

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 can be distributed with permission from *Theology Matters* (Vol.10, No.4): contact SarahLee Morris in the presbytery office if you would like to have a copy of the article sent to you. 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 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.

The Mission Theology of Mark: Proclaiming the Kingdom

(Focus Scriptures: Mark 2.1-17 and 16.14-20)

Believed by most scholars to be the first "gospel" ever written, the evangelist Mark created a new literary form, the communication of the good news of Jesus Christ in story form. The purpose of this narrative is not to entertain or simply to inform, but to provoke, invite, and stimulate mission. Also, the purpose of the Gospel is not so much to quell a single group within the church or confront a particular doctrinal distortion: the intent is to reinterpret and proclaim the Christian message for a frightened and bewildered Christian community desperately in need of a fresh perspective to give them courage and hope. How closely this resonates with our needs today! Consider these aspects of the Gospel:

The focus of the Gospel of Mark is the kingdom ministry of Jesus. To proclaim the reign of God takes much more than verbal words. Actually, in the Gospel of Mark deeds take precedence over words. Jesus' ministry responded to human need wherever he found it. The mission of Jesus was to reverse the consequences of evil in the world: disease; demon possession; the hostility of nature; social, religious, and ethnic rivalries; hunger; economic exploitation; empty religiosity; alienation; and death. Jesus' kingdom ministry was one which not only announced the saving rule of God, but which also denounced the structures and norms of the world as it is. Everything that was not in line with the new order of God was challenged. Therefore, all those who trusted in wealth, power, and prestige for security reacted violently because the values of the new order threatened all false sources of security. Jesus announces a new reality in which the poor, the diseased, the oppressed, women, and children have central places.

"Resistance to Jesus' words and actions of forgiveness (Mark 2.1-17) shows that the separation of the sinner from God is not the only barrier created by sin. Humans divide themselves into categories of 'righteous' and 'sinners,' but Jesus rejects that division. The 'righteous' think they know the conditions under which persons may expect to receive mercy from God...Jesus establishes a pattern of holiness that invites the outsider into fellowship. Forgiveness is essential to the new community around Jesus." (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, p. 551)

The power of the kingdom is power in action, power to heal, power to confront, power to transform. Within this context, the nature of the mission of the church—those who would follow Jesus Christ—is shaped by proclamation, confrontation, and passion. Thus disciples of Jesus are called to the proclamation of the kingdom through service, suffering, and sacrifice. Though Jesus "upbraids" the eleven in Mark 16.14, we remember that out of just such weakness and failure, God brings faith. "Jesus did not need to come once again and choose a new team in some grand lottery for better disciples." WE are those disciples in today's church. William Barclay reminds us in his commentary on Mark: "The Church is never left alone to do its work. Always Christ works with it and in it and through it. The Lord of the Church is still in the Church and is still the Lord of power." (*The New Daily Study Bible: Gospel of Mark*, p.432) Within the Gospel of Mark, it is the *cross* which is the model for genuine discipleship. Discipleship involves not power, prestige, and position, but the following of the crucified Jesus. This Gospel calls for the development of alternative communities, communities which base their

identity and their mission on belief in God's new world order. How will we develop these alternative communities?

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 Mark: Proclaiming the Kingdom

Mark 2.1-17 and 16.14-20

1. Where is there resistance to the in-breaking of God's rule of love, mercy, and forgiveness? In other words, in what contemporary situations might acts of compassion stimulate confrontation?
2. While radical discipleship might have been appropriate for the church within Mark's time, what role should "servanthood," service, suffering, and sacrifice play within the ministry and mission of today's churches?
3. If the church were to adopt Mark's model of mission, what would be different in the life and practice of *your* congregation?

Discussion Questions

The Mission Theology of Mark: Proclaiming the Kingdom

Mark 2.1-17 and 16.14-20

1. Where is there resistance to the in-breaking of God's rule of love, mercy, and forgiveness? In other words, in what contemporary situations might acts of compassion stimulate confrontation?
2. While radical discipleship might have been appropriate for the church within Mark's time, what role should "servanthood," service, suffering, and sacrifice play within the ministry and mission of today's churches?
3. If the church were to adopt Mark's model of mission, what would be different in the life and practice of *your* congregation?