



*A Theology for the 21st Century
of the Church in
Mission and Evangelism*

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INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE AND THE CALL

In seeking a contemporary theology of the church in mission and evangelism, we must begin by recognizing the significant challenges facing Christianity in the “first world.”¹ These challenges are two-fold, posed by a culture and a church in flux.

As Hirsch notes, “the twenty-first century is turning out to be a highly complex phenomenon where terrorism, paradigmatic technological innovation, an unsuitable environment, rampant consumerism, discontinuous change, and perilous ideologies confront us at every point.”² Epistemologically, the western world is transitioning from the “certainties” of yesteryear—whether religious (as in pre-modernity) or scientific (as in modernity)—to a position of postmodern doubt concerning any truth claims.³ In pursuit of ever greater degrees of autonomous freedom, the first world has, by and large, cast off the confines of Christendom, in which the church played chaplain to culture. The church awkwardly vacillates between seeking its former power and status, and adopting the role of counter-culture on the margins of society.⁴ The church encounters its former stronghold as its present “mission field,” needing new ways of informing a Biblically illiterate population of the story of Jesus, influencing people’s attitude toward Christ, convincing people of Christianity’s plausibility, and inviting outsiders to join in.⁵ Most churches in the west are experiencing a long-trended decline, unsure how to connect with a culture characterized by pre-Christian understanding and post-Christian attitude. Rightly, then, does Leighton Ford ask, “How do we preach the Gospel as fresh bread to those for whom it

¹ By “first world”—or the “west”—I am primarily referring to Europe, Australasia, and North America.

² Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 16.

³ Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 30-31.

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 23.

⁵ George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 35-37.

seems stale?”⁶ The cultural challenge is rendered all the more difficult as the church’s internal confusion has undermined its evangelistic endeavours.

Since perhaps the early twentieth century, the west’s physical-spiritual dualism—an unbiblical legacy of Greek metaphysics—has “escalated into a full-blown dichotomy of thought that divided missions . . . separating the word and the deed of the Gospel.”⁷ This separation of orthodoxy from orthopraxy has divided the church, seriously weakening our witness: exposure to a “distorted or diluted expression of Christianity” has inoculated many people against the real thing.⁸ The church has oftentimes estranged “the news of the reign of God from God’s provision for humanity’s salvation . . . [making] salvation a private event by dividing ‘my personal salvation’ from the advent of God’s healing reign over all the world.”⁹ By offering culture the church now and salvation later, rather than the kingdom gradually realized now and fully consummated later—“God’s total answer to man’s total need”—we have made the church irrelevant and the Gospel innocuous.¹⁰

The challenge of re-evangelizing the west is formidable: evangelism faces a crisis in credibility, motivation, definition, methods and means, and many of the present “minitheologies of evangelization . . . do not do justice to the whole Gospel, and they cannot match the desperate needs of the people or the challenges of our troubled world.”¹¹ As Guder suggests, “the answer to the crisis . . . will not be found at the level of method and problem solving. . . . The real issues . . .

⁶ Leighton Ford, “Evangelistic Preaching in the 21st Century,” in *Hearts Aflame: Living the Passion for Evangelism*, ed. Michael Tan (Singapore: Genesis Books and Eagles Communications, 2008), 20.

⁷ Michael Pucci, “The Gospel and Human Poverty,” in *Hearts Aflame*, ed. Tan, 219-20.

⁸ Hunter, *Secular*, 24.

⁹ Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 92.

¹⁰ E. Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person* (Bellingham, WA: McNett Press, 1972 [1945]), 16.

¹¹ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), xii, 115-16.

are spiritual and theological.”¹² In this essay, then, I pursue a theology of the church in mission and evangelism that can support our endeavour in these challenging times. What is to be our *motivation* for mission? What of our *mode*, or method, of engagement? What is our *message*? And what is the *medium* for communication? Given the nature of such a study, the reader will find the following thoughts highly suggestive though hardly substantiated.¹³ Nevertheless, if we are to remain faithful to Christ’s call—to be his witnesses and make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8)—then we must, however superficially for the time being, attempt to answer these four pressing questions.

