

## **The Biblical Mission of the Church in Palo Duro Presbytery Congregations: A Divine Calling**

This study is excerpted and adapted from resources of the Center for Parish Development: *The Biblical Mission of the Church, The People Called By God, Missional Church Study Guide, and The Center Letter* (Vol. 34, No. 1). A supplementary article, “The Missional Church,” by Alan J. Roxburgh, is photocopied and distributed with permission from *Theology Matters* (Vol.10, No.4). If you do not have time to read the entire article, please note the underlined sentences.

### **Central questions posed by this study:**

- How does the church (including your congregation) effectively address changing circumstances and lifestyles in a manner which faithfully maintains its distinctive heritage? In a secular society where the church has been pushed to the margins and its ministry often trivialized, many of our congregations are searching for their identity and purpose. What is it that the church has to offer that no other human institution can offer? *Who are we and what are we to be about?*

### **Observations which inform this study:**

- The gospel is always conveyed through the medium of culture. The ministry of the church must be contextual, creative, and responsive—culturally relevant within a specific setting—if the church is to fulfill its mission of proclaiming the life-transforming power of God’s redemptive love for all humanity.
- The modern self is the dominant construct for how people think of themselves within contemporary Western societies. Structured around citizenship, the shaping dynamics include the possession of personal rights, perpetual consumption, the development of a constructed identity, the use of efficient technique, and a search for intense experience.
- The very foundations of society have changed as we move into a “postmodern” period. Some of the characteristics are (a) globalized or consumer capitalism, (b) growing awareness of difference, (c) the rise of feeling or desire and the dethroning of reason, (d) the critical connection between power and knowledge, (e) a condition of virtual reality in which the sign begins to replace the real thing that it is to represent.
- The church is called into being and sent to participate in God’s mission in a context shaped by (a) an emerging secular spirituality, (b) the loss of national identity, (c) ethnic and cultural diversity, (d) an emphasis on the “now” which thrives on surfaces, images, and experiences.
- Our culture’s way of determining truth, defining the self, and shaping society present to the church both critical challenges and significant opportunities.

### **Introduction and background material (i.e., why are we engaging in this Bible study?):**

The church differs from other human social institutions in that it has a divine calling, a purpose which transcends its own worldly status, accomplishment, or significance. The church is called to a unique and profound vocation: to discern and participate in God’s mission (*missio Dei*): “God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate” (David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, p. 10). How do we know what God’s mission is? How do we identify God’s missional purposes and activity? As Christians we declare that the character of God’s mission is defined by the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,

God's beloved Son. And further, what we know of Jesus is to be found within the narratives and teachings of Scripture as discerned through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith. The Holy Spirit is God's active presence in the midst of God's people who enables the witness of the biblical communities to enlighten the vision of contemporary communities. Thus the search for the meaning of *missio Dei* and the implications for the mission of the church leads to intentional communal Bible study.

One of the distinctive features of Christianity is that we have four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) which express the one gospel (the good news of God's saving work in Jesus Christ.) The witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ by each of the four evangelists was created in a concrete Christian community and was called forth to meet the needs of that community, shaped in response to the circumstances of a particular group of people in a specific historical and religious context. Embracing the variety of interpretations of the gospel can enlighten and inform our own contemporary search to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Quite often when people think of the mission of the church, they quote the so-called "Great Commission" of Matthew 28.18-20: "Go therefore and make disciples..." But the exploration of the source, motivation, substance, method, and aim of the church's mission is deepened and enriched when it is recognized that there are at least four accounts of Jesus' final charge to the disciples. Along with Matthew's model of "making disciples," Mortimer Arias (*The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism*) identifies three other missional perspectives:

1. Mark's description of the commission, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (16.15), which involves proclamation, confrontation, and passion discipleship (service, suffering, sacrifice).
2. In Luke, the disciple community is to witness to the liberation, healing, and empowerment brought about by the death and resurrection of the Messiah: "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (24.47).
3. The commission within John offers an incarnational model for mission as Jesus declares: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20.21).

Each of Jesus' last "commissionings" comes in the midst of an experience with the resurrected Lord and is both grounded in as well as transforms the narrative of the life and ministry of the historical Jesus. As we consider the mission of the contemporary church, the study of these various biblical commissions must be understood within the context and content of the full Gospel of which it is the climax. For example, even the "Great Commission" from Matthew is usually quoted and interpreted out of context, with little knowledge or reference to what Matthew understands to be the nature of discipleship.

