

the center letter

Cultivating Missional Communities

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Volume 34, Number 1

January 2004

The Theological Opportunity: Participating in God's Mission

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We need to learn to discuss, interpret and explain the meaning of the Christian message and its relation to life in open conversation with people who are seekers, who doubt its truth or who may not consider themselves Christians, as well as with the poor and oppressed, the sinners and the lost, the despised and the lonely.¹

Within a pluralistic and secular culture, the church can no longer assume that the language, beliefs, and practices of Christianity will find a ready and waiting audience. Rather than bemoaning this situation, congregations can embrace it as an opportunity to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ into a dynamic and transforming relationship with the challenges of modern life. As congregations shift from an "establishment church" orientation to a "missional church" orientation, they will discover multiple opportunities to strengthen and deepen the life and witness of the congregation. During 2004, the *Center Letter* will identify and explore a number of these, beginning with the theological opportunity.

The transformation into a missional church orientation gives congregations the opportunity to discover afresh their theological identity and purpose. As congregations explore the biblical story, analyze their context, and envision a more faithful future, they will discover what it is they have to offer the world. The church is called to a unique and profound vocation: to discern and participate in God's mission (*missio Dei*). It is this mission which is to shape the language, beliefs, and practices of the church. As expressed by one theologian: "The nature and mission of the church are grounded in the nature and missionary activity of the triune God. The mission of the church is to participate in the reconciling love of the triune God who reaches out to a fallen world in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit brings strangers and enemies into God's new and abiding community."²

Mission as *Missio Dei*. Within Roman Catholic parishes, mainline Protestant churches, and evangelical congregations, the term "mission" carries multiple meanings. Often linked with the term "outreach," mission may represent a variety of humanitarian efforts: service projects within the community, concern for the poor and needy, efforts for economic and social development, participation in political pressure groups. Or mission may be understood in terms of church planting or church development, of expanding the church, usually through numerical growth and traditionally within "foreign" countries across the seas.

There is a more biblical way to define mission—as *missio Dei*, God's mission. David Bosch offers this description: "*missio Dei*, that is, 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."³ Thus it is not so much that the church undertakes mission activities or programs, but that God's mission constitutes the church. God is actively engaged in a redemptive mission in the midst of an alienated and broken world and calls the church to discern and participate in this mission. In other words, the church is neither the starting point (a people engaged in good works), nor the goal (church expansion or development).

It is God "who sends, who leads, and who decides in the mission of the church."⁴ As expressed by the Second Vatican Council: "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit."⁵

Now, having said that the church's mission is to be defined in terms of God's mission, what does this really mean? 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. Thus the search for the meaning of *missio Dei* and the implications for the mission of the church leads to intentional communal Bible study.

Jesus' Mission: The Proclamation of the Kingdom. To illustrate what it might mean to interpret *missio Dei* in terms of the event of Jesus Christ, we will look briefly at the Gospel of Mark. 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. The use of narrative enables the account of Jesus—his teachings and his activities—to be dynamic rather than static, to engage the imagination of readers and to call forth an active response. In other words, the entire gospel can be seen as a "Great Commission."⁶

From the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark, the "good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God" (1:1) has definite content: the coming of the rule or kingdom or reign of God. With the announcement: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15), the stage is set. Baptized by John and

anointed by the Spirit, in Jesus of Nazareth the promised reign of God breaks into human history. For the evangelist Mark, it takes the entire narrative of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection to unfold the meaning, scope, and power of God's rule. "The kingdom is multi-dimensional and holistic and has to be announced holistically—through preaching, teaching, healing, exorcising, calling and forming disciples, feeding, comforting, and confronting."⁷

The picture of Jesus sketched by Mark's Gospel is far from reassuring, particularly for middle-class contemporary Christians. Jesus speaks and acts with an authority which confronts everything which is not in line with God's rule. He eats with tax collectors and sinners, declaring "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (2:17). Manifesting God's forgiveness and mercy, he violates religious sensibilities by performing healing acts on the sabbath (3:1-5). He exhibits power over life and death by bringing new life to a dead child (5:21-43), as well as demonstrating command of the forces of nature (4:35-41).