I. MOTIVATION

The *motivation*, or impetus, for the church in mission and evangelism must begin with the Trinitarian God and the *missio Dei*; as the created, our agenda is always derived from the Creator. As we look, then, at the nature of the Creator, we discover that “at the center of the universe is a community” in loving relationship among Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Our evangelism is to be an echo of the *perichoresis* of the Godhead—the dance-like interpenetration of the three persons in the Trinity.¹⁵ Our Trinitarian God is neither apathetic or monarchical and controlling. Rather, He is passionate and eternally suffering in His love of humanity—most clearly seen in His sacrifice on the cross. He draws us into ever greater degrees of freedom.¹⁶ The Father, in sending His Son and His Spirit, has declared the inner relations of the Godhead open to the

¹² Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 3, 77.

¹³ By “substantiated” I mean “worked out.” The numerous citations herein direct the reader to more substantial engagements with each of the themes explored in this essay.

¹⁴ Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 37.

¹⁵ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 82.

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 22-23, 56, 175-76, 219-22. Cf. Phil. 2:5-11.

world—we are invited to pray with Jesus to YHWH as “Abba” (Matt. 6:9).¹⁷ Evangelism, then, is “conversion into a community.”¹⁸ By drawing us in, we are simultaneously sent to participate in God’s mission in the world (John 17:18). And the “concern of [this] mission is nothing less than this: the kingdom of God, the sovereign rule of the Father of Jesus over all humankind and over all creation.”¹⁹ Our mission is rooted in God’s motivation and purpose to restore and heal creation: we are sent as the people of the “missionary God.”²⁰ As such, even as we are coworkers with God in the coming of the kingdom, we are never prime movers in the *missio Dei*.²¹ We are drawn and elected by the Father, commissioned and sent by the Son, then empowered and directed by the Spirit.²² Furthermore, we are adopted through Christ that we may proclaim the kingdom of the Father, share the life of the Son, and bear the witness of the Spirit to the glory of God.²³ Our evangelistic endeavours are only meaningful when situated within, and contributing to, God’s mission. We cannot build or extend God’s kingdom.²⁴ Rather, we receive, enter, and manifest God’s kingdom, inviting others to travel with us as “co-pilgrims.”²⁵ Our motivation for mission begins as an expression of God’s love, who prizes persons over programs to declare His praises and thereby carry this cosmic liberation forward.²⁶

¹⁷ Ibid., 64, 73, 127.

¹⁸ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 143.

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995 [1978]), 64.

²⁰ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 4.

²¹ Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 152-53. Cf. 1 Cor. 3:9; 4:11.

²² John 6:44; Rom. 8:28-33; Titus 1:1-3; 1 Pet. 2:9; Matt. 8:28-30; John 17:18; Acts 1:8; 16:6-10.

²³ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, v, 64-65. Cf. John 17:18-23; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:3-14; Col. 1:11-20.

²⁴ Jones, *Unshakable Kingdom*, 155, 253, 291. Cf. Heb. 11:8-16; 12:28.

²⁵ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 93-97.

²⁶ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism, with Study Guide by Roy J. Fish, 30th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1993 [1963]), 27, 105. Cf. John 3:16; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; 2 Cor. 5:20; 1 Pet. 2:9.

For this purpose we are elect, through the seed of Abraham who was chosen and blessed to be a blessing to all the nations.²⁷ That is, we are saved to serve, “called and sent to represent the reign of God” in the world.²⁸ As the church imitates God’s loving community the world “*sees* God’s reign, and by our doing justice, the world *tastes* its gracious effect.” This opens the door for proclamation of God’s reign, as the world *hears* of his liberation offered to all who would respond.²⁹ And what should be *our* motivation to participate in this mission? In short: love.³⁰ “We love because he first loved us,” and whoever has experienced the love of God and His forgiveness will naturally desire to pass this love and forgiveness onto others (1 John 4:19-21).³¹ The command to love God and neighbour is not burdensome to the redeemed (Matt. 22:36-39; 1 John 5:3). As with Isaiah, a true encounter of God results in worshipful obedience as we are compelled to respond, “Here am I! Send me” (Isa. 6:8). Mission is

the spontaneous overflow of a community of praise . . . [as we experience] the superabundant riches of the being of the Triune God, in whom love is forever given and forever enjoyed in an ever-new exchange. . . . Boldness and expectancy are the marks of those who have been surprised by joy and know that there are still surprises to come, because God is great.³²

Our motivation is the love of God, and by our love for each other, God is made known.³³

²⁷ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 34, 74, 180, 188; Charles Van Engen, *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 55, 102-4. Cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:8-9; Titus 1:1-3.

²⁸ Guder, *Missional Church*, 77, 81, 100-101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 102-107. Cf. Luke 24:47; Rom. 10:14-17.

³⁰ Cf. John 3:16; 1 Cor. 13.

