingdom of God has come near! I suspect such an invitation might be of interest to our neighbours. I suspect they might be intrigued by a God who loves them enough to turn their "water" into "wine."

² Michael Goheen, "A Critical Examination of David Bosch's Missional Reading of Luke," in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, eds. Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, and Anthony C. Thiselton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 229–264.

WITNESSING THE KINGDOM

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“Yet know this, the Kingdom of God has come near . . .”

When Jesus sends out the seventy in Luke 10, He reminds thirty-five nervous pairs that their basic message is the same regardless of how they are received. As they dwell among those to whom Jesus sends them, eating and healing the sick, they are to announce that the Kingdom of God is near. If or when rejected, they are to wipe the dust from their feet and proclaim the nearness of God’s Kingdom.

Jesus’s instruction, no doubt, serves to give His disciples confidence. The success or failure of God’s Kingdom doesn’t hinge on their persuasive skills or the right response of the town. But Jesus’s instructions cannot be reduced to a rhetorical confidence builder. Underneath Jesus’s instructions lay a declaration of objective reality: the Kingdom of God is near. The disciples go in confidence, like “sheep into the midst of wolves,” because the certainty of God’s reign goes before and behind them in the person of Jesus.

We are in desperate need of this kind of confidence. Not the confidence that comes from evangelistic or social justice activism, but the bald, utter confidence of the disciples that God’s reign is objectively near in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. Such confidence, I believe, will help us to cut between the social justice versus evangelism debates that polarize and fossilize the church. Such confidence will teach us to announce the kingship of Jesus while also learning to participate in God’s good work in our neighborhoods.

Such confidence helps us to risk acts of daily discernment – to understand, proclaim, and join in with the coming reign of God.

This work of discernment, rooted in our faith, trust, confidence in the lordship of Jesus Christ, ought to center our identity as leaders and theologians of the church. But how? How might we invite our congregations into discernment regarding the Kingdom of God in our midst? How might we cultivate a sense of expectation in our congregations about the reign of God so that we learn to announce that the Kingdom has come near in concrete ways and places? I suggest three different movements for such work.

Attend

We must learn to pay attention to God in God’s world, in all its complexity and ambiguity. God’s mission is never a one-size-fits-all kind of reality. It cannot be reduced to strategy or

mere methodology. We will develop confidence in God's power and presence when we learn to pay attention to the work of the Spirit in our midst. Attention involves work, and it is often driven by questions. If we as leaders learn to ask consistent questions of our context and neighborhood, we will learn to develop a greater awareness of God's presence and leading.

Where did you encounter welcomeness or hospitality from a stranger? What gifts were you given today? What surprises did you encounter? What did you hear from God? Where did you experience loneliness or encounter pain or disappointment? Where did you see injustice? What do you wish you heard from God today?

Risk

Attention to God in God's world invites us to risk making a statement regarding God's presence and leading. We often miss the chance to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near, not only because we are unaware of God's presence and leading, but also because we tend to be risk averse. Make no mistake: theological discernment invites us to take a leap of faith. Our attentiveness to God and God's world invites us to venture a statement regarding God's presence, leading, and action in our midst. I say this is a risk because we may find out later that we were wrong or it may seem to come out of the blue. But our discernment remains amorphous without such risk. We first learn to do this within the church community as we risk making God statements with one another and as we test these statements against Scripture, tradition, and the experience of the faithful.

Risky statements might begin here: "I think God said . . .;" "I think God invites us to . . .;" "I think God is doing . . .;" "I think God is calling us to . . .;" "I think God will surprise us with . . ."

Act

Too much of congregational discernment ends with statements made inside the church without action or speech that takes place outside the church. The skills we develop through attending and risking compel us to risk experimentation and action in our neighborhood. If we believe God is calling us to do something, then we must eventually test that statement in collective action. Such action, however, must never be seen as the final word, but simply an invitation for experimentation and innovation.

Students of Scripture over the years have recognized Luke 10 as a moment where Jesus teaches His disciples something about mission and discipleship. They go in vulnerability, and they learn to bear witness to the reign of God in word and deed. We, too, are sent; may we learn, too, what it means to also bear witness in word and deed.

YOU MIGHT BE A KINGDOM-MISSION CHURCH IF . . .

