

Which Story Will Shape the Church in the 21st Century? -- The Role of Bible Study in the Missional Church

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For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...(John 3:16).

Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation (Mark 16:15).

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23).

The church is called to love the world as God loved the world: by offering his only Son. The mission of the church is to proclaim the story of Jesus, to deliver to the world the good news that in this lowly person of Nazareth the character and purpose of the Almighty Creator of all that exists has been revealed. Through this good news it is discovered that the reason for the sending of God's son is to redeem the whole creation, to bring a hostile and alienated world into God's new social order of love, justice, and peace.

As caring and responsible people, church members participate in various civic endeavors. Engaging in good works, they join with others (Christian and non-Christian) to promote the flourishing of life within the wider community of the human family. Yet in this involvement, what is their distinctive contribution as church? What is the unique perspective which only the church offers the world? The thesis offered here is that the only reason for the existence of any Christian community is to proclaim and to embody the gospel: the good news that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). The church is the only body of people charged with declaring the truth about God and about the world; this is its identity, its mission, its contribution to world.

We all too easily forget that according to human wisdom the message of a crucified savior is not good

news but a stumbling block and foolishness. Thus as the church declares the gospel in the midst of the brokenness of the world, it must both engage and critique the concerns of the world. Participating in God's mission does not preclude or discount humanitarian activities, but it does challenge the church to clarify how the core of its identity--the gospel of Jesus Christ--both shapes and is shaped by these undertakings.

The missional church is called to move beyond the old split between the gospel as personal salvation or as social action in order to embrace a vision of the gospel as the announcement of God's saving purpose for the world through the life and witness of the church.

The Story of the Crucified Messiah.

"Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:32). For most of those observing and participating in his death, the cross did not support the claim that Jesus was the Son of God, but exactly the opposite. It demonstrated that his powers were limited, that he was a false messiah: "He saved others; he cannot save himself" (Mk. 15:31).

Today the cross has become a popular, central, and recognized symbol of Christianity. It is displayed in sanctuaries, in front of churches, on stationary and logos, around necks and on lapels. The cross has become so domesticated, so commonplace, that it may no longer have any relation to the scandal of the crucifixion, the shocking and shattering event recounted in the New Testament. For example, many contemporary Christians picture Jesus as he is initially portrayed in the Gospel of Mark: proclaiming the arrival of the reign of God and doing mighty works. Jesus appears to fulfill the expected role of messiah by

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casting out demons, healing the sick and raising the dead, calming the wind and walking on water. "He acts as a superhero who exercises the power of God to subdue the forces of evil."ⁱ

In an era of comforting angels and satisfying spirituality, modern hearers of Mark's Gospel will be just as shocked as were the disciples when a major shift occurs. Violating the norms for a superhero, Jesus announces: "the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected" (Mk. 8:31). Redefining the nature of power and of suffering in a way that contradicts all expectations, Mark declares that Jesus can only be known as the messiah when also known as the crucified one. The way of Jesus Christ is the way of suffering, rejection, and death. Even to call this offensive and brutal story "gospel"--good news--jars, challenges, and reorients ordinary human assumptions and expectations. It is for this reason that the missional church must resist the temptation to fit its message into conventional religious categories and to shape its ministry in response to commonly defined individual and social "needs."

Authentically wrestling with the question "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk. 8:29) calls the church to be open to the unexpected, unconventional, and unpredictable ways in which God works. The radicality of the story of the crucified messiah means that those who would follow Jesus Christ must "never become so sophisticated, so learned, so literate, or so professional, that we cease speaking of this horror, this obscenity, this Cross of Jesus, which alone has the power to shatter our world, so that the hope of resurrection and new life can spring forth for us and for this world which our God so deeply loves."ⁱⁱ

Which Story Will Shape the Church?

While it may be comforting to affirm that "Jesus died for our sins," many Christians may not be as eager to embrace the image of the cross as indicating the shape of their communal and personal lives. In a time of multiple symbolic universes and cultural narratives, the story of the crucified messiah has become simply one among many stories telling the

church what to value, where to focus its time and energy, how to interact with the world.