³¹ Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 107.

³² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 149, 150. Cf. Ps. 126:1-3; John 15:9-11; Rom. 5:1-11; 6:17-23; 7:24-25; 8:1-4, 15-39; Gal. 1:3-5; Eph. 1:3-23; Heb. 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 1:1-5; 2 Pet. 1:3-4; 1 John 4:7-21; Rev. 4:8-11; 5:5-14; 21:1-6.

³³ Cf. John 13:34-35; 17:20-26.

II. MODE

Following the example of Christ, the *mode* for the church in mission and evangelism must be *incarnational, sacrificial, holistic, and Spirit empowered*.³⁴ By *incarnational*, I refer to the Father sending the Son to take on flesh, in radical identification with sinful humanity. As E. Stanley Jones notes, in reference to Jesus' baptism, "He would be a savior from within—not from above, apart from, separated."³⁵ In doing so, not only did Jesus—who is in very essence, God—empty and limit Himself as a finite being, but he also tied himself to a particular community in time and space, living and working "among the people he taught and healed."³⁶ Jesus' "yes" to being a first century Galilean carpenter meant "No" to other identities and places—it was an expression of faithful specificity.³⁷ So, too, must the church understand her context in a particular time and place, identifying with the people in such a way as to faithfully embody the Gospel in the "language of the receptor culture," that in due time they may understand and respond.³⁸ The global Gospel must be translated into local expressions.

Our mode of mission and evangelism must also be *sacrificial* as we compassionately serve in Christlike humility.³⁹ *Splagchnizomai* (Grk.)—literally, bowel-shaking compassion for another—characterized Jesus' manifestation of the good news of the kingdom in word and deed.⁴⁰ Jesus' actions were never indifferent—he passionately loved people, suffering with and for them, that

³⁴ John 1:1-14; 15:13; Luke 3:21-22; 4:1, 18-19; 7:22.

³⁵ Jones, *Unshakable Kingdom*, 112.

³⁶ Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 46. Cf. Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 4:15.

³⁷ Darrell Johnson and Charles Ringma, *APPL 610*, Audio of Class Lecture (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2005).

³⁸ Ray Bakke with Jim Hart, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 27; Van Engen, *Missionary People*, 27, 78, 187; Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 5-6.

³⁹ Cf. Luke 22:24-30; John 13:1-20.

⁴⁰ Cf. Matt. 9:35-36; 14:14; 15:32; Mark 8:2; Luke 7:13.

He may welcome them into the banquet that is His Father's kingdom.⁴¹ The cross, in essence, was an expression of "eucharistic hospitality"—it brought in all those on the periphery whom society had cast out, thereby announcing the "kingdom as a gift."⁴² *Shalom*—all encompassing peace—is known through the "scars of His passion."⁴³ And in this same mode the church is sent into the world, comforting the afflicted in a hospitable community, and considering ourselves blessed to enter the suffering of a saviour who identifies with the tribulations and temptations of being human.⁴⁴ If we truly believe that a slain lamb occupies the very center of power in the universe, then compassion, not coercive control, must characterize our mission.⁴⁵

Not only must the mode of the church in mission and evangelism be incarnational and sacrificial—it must also be *holistic* and *Spirit empowered*. Jesus' mission, as proclaimed in Luke 4:17-21, was all encompassing.⁴⁶ According to Jones, Jesus' "program for bringing in of the Kingdom" was truly good news to the economically disinherited, the socially and politically disinherited, the physically disinherited, and the morally and spiritually disinherited—the saviour will not settle for anything less than total liberation that is individual, corporate, and cosmic.⁴⁷ More than just talk, Jesus' ministry was characterized by teaching, proclaiming and healing, synergistically evidencing the nearness of the Kingdom.⁴⁸ He then called His disciples to do likewise—good deeds and good works in unison, to the glory of God—giving them

⁴¹ Cf. Luke 14:16-24.

⁴² Arias, *Reign of God*, 80-82.

⁴³ Newbiggin, *Open Secret*, 48. Cf. John 20:19-23.

⁴⁴ Webber, *Evangelism*, 57. Cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-6; Col. 1:24; 2 Thess. 1:5; Heb. 4:15.

⁴⁵ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 70, 197-98; Jones, *Unshakable Kingdom*, 224-25. Cf. John 4:10; 7:37-38; 1 Pet. 3:15-16; Rev. 5:6-12; 22:17.