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In his well-known Southern twang and humor, Jeff Foxworthy often turns crowds into raucous laughter when he offers his ideas on how to detect Southern hicks with his opening line, “You might be a redneck if . . .,” as in, “You might be a redneck if you think the stock market has a fence around it.” I borrow his line, not for humor, but for the serious endeavor of detecting a kingdom-mission church: “You might be a kingdom-mission church if . . .” I offer below ten traits of a kingdom-mission church.

This set of ten themes puts into practice what is written in my book *Kingdom Conspiracy*. In the book I make a case for what the Bible means when it uses the word *kingdom*. Here’s the chief conclusion I offer: every time the term *kingdom* is used in the Old Testament (apart from possibly once), it means a nation or a people governed by a king. Never, and on this there is not a debate, does it mean “salvation” or “working for justice among the Gentiles.” In other words, in the references that most concern us, the term *kingdom* refers to Israel as a nation. When Jesus said the Kingdom had drawn near, He meant that kingdom vision of the Old Testament’s narrative. So I offered there the briefest definition of kingdom that every Christian can use to get a solid grip on the meaning of the term: a kingdom is a people governed by a king.

Because it is a people (and not reducible to an ethic, social or private, nor reducible to the unleashing of God’s redemptive power), the Bible reader is driven to ask for the New Testament: Who are the kingdom people now? The answer is “church,” with church understood not in super-secessionist ways (the church replacing, and God abandoning, Israel), but in expansionist, progressivist ways: the church expands Israel by opening its doors to Gentiles.

In *Kingdom Conspiracy*, I offer five elements to the meaning of kingdom in the Bible, which are: a kingdom (1) has a king who (2) rules both by way of redemption and governing, and this king rules (3) over a people [Israel, church] through the revelation of (4) the law [Torah, teachings of Jesus and the apostles], and this king rules (5) in a land. All five of these elements are needed to speak biblically about kingdom, and all five are needed to be a kingdom-mission church. Far too many have reduced the kingdom to one element. Some reduce it to the redemptive rule of God in a person’s life, in some healing miracle, or even in the influentialist theory (Kuyper, Niebuhr) of participation in culture and state. Others reduce it to law/ethics and then go public with deeds of compassion or social justice. This is well and good for both of the important themes in these reductions, but to reduce kingdom to these excludes the central core theme: the people. Which is to say, many erase church from kingdom theology and see kingdom work as what is done in the wider world –

for the common good. It is good to care about the common good, but the common good is not what kingdom means in the Bible. Kingdom is a people, and that people is Israel expanded, the church.

When we equate kingdom with the public sector, we have become Constantinian or Erastian or some other kind of compromise of church and state. If we see that kingdom is a people and that people is Israel expanded into the church that lives under King Jesus, then immediately kingdom people are not servants of the state; they fight imperialism and colonialism, and they become a cruciform counter-cultural community. They become agents of Jesus in the world, for the world and also at times against the world.

Now then, what does kingdom mission look like? I suggest you might be a kingdom-mission people/church if the following ten statements are true of your church, and I realize each of these begs for development, so I offer each statement with brief support and clarification.

1. The cruciform character of King Jesus shapes every major dimension of your church.

The character of a king shapes the character of that king's kingdom, and the character of our King is cruciform. I appeal here to Philippians 2:6–11 – Jesus is the one who became a slave unto death to make us kings and queens in the kingdom. We are to live as did our King: as servants for the sake of others.

2. The church perceives itself as a people redeemed and rescued from the world (sin, self, systemic evil) by King Jesus.

Our King redeems, and the kingdom people are the redeemed people of that King. One can study Matthew 8 and 9 or call to mind Mark 10:45 or 14:24, or even the unleashing of redemptive power through the Spirit in Matthew 12:28. But there is a strong redemption theme in the kingdom mission of Jesus: God is redeeming people from their sin, from their diseases, from narcissistic selfishness, and from systemic evils.

3. The church knows at the deepest level that it is governed by King Jesus and not by culture or state.

Here kingdom-mission churches draw a deep line: they are not subservient to the state even if they are good citizens when they should be. Instead, they answer to King Jesus and follow His teachings and cruciform vision and that alone sets their agenda for how to live in this world. Kingdom-mission churches will at times need to challenge the empire.