Rather than being received with acclaim and gratitude, Jesus' loving acts of compassion are seen as threatening acts of confrontation. Far from recognizing Jesus as the inauguration of God's long awaited redemptive rule, the good religious people of his day begin to plot his destruction (cf. 3:6; 11:18; 14:55). Indeed, it is primarily the unclean or demonic spirits who recognize his true identity: "You are the Son of God" (3:11). Even the disciples fail to understand: "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (8:18). In the Gospel of Mark Jesus' ministry is characterized by conflict, by the struggle of God's new order to displace the order of sin and death. Therefore, all those who have succeeded in the old order, who trust in religion, wealth, or power, react violently when their false sources of identity and security are threatened.

The story of Jesus in Mark's Gospel ends with betrayal (Judas), denial (Peter), harassment (chief priests and scribes), and even abandonment by God ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 15:33). It is the resurrection, God's confirmation of Jesus' identity and mission, which enables Christians to see that the cross is not just an unfortunate incident, but the place where God establishes God's rule. "In the context of Jesus' resurrection, what Jesus does—his baptism, his authority on earth to forgive sins, his activity as a friend of sinners and the lost, and his death on the cross in order to include sinners in the festival of God's salvation—is seen as God's own activity. In Jesus God comes to identify with sinners, to forgive sins now, to give life to those who suffer under the violence of our world, to enter into death and hell to deliver those who perish under God's judgment.

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¹ Duane A. Priebe, "The Role of Theologians and Theology," unpublished paper given at the Gathering of ELCA Bishops and Teaching Theologians, 2002.
² Daniel L. Migliore, "The Missionary God and the Missionary Church, Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Spring 1998, p. 14.
³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), p. 10.
⁴ Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission* (Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p. 83.
⁵ "Ad Gentes" (1965) in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Costellos Publishing Company, 1992).
⁶ Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives* (Peter Lang, 1999), p. 38.
⁷ Mortimer Arias and Alan Johnson, *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism* (Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 39.
⁸ Duane A. Priebe, "Atonement: The Gospels' Stories of Jesus' Death and Its Meaning," unpublished paper, Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, IA, 1997.

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God takes up into God's own being our suffering, sin and death, to share with us God's life and fullness."⁸

The Way of the Cross. What do we learn about *missio Dei* (God's mission) from this brief discussion of the good news of Jesus Christ within the Gospel of Mark? The people of Israel were expecting a Messiah, God's representative who would free God's suffering people from their earthly bondage. The messianic expectation usually focused on a mighty national leader who, as a powerful instrument of God's righteous cause, would defeat the Roman oppressors and restore the former glory of David's kingdom. As indicated by Jesus' confrontation with worldly structures in Mark's gospel, political, social, and economic concerns are certainly included within God's rule. But the nature and quality of the Messiah's mission is redefined. Rather than a strong and conquering Messiah, the evangelist Mark more closely aligns Jesus with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah (cf. 10:45). It is through betrayal, rejection, and death that Jesus brings about salvation—God's redemptive mission. In the predictions and the actuality of the journey he must travel to Jerusalem, Jesus takes to himself not power but service, suffering, and sacrifice.

God's mission as interpreted by the story of Jesus' mission in the Gospel of Mark, involves costly discipleship, the following of the crucified Jesus: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). This mission calls the church from the comfortable ways of the world. Instead of offering more effective or successful methods of community outreach, political influence, or church growth, the evangelist Mark points to the way of the cross: the path of self-sacrifice and humble service (cf. 9:35). Contrary to the wisdom of the world, it is this path which leads to wholeness and fulfillment, to forgiveness, reconciliation, and eternal life. Dying with Christ is the only way to rise and live with Christ.

It is also true that this message is as challenging today as it was in Jesus' day. Both those within the church, and those to whom we seek to proclaim the Gospel, are all too much like the rich man, who when hearing the conditions for following Jesus "was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (10:17-22).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does Mk. 2:1-17 tell us about the reign of God?
2. What does Mk. 10:32-45 tell us about following Jesus?
3. What does Mark tell us about the mission of the church?