⁴⁶ Arias, *Reign of God*, xiv, 3, 20-21.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Unshakable Kingdom*, 115-120. Cf. John 3:16; Rom. 8:19-23; Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20; 1 Cor. 15:28.

⁴⁸ Cf. Matt. 4:23; 9:23; 11:5-6.

authority to continue His holistic mission.⁴⁹ Indeed, *salvation* was understood to be both physical and spiritual. True worship of God results in personal righteousness and corporate justice.⁵⁰ As such, our mission must be holistic, “reaching [our] community with the whole Gospel for the whole person through whole churches.”⁵¹

This humanly impossible mission requires divine *empowerment* and direction. Jesus modeled a life of prayer and Spirit dependence, only doing what He saw the Father doing.⁵² The *proclamation* and then *demonstration* of the Kingdom in signs and wonders through the Spirit—what John Wimber terms “power evangelism”—was the “catalyst for fulfilling the great commission.”⁵³ Thus, the Holy Spirit is the real agent of mission.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is the Spirit who convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, that hearers may respond to our witness and willingly submit to Christ’s Lordship (John 15:26-27; 16:8-15). Our mission must therefore be characterized by prayer and reliance on the Spirit: we must seek the Father’s will in every situation to effectively deploy our finite resources; we must also listen to His leading, that we may sensitively enter the ongoing—though at times imperceptible—dialogue between the Spirit and an unbeliever.⁵⁵ As God makes His appeal through us, we must remember that “the Holy Spirit is the evangelist. And we are the common clay pots in which He shares His treasure.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Sider and others, *Churches that Make a Difference*, 43-47. Cf. Matt. 5:16; 28:18-20; Eph. 2:10; 1 John 3:18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51. Cf. Isa. 1:10-15; 58:3-7; Amos 5:21; Mic. 6:6-8; Matt. 6:12; Matt. 25:31-46; Luke 7:50; 8:50; 19:9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵² Cf. Matt. 26:27; Luke 3:1; 6:12; 9:27; 22:39-46, John 5:19, and so forth.

⁵³ John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), xx, 16, 31, 34-35, 118, 191-92. Cf. Acts 1:8; 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 2:1-5. This pattern is seen throughout the entire book of The Acts of the Holy Spirit. See also Guder, ed., *Missional Church*, 104-5, 142.

⁵⁴ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 57. Cf. Acts 8:26-40; 16:7.

⁵⁵ Sider and others, *Churches that Make a Difference*, 78, 133. Cf. Matt. 6:9-10; John 6:44; 1 Cor. 2:12-16; Col. 1:9-10; 1 Thess. 5:17.

⁵⁶ Ford, “Evangelistic Preaching,” in *Hearts Aflame*, ed. Tan, 36. Cf. 2 Cor. 4:7; 5:20.

III. MESSAGE

What, then, is the *message* that the church in mission and evangelism must proclaim? In short, “Jesus’ evangelization was no less and no more than a holistic proclamation of the present, imminent, and inbreaking reign of God.”⁵⁷ This is perhaps best seen in Mark 1:14-15 (ESV): “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.’” As we explored earlier, the reign of God is fully orbed *shalom*—righteousness, healing, justice and abundant life. The Gospel of the Kingdom, then, is a public pronouncement of “good news of God’s absolute future and God’s design for humanity.”⁵⁸ By announcing God’s reign, we simultaneously engage in the “ministry of denunciation” of all that is anti-Kingdom.⁵⁹ “Sin” is a “departure from that Kingdom,” such that whatever keeps humanity enslaved and restrained from embracing the liberating reign of God must be renounced and relativized—whether it be personal sins or corporate injustice.⁶⁰ No one drifts into God’s Kingdom; you enter by responding in faith and obedience to the call to “repent”—that is, to rethink and reorient your whole life toward the kingdom of God.⁶¹ We are not calling for converts who respond to cheap grace. Rather, our message must make it clear that Christ is looking for *disciples* who are willing to die to themselves and live for Him, press on to maturity in His image, identify with His body—the church—in baptism, and follow Christ “on the way of the Kingdom.”⁶² God deserves our

⁵⁷ Arias, *Reign of God*, 55.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 39; Guder, *Missional Church*, 135-36. Cf. Isa. 9:1-7; 11:1-9; Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 10:7-8; 24:14; Luke 4:43; John 10:10; Rom. 10:14-17; 14:17; 1 Cor. 15:28; 2 Cor. 5:17-20.

⁵⁹ Arias, *Reign of God*, 92. Cf. Matt. 11:21; 23:13-15; Luke 6:24-26; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:1-6; Rev. 21:1-8.