4. The church challenges the “lordless lords” of our cultures and our countries.

Postmodernity's greatest insight, or least one of its enduring legacies, is that it taught us all that each of us is complicit in the ways of the world and state and culture. But kingdom-mission churches develop a hermeneutic of discernment that detects the lordless lords that must be cast down so that King Jesus can rule. I think here of 2 Corinthians 10:4 and Colossians 2:6–7, but also the narrative overthrow of evil in Revelation 17–22.

5. The church embodies, or seeks to embody, the kingdom realities about which Jesus and the Bible speak.

Perhaps the most disappointing element of kingdom chatter today is the complicity of thinking kingdom is the same as the public realm. Since kingdom is a people, and since that people is Israel expanded into the redeemed church, kingdom teachings are to be embodied by kingdom people as a visible witness to the world concerning the ways of the kingdom.

6. The church is known above all for loving one another, for loving God, and for loving their neighbors well.

Both Jesus and the apostles made loving God and loving others the charter of Christian living, so kingdom-mission churches are known for being an ocean of love for God and for one another and for all their neighbors. Love, I contend, needs more careful definition than it often has in our culture: it is a rugged commitment of presence, advocacy, and direction toward Christlikeness. God loves by making a rugged commitment (covenant) to be with us, to be for us, and to transform us, and so our love is to be God-like and Christ-like.

7. The church establishes justice, peace, and reconciliation among its own people first and then that kind of justice, peace, and reconciliation spill over naturally into the community.

Again, kingdom-mission churches aren't just committed to justice in the public sector but seek to embody it especially among one another in the local church fellowship. What we learn there will spill over for the common good as the only way kingdom-mission people know how to live.

8. The church cannot avoid – because of God's grace and power at work – being people of "good works" in the public sector.

What many people today call "kingdom" is actually called "good works" in the Bible – both by Jesus in Matthew 5:13–16 and most especially by Peter in 1 Peter 2:11–12 (elsewhere in 1 Peter, too). Good works is what kingdom-mission people do in the public sector, and these good works demonstrate the resurrection power of Christ at work in kingdom people.

9. The church becomes "sacred space" and "kingdom space" in your community.

No one can read the Bible and not be struck by the land promise. What does that mean for us today? While many criticize the implicit Gnosticism of Christians in their view of heaven or the spiritual life, I see implicit Gnosticism in the way we talk about church. It is for many only a "spiritual" reality, but as Christ became incarnate so also the Body of Christ is incarnate: it is a living, breathing, physical reality. A local fellowship is to be sacred space and kingdom space by taking up real space in this world for the kingdom to breathe out redemption.

10. The church learns that its spiritual disciplines foster this kind of community rather than just personal spiritual formation.

Now a challenge: What spiritual disciplines do we need to focus on in order to form and foster being a kingdom-mission church?

REHEARSING THE GOSPEL AS STORY

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A few years ago, my wife and I took our two girls to Walt Disney World in Orlando. I assumed I would hate the crass consumerism and cliché Americana. I tried really hard to hate, but I found myself fascinated instead.

If Disney does nothing else, it demonstrates the power of rehearsing an authoritative story for the sake of inspiring new and innovative action in the world. Disney does not have rides or entertaining shows; the rides and shows are creative opportunities for telling and retelling the whole “canon” of Disney stories, movies, and TV shows. I watched the entire week as my girls indwelt and rehearsed the basic Disney storyline: where good people were pretty—dressed primarily in pink—and courageous while evil lurked around the edges in ugly things and black outfits. Not surprisingly, they wanted us to buy them every pink dress, headband, and magic wand Disney could put on display. To paraphrase Paul Ricoeur, the Disney story redescribed the world for my girls in a way that led to changed action (and the purchase of way too much princess paraphernalia).

The Gospel is also an authoritative story that redescribes the world. As Christians, it is the authoritative story. As such, “Gospel” defines our core commitments, our hopes, and our way of life. Because of this, we use the term *Gospel* all the time. We want our preachers to proclaim it. We want our small groups to live it. We want our churches to look like it. We want to recognize it in our neighborhoods. Like a group of street-artists, we want to live out (or rehearse and perform) the Gospel in a way that invites others to respond. But how well do we rehearse it as a story? Put another way: in what ways should the basic elements of the Gospel story shape how we bear witness to the Gospel?