The mission of the church cannot be understood without reference to the mission of Jesus Christ. The multiplicity of the accounts of Jesus' last commissions does not mean that the church is free to construct its own in whatever way it chooses. It does mean that the church is called to interact in a profound and substantive way with the witness of the New Testament, and, open to and testing the movement of the Holy Spirit in its midst, prayerfully and courageously to take the risk to discern and express its mission within its contemporary context.

The process of this Bible study has been to consider selected passages from each gospel and in that context to interpret afresh the significance of Jesus' final commission for the mission of the church. Each of the gospels has been examined in turn over a series of four presbytery

meetings, with this study being the final one in the series. Note: All scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

**The Mission Theology of John: A Sent Community**  
(Focus Scriptures: John 1.1-18; 15.12-17; 16.4b-15; 20.19-23)

Through symbols like “light,” “truth,” and “life,” combined in complex patterns with verbs like “believing,” “seeing,” and “knowing,” the Gospel of John presents Jesus as the eternal Word made flesh and the revealer of God’s glory. And that which Jesus proclaims and brings is signified not by the terms *salvation* or the *kingdom of God*, but *life*. Life is the purpose of Jesus’ coming (10:10), and the purpose of the whole gospel is life (20.31), and John stresses the universal significance of Christ. Life in Christ (salvation, the supreme blessing within the sovereign reign of God) is characterized as abundant, true, full, and with no end (eternal). Participation in this new life is not only a future hope, but a present possibility because the life and the light of humanity are found in Jesus Christ.

The work of Jesus—his mission—is to reveal the truth from God that makes people truly free, “to save the world and no to judge it,” to “give life,” by “coming” into the world, by words, signs, and works, by life and death. It was the glorification (crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension) of Jesus which both judged and redeemed the world. Only then could the Spirit’s mission—and that of the disciple community—of bearing witness to Jesus and bringing about the renewal of humanity begin. The power and direction for the church’s mission within the world are dependent upon the Holy Spirit. The post-resurrection church enjoys the full benefits of Jesus’ life-giving work because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. And it should never be forgotten that Jesus’ mission, even in the sense of the judgment the light brings upon the world, is for the purposes of bringing about wholeness of life for all of creation.

Jesus himself, “the sent one,” provides the model for the church’s mission. Through his own being and coming, living and teaching, dying and rising, Jesus Christ revealed the truth about God, about himself, about the life and destiny of humanity. It is this truth which motivates and guides the mission of the church. While in the other Gospels the disciples are given specific tasks, “to make disciples,” “teaching and preaching,” “to proclaim the good news,” “to announce repentance and forgiveness,” in John there are few indications of why they are sent or what they are to do. Only one clue is given: “As the Father has sent me.” Following the pattern of the incarnation (John 1.14), the church is sent into the world to incarnate—to witness to and to be the bearer of—the reconciling peace of God accomplished in Jesus Christ. Following Jesus, the mission of the sent community is to proclaim and embody God’s love in such a way that persons are drawn into communion with God.

As commissioned and authorized by the Risen Lord, when the disciple community forgives or announces forgiveness, something real happens. God’s love and forgiveness is mediated through the words and actions of those who are called and sent into the world as Jesus was sent. As a dynamic and tangible sign of God’s redemption of the world in Jesus Christ, the new order of reality within eschatological communities of love, joy, peace, freedom—abundant, true, full, eternal life—is the result, the means, the content, and the end of transforming mission.

Possible format for area meetings:

- Note the limited time frame available and ask everyone's cooperation in framing concise responses, so that as many people as desire can contribute to the discussion
- Open the study time with prayer
- Summarize as concisely as possible in your own words the *observations which inform the study* and the *introductory material*
- Distribute the question sheet and allow sufficient time for one or two persons to read the focus scriptures aloud (ask for volunteers, or read them yourself)
- Discussion time: watch out for "monopolizers" and courteously move along to others if needed
- You may need to watch the clock and allot a specific amount of time to each question; the final question is the summary question and needs to be addressed even if discussion of the other questions must be curtailed
- Close with prayer (ask for a volunteer)

### **\*Discussion Questions**

#### **The Mission Theology of John: A Sent Community**

#### **John 1.1-18; 15.12-17 and 16.4b-15; 20.19-23**

1. How is your understanding of the mission of Jesus Christ informed by thinking of it in terms of a "gospel of life"? (1.1-18)
2. Why does the church need the Spirit? What will the Spirit bring to the church? (15.12-17 and 16.4b-15)
3. Most people would rather not depend upon other people for God's love and forgiveness. What are the implications if God's love and forgiveness are mediated through the words and actions of Christian communities? (20.19-23)
4. If the church adopted John's theology of mission, what would be different in its life and practice?

\*Participants will receive a sheet (the following pages) with these questions and the scripture passages in their registration packets at the presbytery meeting.

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