⁶⁰ Jones, *Unshakable Kingdom*, 172-74, 225, 293. Cf. Ex. 20; Matt. 5:17-48; John 8:31-58; Rom. 3:23; Gal. 3:24-25.

⁶¹ Snyder, *Kingdom*, 150; Arias, *Reign of God*, 45-53. Cf. John 3:3.

⁶² Arias, *Reign of God*, 104. See also pp. 6, 52, 101, 103, 112. The following sources set our evangelistic endeavours within the greater task of making disciples of the nations: Newbigin, *Secret*, 135; Guder, *Missional Church*, 137-38;

allegiance: through Christ, He has vanquished evil and “won a battle for us that we ourselves can’t win.”⁶³ In announcing God’s reign, however, we speak not of a tyrannical King but a loving Father: He desires that none perish; He rejoices over the lost being found.⁶⁴ Repentance, then, precedes forgiveness and times of refreshing.⁶⁵

As Leighton Ford observes in the Scriptures, the “Gospel” has many variations:

the “Gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 24:14); the “Gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24); the “Gospel of God” (Romans 1:1); the “Gospel of Christ” (Romans 1:16); “the Gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Yet it has a singular focus: “We proclaim Christ.” *There is no evangelism that does not make clear that God has come near to us in Christ.*⁶⁶

The Biblical portrait of Christ is clearer than that of God the Father and His Kingdom.⁶⁷ It is appropriate, then, that our message centres on both “the unshakable kingdom and the unchanging person,” for “the Kingdom [is] Christlikeness universalized.”⁶⁸ Jesus (the King) and the Kingdom order He embodies are one—“*auto-basilea*.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, it is through Christ that we see the Father and understand the Trinity.⁷⁰ Essentially, “the Gospel is Jesus himself,” for there is salvation in none other.⁷¹ Christ alone—through His sacrifice on the cross—reconciles us to the Father and saves us from the coming wrath of God against all that is anti-Kingdom,

Sider and others, *Make a Difference*, 65; Webber, *Faith*, 145, 150, 172; and Coleman, *Evangelism*, 34-36, 51, 101-3. Cf. Matt. 5-7; 8:19-22; 11:29; 28:18-20; Luke 9:47-62; 14:28-33; John 6:26-66; Rom. 6:1-13; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:1-7; Phil. 3:8-16; Col. 1:27-28.

⁶³ Webber, *Evangelism*, 140; Idem, *Faith*, 144-51, concerning the *Christus Victor* model of atonement as the church’s primary proclamation. Cf. Col. 2:13-15; Phil. 2:10-11.

⁶⁴ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 70; Snyder, *Kingdom*, 23; Arias, *Reign of God*, 17. Cf. Ezek. 18:1-32; Matt. 5:45; 6:8-13; 7:7-14; Luke 15:1-32; 2 Pet. 3:9;

⁶⁵ Cf. Matt. 11:28-30; Acts 3:19; 1 John 1:9.

⁶⁶ Ford, “Evangelistic Preaching,” in *Hearts Aflame*, ed. Tan, 21; emphasis mine.

⁶⁷ Snyder, *Kingdom*, 128. Cf. John 5:37-40.

⁶⁸ Jones, *Unshakable Kingdom*, 155-56; 240. Cf. Heb. 12:28; 13:8.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 290, 295-96, 301. Cf. Acts 8:12; 28:31. *Basilea* is Greek for *Kingdom*.

⁷⁰ Cf. Luke 3:21-22; John 14:6-11; Col. 1:11-22; 2:9-15; Rev. 22:12-13.

⁷¹ Guder, *Missional Church*, 87. Cf. Acts 4:12; 11:14-18; Rom. 1:3, 9; 1 Cor. 15:1-8; Gal. 1:6-9; 3:1; 2 Tim. 2:8.

thereby offering forgiveness of sins and the promised Holy Spirit.⁷² As David Short notes in his exegetical study of the “Gospel,” following Christ’s resurrection and ascension and the reception of the Spirit at Pentecost, the Kingdom of God is now synonymous with the Kingdom of Christ.⁷³ The centre of evangelistic proclamation shifts from announcing that “the Kingdom of God is at hand” to declaring that “Jesus is Lord.”⁷⁴ In this context, then,

evangelism, or proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom, means announcing that individuals can share in Christ’s cosmic redemption by submitting themselves to Christ’s Lordship. It means an invitation to join Jesus’ new community, the church, which is now making the kingdom visible by caring for those who are poor, restoring communities and creation, and loving the whole person the way Jesus did.⁷⁵