As a way of rehearsing the basic shape of the Gospel as an authoritative story, I want to suggest four interrelated statements as a kind of narrative scaffolding: (1) The Gospel is the good news of the reign of God, (2) inaugurated by Jesus Himself (3) and demonstrated in Jesus’s life, crucifixion, resurrection, and promised future, (4) which makes a claim on all creation. You might want to add a point, or further clarify another. I do, too. But here is a start to the conversation. Let us rehearse the good news together!

The Gospel is the good news of the reign of God

Jesus bursts into the Gospel of Mark with a simple declaration: “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is near; repent and believe the Gospel!” It is stunning, given the breadth of religiously themed Greek words available, such as “mystery” or “wisdom” or “law,” that Jesus and the New Testament writers chose a word borrowed from politics—*evangelion* or

Gospel—to describe Jesus’s message. In the same way that a public messenger might declare the gospel of Caesar’s victory over the barbarians or of the emperor’s peaceful rule, the New Testament itself rehearses Jesus’s message as public news of God’s present rule.

This announcement—that the reign of God has come near—immediately connects the Gospel with Israel’s story, suffering, and hope. The Law and the prophets anticipate the advent and full manifestation of God’s salvation characterized by shalom, rest, and justice even as Israel laments her present suffering and ambiguity. As the good news of the reign of God, the Gospel assumes continuity with this hope and suffering; as an announcement that the time is fulfilled and God’s reign is near, the Gospel proclaims the fulfillment of Israel’s story. As such, the Gospel assumes the whole trajectory of the biblical story from creation to election, the life of Jesus and God’s promised future. The Gospel is a news story of epic proportions. We cannot rehearse and re-tell the Gospel in our setting without inviting others into this grand and expansive story.

Inaugurated by Jesus Himself

Mark describes his account of Jesus’s life as “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God” (v. 1:1). Throughout Mark, Jesus’s announcement of the Gospel accompanies mighty acts of power and healing. Jesus proclaims the reign of God and inaugurates it. He bears witness that it is near while also demonstrating that it comes through Him. The nearness of this reign coincides with the nearness of this person: the Gospel is a story focused on a person. The Gospel is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Focusing our rehearsal of the Gospel on Jesus Christ exposes our tendency to equate our performance of the Gospel with the good news itself. In our ordinary speech, we continually confuse the Gospel with something that we create, such as a social justice project, a particular ecclesiology, or an evangelistic strategy. But the very content of the Gospel—that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead—demonstrates that Jesus Himself is sufficient to correct, re-focus, and use our incomplete and fragmentary performance of the Gospel. We point toward Jesus and His work; we must entrust ourselves to Jesus even in this action. Thus, our rehearsal of the Gospel is not itself the good news. It participates in the good news by bearing witness—pointing toward—the in-breaking reign of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Demonstrated in Jesus’s life, crucifixion, resurrection, and promised future

But what is this good news? The story of God and God’s creation has come to its climax and fulfillment in the story of Jesus Christ. God has revealed and inaugurated His hoped-for reign in the life, crucifixion, resurrection, and promised future of Jesus Christ. This means that the Jesus story reveals the character and availability of God’s reign.

In the Gospels, Jesus’s acts of power and healing demonstrate the saving character of God’s reign. In Jesus, shalom characterizes God’s present and coming reign. His role as a rabbi and prophet demonstrates this reign as ordering a way of life that invites both repentance and commitment. Jesus’s life in solidarity with sinners—His scandalous table-fellowship with prostitutes and tax collectors, His inclusion of zealots in the twelve—demonstrates both the surprising upside-down character of God’s reign and its scandalous availability. All

these features come into sharp focus with the cross and resurrection. God's rule takes the shape of a Roman cross. As Bonhoeffer says: the God revealed in Jesus Christ is "a God who bears" human sin, suffering, displacement, and alienation.³ So also, the resurrection of the Crucified One declares death's limit while interrupting human history with the firstfruits of God's new creation. In His death, Jesus marks the way of God's suffering-love in the midst of a broken creation. In His resurrection, Jesus demonstrates the interruption of God's new creation, the new that is present and yet still coming.

We rehearse—and also perform—the Gospel through acts of anticipation and participation. We anticipate God's shalom in our congregations and neighborhoods through acts of healing and community-building. We participate in Christ's suffering-love through bearing the burdens of others in faith, hope, and love. As Paul insists in Philippians 2, our social engagements are to be ordered by the logic of Jesus's self-giving and humility.