The Story of Constantine. When Constantine assimilated the church into the Roman Empire in the 5th century, a particular and powerful story began to shape its role and mission. According to this story, the purpose of the church is to provide the resources and services necessary to fulfill individual religious and spiritual needs and to construct a moral and unified culture. Since by Imperial Edict all citizens of the Empire had been declared to be Christian, the language, practices, and ethics of the church had to be understandable and workable for all of society. In other words, the church is to be accessible, appropriate, and relevant for Everyperson, believer and non-believer alike. As an integral part of the cultural establishment-- as chaplain, servant, or conscience-- the church in the Western world has been expected to provide the moral standards, pastoral care, and religious motivation to undergird, legitimize, and sustain democratic and free nations.

The Story of Jesus Christ. But what if the story shaping the church is not that of Constantine but that of Jesus Christ? The distinctive plot of this story, within the context of the story of the people of Israel, is determined by the events of Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. Through these events the key actor is revealed as a gracious and righteous God who enters into the midst of sin, estrangement, and death in order to offer forgiveness, peace, and eternal life. If minds, hearts, and imaginations are open to this story, a new view of reality and a transformation of identity and purpose are possible.

Shaped by the story of Jesus Christ, the church is not simply another cultural institution promoting the welfare of the existing society (no matter how well-intentioned), but a unique community called into being to announce publicly and embody socially God's New Creation. The Good News is communicated to the world not simply through ideas, beliefs, or ideals but through a reconciled and reconciling community of believers learning to live by the story of the crucified messiah. Hence, the gospel is not only that by which the Christian community lives, the gospel itself lives

through the life and witness of the community. As the enfleshment or embodiment of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit, such a community serves the world by showing God's truthfulness, by confirming God's promises, and by glorifying God for God's mercy (cf. Rom. 15:8).

A Community Shaped by the Gospel.

The New Testament makes theological claims about the church which are extraordinary and difficult for modern people to understand much less to accept. The Christian community, those who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, is declared to be the focus of God's saving power and the locus of God's redemptive activity in the world. This is not sectarianism or elitism but a message of hope for the world and a call to responsibility for the church. The most powerful argument for the truth of the gospel is a community of people who exemplify the transforming love of the God that they have come to know through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The emphasis here is not upon the moral perfection or doctrinal purity of the church, but upon the undeserved grace and mercy of God. The witness of the church is not to itself, but to the self-sacrificing obedience and world-reconciling love of Jesus Christ. Empowered by the Spirit, the church "is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world: this is the concrete social manifestation of the righteousness of God."ⁱⁱⁱ

Hindrances to this Vision of the Church. The dominant story shaping Christian communities today tends to domesticate and trivialize the biblical story of the crucified messiah. For many, the purpose of the church is to attract and accommodate non-believers by speaking their language, giving them a respite from a competitive world, and providing meaning for their hectic and confused lives. In this process, the radical nature of Jesus' charge to those who would be his disciples to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34) is often interpreted in a spiritualized, individualized manner. Bearing one's cross must mean that people are to be responsible, work hard, be good spouses, parents, and citizens. When so moved, they are also to help the less

fortunate through contributions and involvement in programs of charity, service, and social action. And the call to lose your life for the sake of the gospel can't really mean that Christians have to suffer and die for their faith.

Having divided the world up into "private" and "public," it is the individual Christian who is expected to link the private sphere of religious experience with the public sphere of social reality. Within this story, the church is a voluntary collection of individuals who come together to support and encourage one another in the development of their private faith. The communal practices, structures, and norms of the church are viewed as secondary and instrumental to the satisfaction of the needs, desires, and concerns of individual participants.

The Aroma of Christ. The missional church is called to hear the story of the crucified messiah again for the first time, "to think afresh about what discipleship might mean in our world, in light of the radical love and trust revealed in the cross of Christ."^{iv} The challenge is for the relationships, practices, worship, and ministry of the church to become pervaded with the aroma of the offensiveness and foolishness of the cross. "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence" (2 Cor. 2:15-17).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This essay is one of a series of articles by the staff of the Center for Parish Development and based on the Center's research and experience, since 1968, of guiding church organizations through processes of planned strategic transformation.

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- i. Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 75.
 - ii. James V. Brownson, "Hearing the Gospel Again, For the First Time," address delivered in March 1996 at the Confident Witness Conference, sponsored by the Gospel and Our Culture Network.
 - iii. Richard Hays, "Ecclesiology and Ethics in First Corinthians," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994):10.
 - iv. Brownson, "Hearing the Gospel Again, For the First Time."