Or, as N. T. Wright explains, “The Gospel is that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Lord of the world. And that His death and resurrection transform the world, and that transformation can happen to you. You, in turn, can be part of the transforming work.”⁷⁶

The message that “Jesus is Lord”—having conquered the powers and set about restoring the cosmos—is clearly a cosmic drama.⁷⁷ Evangelism itself is a “drama in three scenes, concerning (1) God’s victory over the forces of chaos and death, (2) the announcement of that victory, and (3) its appropriation by those who hear the announcement.”⁷⁸ The word “Gospel,” simply defined, means “tell-the-news.”⁷⁹ As Christ’s witnesses, then, our task is to “tell the old,

⁷² Cf. Ps. 2; Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26; 37:14; Joel 2:28-29; Matt. 5:20-30; Luke 13:1-5; John 15:26-27; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:30-31; 22:16; Rom. 1:18; 2:4-8; 5:6-11; Eph. 2:1-9; Col. 3:1-14; 1 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 11:18.

⁷³ David Kenneth Short, “Evangelism, Eschatology and the Kingdom of God: A Critical Appraisal of a Proposal by William J. Abraham” (ThM Thesis, Regent College, Vancouver, 1997), 145. Cf. Col. 1:13; Eph. 5:5; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18; 1 Cor. 15:24.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 159, 164-66. Note that “Jesus is Lord” is no less eschatological or embracing a frame of reference than, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand,” as the King and His Kingdom are one.

⁷⁵ Sider and others, *Churches that Make a Difference*, 68.

⁷⁶ N. T. Wright, “Mere Mission,” interview by the editor, *Christianity Today* 51, no. 1 (January 2007): 39-41.

⁷⁷ Snyder, *Kingdom*, 141-43.

⁷⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), back cover, 8-10, 16-17, 37-38.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

old story” in fresh ways to an unknowing and unbelieving audience.⁸⁰ N. T. Wright suggests the Gospel makes most sense when understood within a five-act play consisting of creation, “fall,” Israel, Jesus, and the church, the drama closing with cosmic recreation.⁸¹ Robert Webber shares the Gospel through the story of *recapitulation*, in which “the whole creation is under sin and death. Yet God’s mission [through Christ reconciling all things to Himself] is to free creation (nature and people) from death and deliver creatures and creation into life—life in this world and life eternal.”⁸² Similarly, James Choung—after beginning with a listener’s felt needs—explains the story as follows:

Most people ache for a better world. . . . The world and all that’s in it was designed for good. . . . We—and the world—are damaged by evil. . . . Jesus came to restore the world and everything in it for better. . . . With these resources [a community moving in the power of God’s Spirit], Jesus is asking us to be sent together to heal the planet. . . . We need to become the kind of good we want to see in the world.⁸³

Whatever words we employ, we must tell a story that makes the call to repentance intelligible and illuminates our main message that “Jesus is Lord.”

⁸⁰ Hauerwas, *After Christendom?*, 148-49.

⁸¹ N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 121-22.

⁸² Webber, *Evangelism*, 137-38. The entire chapter, entitled “The Story We Tell” (pp. 137-52) is most useful.

⁸³ James Choung, “The Big Story,” *Tell It Slant* Blog, 17 Sept. 2007, <http://www.jameschoung.net/2007/09/17/the-big-story/> (accessed 21 Nov. 2008). The advantages of such a presentation over many evangelical tracts is that it balances ongoing transformation with instantaneous decision making in conversion, communal with individual implications, and mission-life with after-life. It lacks, however, by downplaying the “not yet” nature of the Kingdom—thereby reinforcing anthropocentric activism—and final judgment and consummation, consequently ignoring God’s wrath and the need for listeners to repent from their sins and realign with God’s reign. As Snyder suggests in *Models of the Kingdom*, a biblically useful theology of the kingdom must maintain the tension among six fundamental polarities—present versus future; individual versus social; spirit versus matter; gradual versus climactic; divine action versus human action; and church versus kingdom (pp. 16-17).