Which makes a claim on all creation

The earliest disciples were called martyrs—or witnesses—of the resurrected Christ. At one level, their Gospel was the simple declaration that God has raised the Crucified One from the dead. They pointed toward a real historical event that marked a surprising interruption to the biblical story. The ascension narrative (as well as the Spirit-initiated mission to the Gentiles) confirmed for these witnesses that the Resurrected One has been enthroned at the right hand of God (Philippians 2:11), who has been given "all authority in heaven and earth" (Matthew 28:18). The early confession used to declare the Gospel to the Gentiles—Jesus is Lord—underscores this conviction.

The singular life of a particular man creates a hinge for all human history and the future of the earth. The Gospel, then, is not only a set of ideas to be communicated, nor is it a project of which we must be convinced. It is a happening that makes a claim on us.

Conclusion

What difference does this kind of narrative rehearsal of the Gospel make? At the very least, it protects from the various abstractions of which the term *gospel* is subject. It is so easy to turn "gospel" into a set of propositions (as my statements above become if we don't fill in the story) or another social project. A term like *good news* can be pulled in so many different directions and can baptize so many different perspectives. But for Christians, the Gospel is always the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the manifestation and future of God's rule. We cannot say Gospel without recalling the history of God and God's people as seen through the Christ-event.

The regular rehearsing of the Gospel as a story also forms Christian community and shapes us for innovative and creative action in the real world. Stanley Hauerwas insists that we live according to the stories we tell. I think he's right. The Gospel is nothing other than a story about the way things are: a word that discloses a world. Disney understands this;

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, eds. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 90.

they just get the story wrong. Let us rehearse the story in our neighborhoods, small groups, and church services for the sake and glory of Jesus Christ!

To be clear: I'm not, in any way, endorsing this story as good or even beneficial.

It is, I guess, what it is.

TRINITY AND MISSION

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There is a tree in my neighborhood that some believe is sacred. To me, it looks like every other tree in the park. But to some of my neighbors, the tree has become an object of power that they turn to for the sake of drawing some kind of positive energy. On my morning runs, I often see two or three people at a time reverently walking in circles around the tree. They bow down at various interludes and engage in their ritual with a solemn silence. A perfect dirt circle has been worn into the grass because of the frequency of this morning ritual. For my neighbors, the material world is punctuated by high and low places, emanating unseen but—to them anyway—real spiritual forces.

I have no understanding of what these neighbors are doing. I have trouble imagining how a tree, or any physical reality, might be more than it appears for I live in what philosopher Charles Taylor has called “a secular age.” You see, I have been thoroughly shaped by a fusion of the secular Enlightenment as it has influenced evangelical theology. I naturally operate within a disenchanted world that makes a firm distinction between God and God’s creation.

Sometimes, this leads to what Craig Gay has called “practical atheism.” It has not always been this way. While our ancient forefathers and foremothers in the faith would not have worshipped the tree, they would have experienced and understood all of creation as existing with, because of, and in God in some way. They would echo what the apostle Paul says in Acts 17 that God is the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (v. 28). We exist only in relation to God as we are sustained by His Spirit. This does not lead to tree worship, but it does lead to a different kind of understanding of material reality.

I don’t want to be a practical atheist. I’m going to assume that you don’t want to either. I’m also certain that a tree—no matter how majestic—is not worthy of worship. And so we modern/postmodern evangelicals are continually beset with a crucial theological problem: how do we understand the presence and power of God in the world? We rightly reject pantheism, and yet we must acknowledge that our theology too often succumbs to a disenchanted world. How do we steer between pantheism and practical atheism?

The *missio Dei* emerges in the history of theology as a kind of response to this problem. In fact, I think that our turn to missional theology just might help us to reclaim a view of a world that is “enchanted” by the creative and Creator Spirit, for our renewed understanding of mission in relationship to the being and vocation of the church comes from a renewal of trinitarian theology and it is Trinity that helps us to see and experience God as both present with us while remaining wholly and holy other from His creation.

The word *missio* is Latin for “sent.” Originally, this word was used in the theological tradition to understand the inner relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit apart from the world (what is called the “immanent Trinity”). Medieval scholastic theologians described the interior life of God in terms of the order of procession: the Father sends the Son; Father and Son send the Spirit into the world. The term *missio* helped earlier Christians to understand the way in which a holy God could be present in an unholy world. In the same way that a source of light floods a room without itself being compromised, *missio* helps the church to see the Father as the Sending One who floods the earth with His Son and Spirit. A firm distinction is maintained between God and world.

