

## **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. The *Book of Order*, G-5.0102 (Membership as Ministry), is also relevant to this study’s session on the Gospel of Luke.

### **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 will be 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 will be examined in turn over a series of four presbytery meetings. Note: All scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

**The Mission Theology of Luke: Practicing Forgiveness and Solidarity**  
(Focus Scriptures: Luke 4.14-21; 6.20-38; 24.44-49; also see *Book of Order* G-5.0102)

The author of the Gospel of Luke is writing for the “second generation” church, which faced an identity crisis. This gospel proclaims that later Christians are not really in a less favorable position than Jesus’ first disciples; the “word” and “power” of the risen Lord is in their midst, particularly through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Luke restructures the tradition—the story of Jesus—in such a way that it conveys an evangelical message and challenge to his contemporaries, and so to us today.

After his testing by the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus returns, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to his hometown. In the synagogue, he announces the inauguration of the reign of God by proclaiming that God has good news for those on the boundaries of accepted society. With his announcement, Jesus calls into question the prevailing values of prosperity, success, and well-being (as we would do well now to question the rampant individualism in our own society). Through this dramatic scene at Nazareth, Luke indicates the themes which will be developed within his narrative: liberation, healing, forgiveness, rejection by Israel, going to the Gentiles and the outcasts.

The faith communities addressed by Luke’s gospel are called to “costly discipleship”: not simply being good citizens, but resisting or even opposing the dominant culture when it conflicted with the standards of the rule of God as proclaimed by and embodied in Christ. Life within the kingdom of God indicated change in lifestyle: beliefs, attitudes, and actions. The work of the church was to participate in Jesus’ liberating, healing, and empowering mission in the midst of the real challenges and opportunities of the world. Such participation called for personal and often costly conversion which was not an end in itself, but motivation and empowerment for mission with and for others.

In Luke’s climactic resurrection appearance of Jesus, the risen Lord instructs the community about the nature and scope of its mission. Key elements can be summarized as:

- The mission of the church is grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus, and this mission is to be universal, crossing all human, national, and other boundaries.
- In the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, God’s intent for salvation as prophetically expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures has been fulfilled.
- The redemptive reign of God breaks into human history because of Jesus’ suffering and his ultimate vindication by God, the resurrection.
- The Gospel of Luke emphasizes the transforming power of the gospel: Jesus’ call for conversion and the promise of forgiveness.
- The mission of the church is carried out by “witnesses:” the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit links the story of Jesus, the experience of the first disciples, and the history of the church with our lives today. *All* believers are empowered to be witnesses to the Good News.
- The Holy Spirit sustains and directs the church’s 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 Luke: Practicing Forgiveness and Solidarity**

Luke 4.14-21; 6.20-38; 24.44-49 and *Book of Order* G-5.0102

1. Who are the excluded ones in today's society and in the church? What is the message—the "good news"—being proclaimed to them? (4.14-21)
2. How are Christ's disciples called to "love your enemies" and "judge not" in today's world? How do the expectations for disciples of Jesus Christ outlined in this Lukan passage compare with what is expected of members of our own congregations? (6.20-38; *Book of Order* G-5.0102)
3. What would be different about the congregation's life and practice if Luke's mission theology of forgiveness, solidarity, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit was adopted in your congregation? (24.44-49)

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

## Discussion Questions

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#### **Book of Order G-5.1012: Membership as Ministry**

A faithful member accepts Christ's call to be involved responsibly in the ministry of his Church. Such involvement includes

- a. proclaiming the good news,
- b. taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church,
- c. praying and studying scripture and the faith of the Christian Church,
- d. supporting the work of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- e. participating in the governing responsibilities of the church,
- f. demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- g. responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- h. living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- i. working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.