IV. MEDIUM

As the church in mission and evangelism bears a message that is cosmic in scope, it is understandable that many Christians have sought the most powerful “megaphone”—that being the media—to capture attention and efficiently telecast the good news to all of humanity. We must ask, however, whether all vehicles are equally suitable to convey the Gospel. In a series of talks captured in *Christ and the Media*, the renowned British broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge asks his listeners to suppose that in the wilderness the Devil had presented Christ with a fourth temptation, “this time an offer of networked TV appearances, in prime time, to proclaim and expound his Gospel. Would this offer, too, have been rejected like the others? If so, why?”⁸⁴ Muggeridge goes on to argue that the media—through its consumer driven bent to provide entertainment and undemanding fantasy—irreparably distorts the truth and reality of the Gospel, making it an unsuitable medium for communication.⁸⁵ He warns against the naïve belief that “because they can reach millions of people, therefore what is said will be a million times more effective.”⁸⁶ I follow this lengthy aside not to entirely dismiss the media as a medium for Gospel communication—for surely we could discerningly employ the media as but one of many strategies as we seek to be “all things to all people, that by all means [we] might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22, ESV)—but rather as a foil to considering, *What medium best accords with Gospel proclamation?* I contend that the primary medium for the church in mission and evangelism must be broken people, united in love, who together represent Christ and His Kingdom in the world.

⁸⁴ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 30.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30, 39-42.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 99. Thus, Muggeridge is “dubious about estimating influence by counting heads. God speaks to us in a still, small voice, and leaves the thunderous words to Caesar. The truth is that what is effective is truth” (p. 103).

The church is the plausibility structure supporting our Gospel proclamation: it is by our love for each other that God is made known (John 13:34-35).⁸⁷ Disembodied propositions and impersonal pronouncements of God's reign may play a role in the conversion of some people, as God's Word always achieves that for which it is sent (Isa. 55:11). Ideally, however, an outsider receives the message in the context of experiencing an imperfect yet authentic people whose gradual transformation into the image of Christ signposts the "now but not yet" His Kingdom.

Charles Van Engen suggests that the church acts as Christ's body in the world. Each member has a unique role to play so that collectively we may serve the world as *prophet* ("calling for and working towards justice, toward *shalom*, toward righteousness and peace in human relationships and social structures"), *king* ("to take seriously [our] role in nation building, in bringing harmony to chaos . . . and in organizing itself for the proclamation of the Gospel of freedom and grace in Jesus Christ"), and *priest* ("call[ing] for reconciliation of people with God, each other, and themselves . . . [as] an offering of the redemption found in Jesus Christ to all who will come").⁸⁸ Each local church functions as a "covenant community of the King," and thus a servant, sign and sacrament of the Kingdom.⁸⁹ Reflecting the Trinitarian God, the church must be open to the world as a "community of men and women, without privileges and without subjugation . . . defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possession."⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Synder, *Kingdom*, 131; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 227-32. Cf. Acts 2:14, 41-47; 4:32-35.

⁸⁸ Van Engen, *Missionary People*, 124. As such, clergy function to equip the laity—the true "ministers"—to be "God's missionary people in the world" (pp. 154-56; cf. Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12-14 on gifts). Any other hierarchical distinction between clergy and laity is artificial and unbiblical. See Bakke with Hart, *Urban Christian*, 156-57.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 99, 110, 113, 119. See also Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 48-49, 113; Guder, *Missional Church*, 204; Sider and others, *Make a Difference*, 148-49.

⁹⁰ Moltmann, *Trinity*, 198.

As we speak of a triumphant Messiah, we must not engage in triumphalism, lest we forget Christ's humility, brokenness and poverty in this world.⁹¹ We, as members of His church, are the "poor and crippled and blind and lame" invited into the King's celebratory banquet—an evidence of God's amazing grace and power made perfect in weakness.⁹² As with Christ, we function in this world as a "suffering servant," willing to witness (*martyria*, Grk.) even unto death.⁹³ Indeed, God's presence is "hidden and revealed in the life of that community which bears in its life the dying and rising of Jesus."⁹⁴ This point is powerfully made by Michael Pucci, warranting an extended quotation:

If it is true that the medium is the message, God is certainly saying something very profound about the nature of His Gospel message. For He has chosen to send us. He is not sending a detached word (or worse, an attached word document). . . . We incarnate the Gospel because that is God's medium of choice. One good thing about the human medium is that it tends to preserve the holistic nature of the Gospel. We are whole people, not walking sandwich boards. . . . For the Gospel is not a law or a disembodied message that God wants to convey, but the living, breathing word of the Kingdom exemplified in its messengers. If the Gospel is good news to the poor, it is also [good news]through the poor. . . . We are the best expressions of both the poverty of the human condition and its redemption and ongoing transformation in Christ. We are signs of poverty for the Gospel. . . . Therefore, the fact of our imperfection as vessels of the Gospel is something we need to embrace, not hide. . . . It is precisely our sharing in poverty that makes us effective priests. Furthermore, walking in a posture that acknowledges this fact of our own poverty is itself alignment with and a testimony to the power of the Gospel. . . . Our brokenness and continuing transformation is a key part of what we testify to. The authenticity of transparency is a powerful vehicle of the Gospel.⁹⁵