But with the Enlightenment, the distinction between God and world grew more firm and fixed. Modern medicine and science seemed to describe physical reality in a way that no longer required God’s ongoing care and presence. In such an environment, the doctrine of the Trinity—which helps to explain God’s presence and otherness (immanence and transcendence)—was relegated to the back pages of theology texts. This was largely the practice until the middle of the twentieth century, when the devastation of two world wars left us considering the limits of our more distant view of God.

In the 1950s, the term *missio* suddenly began to be used again. This time it described more than the interior life of God by also accounting for the way in which God—through His Son and in His Spirit—creates, sustains, and renews the world. With the term *missio Dei*, scholars, pastors, and missionaries began to recognize that the sending of the Son and Spirit by the Father includes yet another sending: that of the church. We usually draw out two important implications that follow from linking God’s trinitarian mission and the church.

First, it understands the church as a participant in God’s work rather than a solitary actor. In a disenchanted world, the ministries and mission activities of the church can be imagined as a kind of extension of God’s work and care where God gives us certain tasks and then withdraws to let us finish the work. We still see this assumption operating when we find ourselves surprised by the miracle of God’s intervention when a struggling church program suddenly receives an infusion of hope or success. Old habits die hard. We do sometimes find ourselves thinking that God’s action in the ordinary course of things is somehow an intervention rather than a requirement for anything to happen at all. But a turn toward the triune *missio Dei* encapsulates the very existence of the church between the prior and promised fulfillment of God’s work.

Second, it understands the calling of the church in relationship to the world rather than itself. Again, in a disenchanted world we are tempted to view church ends and goals in a pragmatic fashion. We believe God has given us good things to do, and so we find the right technique to help us grow our ministry and expand our influence. Our concern for “bucks in the offering, bums in the pew, and bricks/buildings” is the residue of this kind of pragmatism. But if the church exists because of and within the *missio Dei*, then the purpose of the church is to live for the world that God so loves. As many others have said before me, the church is the only social body that exists for the sake of those who are not yet members.

For now, though, I want to draw out one more implication of Trinity that reframes our disenchanted world by understanding life in God. Broadly speaking, *missio* describes not only a function of Father, Son, and Spirit but also the being of God as social, or as existing in relation. We can see this most clearly when we think about the history of God's mission. At Jesus's baptism, we see Father, Son, and Spirit all together, with each person affirming and being affirmed by the other. Jesus the Son is baptized in affirmation of the vocation the Father has given Him ("to fulfill all righteousness") while God the Father affirms His pleasure in the Son and the Spirit rests upon Jesus (Matthew 3:15). Here, we do not see only a functional sending, but rather the give-and-take, the mutuality of relationship. It is a picture of what the Scriptures mean when they say that God is love.

The cross and resurrection display this even better. We often only think about the cross as a singular event in the life of Jesus the Son. But to do this would miss it as an event that has significance for the Father as well. With the cry of dereliction—"my God, my God, why have you forsaken me"—we catch a glimpse of the trinitarian significance of this event (Matthew 27:46). For here the pain, loss, and godforsakenness of the world enters the life of God as the Son suffers death and sin. The resurrection, of course, is the other side of this event. The Father in the Spirit claims Jesus as His Son, and as a consequence, receives all those identified with the Son. As we follow the trinitarian shape of the *missio Dei*, particularly in the cross of Jesus Christ, we understand that God both engages the world by sending His Son and receives or responds to the world in its sin, suffering, and death: "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). God is the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The trinitarian *missio Dei* shows us that the life of God is love, and this love envelops and includes even the darkest of places in God's creation, places that God now sends and meets us as His church.

So what does this mean for our present tendency to imagine a disenchanted world? Without this last trinitarian framework, we might still imagine the world as somehow detached from the life of God or the mission of the church in only pragmatic terms. But the cross and resurrection of Jesus shows us otherwise and it leads us to live in a world punctuated by the presence and power of God where the reconciling work of God includes the church.

Why missional?

Without a missional mindset we struggle to see our lives and our world as properly related to and in God. The triune *missio Dei* challenges our modern flirtation with practical atheism while also drawing us out into the world so loved and indwelled by Father, Son, and Spirit.

Missional helps us to live and think faithfully in this, our secular age.