Our "missional spirituality" as the *ekklesia*—those called out and gathered together by God to take on the business of the Kingdom—must therefore be both "paschal" and "kenotic": we must willingly lay down our lives, and our programs, embracing poverty for the sake of the Gospel.

⁹¹ Cf. Matt. 20:17-28; John 13:1-17; 15:13; Phil. 2:5-11; 2 Cor. 8:9; Heb. 4:15.

⁹² Cf. Luke 14:21; 1 Cor. 1:17-31; 2 Cor. 12:7-10; 13:4; Heb. 11:35-40.

⁹³ Cf. Isa. 52:13-53:12; Matt. 5:10-12; Mark 13:10-13; John 12:32; 15:18; 2 Tim. 1:8; 2:3-9; 4:5; Heb. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:9-25; 5:9; Rev. 12:11.

⁹⁴ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 52-54, 58, 140. Cf. 2 Cor. 4:1-18; Col. 1:27.

⁹⁵ Pucci, "Gospel and Human Poverty," in *Hearts Aflame*, ed. Tan, 222-24.

CONCLUSION: HOW MIGHT THIS LOOK?

In this essay I have sketched a theology of the church in mission and evangelism that is both faithful to the Scriptures and sufficient to support missional endeavours in our challenging contemporary context. Evangelistic strategies abound—crusades, “tract-bombing,” friendship evangelism, power evangelism, divine appointments, apologetic dialogue, life-skills seminars, street preaching, Alpha courses, and so forth. God, in His providence, has at times blessed every one of these approaches, and each may find some justification in the aforementioned theology. Ideally, however, the strategies we employ should grow out of this theology, rather than seek justification after the fact. What, then, are some of the practical implications of such a theology?

The *motivation* for mission is a communal God who both invites us into His love and sends us out to join Him in blessing the world through creative and transformative action. Accordingly, our mission must be characterized by hospitality, authenticity akin to familial interaction, championing of structures that fulfil our dominion mandate in the world, challenging of structures that coercively dominate, and cultivation of a loving heart of worship out of which mission flows.

The *mode* for mission is incarnational, sacrificial, holistic, and Spirit empowered. Accordingly, we must seek to understand our context in contextualizing our witness, go the extra mile in walking with the hurting, and evidence God’s reign in compassionately caring for the economically, socially, politically, physically, morally and spiritually disinherited. Furthermore, our ministries must be bathed in prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit for empowerment and leading—avoiding frenetic activism—that we may faithfully deploy our finite resources for full effect.

The *message* for mission is both Christ and His Kingdom, encapsulated in the proclamation that “Jesus is Lord!” This message announces the gift of forgiveness and abundant life, denounces all that is anti-Kingdom, calls for repentance, seeks to make disciples, and is best told as a true story that demands a response. Accordingly, we must understand both the individual and his or her community to know what the Gospel would have us commend or challenge, what barriers must be removed, and what bridges provide a point of contact. We must discover culturally relevant ways of sharing the Gospel story to gain a fresh hearing, encouraging creative expression through the arts. Also, our strategies must allow for ongoing dialogue, personal care, and thoughtful follow-up in the life-long disciple-making process.

Finally, the *medium* for mission is broken people and a Christlike church. Accordingly, we should be open and honest about our struggles, reliant upon God’s grace, humble in our witness, and united with other believers and churches in our efforts. Together we should seek to faithfully represent Christ in our local community as we challenge sin and speak of *shalom*, work for reconciliation, liberation and healing—harmoniously restoring relationships with each other, creation, and our Creator—and as we offer servant-leadership, thereby playing our part in the overarching *missio Dei*, that God’s will may be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.

As we squarely face the missional challenge to re-evangelize the first world, we may find great confidence in knowing that the mission is God’s, as is the church itself. As we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, the church need not be anxious about tomorrow, for the Christ the King has promised that even “the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.”⁹⁶

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⁹⁶ Matt. 6:33-34; 16:18-19.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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