



Evangelism and Discipleship: The God Who Calls, the God Who Sends

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

I begin with four affirmations that I will exposit in some detail:

1. The God of the gospel is a God who calls persons and communities to God's own self, to engage in praise and obedience.
2. The God of the gospel is a God who sends persons and communities to claim many zones of the world for God's governance of "justice, mercy, and faith" (Matt 23:23).
3. The God of the gospel lives among and in contestation with many other gods who also call and send, but whose praise and obedience are false, precisely because there is no commitment to "justice, mercy, and faith."
4. Consequently, the persons and communities called by this God for praise and obedience and sent by this God for justice, mercy, and faith also live among and in contestation with other gods, other loyalties, other authorities. Inescapably, the ones called and sent are always yet again deciding for this one who calls and sends. This endless process of deciding again is accomplished in freedom from

God's call disrupts the lives of settled people, both in biblical times and now. God sends, then and now, to transform the present world, subject to alien powers, into the world God intends. Discipleship and evangelism are, therefore, not primarily about church membership and recruitment but about an alternative way of being in the world for the sake of the world.

all other calling gods and all other sending loyalties. That endless deciding, moreover, requires great passion, imagination, and intentionality.

GOD CALLS

The God of the gospel calls to praise and obedience. This is, we confess, the one true God, who is the giver of all life and who intends that all life should gladly be lived back to God. It is God's rightful place to invite and expect such a turn back to God in joy and well-being. The characteristic response to the creator by all creatures is to give praise (that is, exuberant, self-ceding gladness to God), and obedience (that is, active engagement in doing God's will and making the world to be the creation that God intends). The call of God, in short, is to discipleship, that is, to follow God's presence and purpose and promise with the disciplines necessary to the project.

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1. The God to which the Old Testament bears testimony is a God who calls, who disrupts the lives of settled people, who gives them a vocation that marks life by inconvenience and risk. The ground of the call is the good news of the gospel that God has a powerful intentionality for the world, which, when enacted, will make a decisive difference for good in the world. Of the Old Testament's many calls to the disciplines of praise and obedience, I will mention only two.

(a) The story of Israel begins with God's abrupt address to Abraham, an address that is decisive and delivered without any forewarning. Abraham is addressed in an imperative: “Go”; and with this address Abraham's life is radically displaced. He is caught up in a world of discourse and possibility about which he knew nothing until addressed, a world of discourse and possibility totally saturated with God's good promises for him and for the world through him (Gen 12:1). By this call Abraham is propelled into an orbit of reality that totally preempts his life and removes him completely from any purpose or agenda he may have entertained for himself before that moment. Of Abraham's answer to the address of God we are told very little. The text says only, “So Abram went” (Gen 12:4). Later, this response is interpreted as a supreme act of faith:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Heb 11:17–19)

(b) This same God also calls Moses by meeting him in the burning bush (Exod 3:1–6). The call itself consists in three elements:

- God calls him by name, “Moses, Moses.” In this address God seizes the initiative in the life of Moses. Moses is known by God from the outset in elemental ways and is called to engage the mystery of God.
- Moses is warned that he is standing on holy ground. That is, his locus is not what he thought, not simply a place for the struggle for social justice in which he was already engaged, but a zone inhabited by demanding, addressing holiness. The call is an abrupt act that displaces Moses for a world of conflict propelled by God’s holiness.
- Moses is resituated in the tradition of God’s people, as God recalls God’s identity from the book of Genesis: “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob.” Moses is thereby wrenched away from what he might have thought was the circumstance of his life and decisively relocated in a larger narrative about which he knew nothing until that moment of confrontation.

2. The same God, in the life and in the utterances of Jesus, makes the same claim in the New Testament. In each case the call, an authorizing imperative, is a disruption that sets lives on totally new trajectories that had not previously been in purview. The simple, uninflected imperative is “follow me,” an imperative that sets folk on a new path of obedience, trailing along the path that Jesus himself walked in obedience:

- In Mark 1:16–20, immediately upon announcing the nearness of the kingdom (vv. 14–15), Jesus comes upon the four fishermen who abandon their old life for this new following.
- In Mark 8:34–38, just after announcing his own death and resurrection (v. 31), Jesus issues a call to the disciples:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:34–35)

- Following Jesus leads to Jerusalem, a path that culminates in a cross, a reality that contradicts all the hopes and promises of the world into which Jesus goes, that is, into the world of settled legitimacy and power.
- In Mark 10:17–22, Jesus offers a call to the man who had kept all the commandments: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me’” (Mark 10:21).

In all these cases, Jesus’ claim upon peoples’ lives places their lives in crisis; it is the same sovereign claim that is so uncompromising in the narratives of Abraham and Moses.

3. Of course, it is a huge leap from these biblical summonses to our own time, place, and circumstance. Nevertheless, we imagine that the same calling God calls “men and women of all ages, tongues, and races into his church.”¹ The call is not to join an institution or to sign a pledge card; it is rather to sign on for a different narrative account of reality, one that is in profound contrast to the dominant account of reality into which we are all summarily inducted.

This God of the gospel calls men and women away from the bad news of the world, away from the dominant, dehumanizing values of commodity and brutality that are all around us. The calling God means for us to disengage from the postures, habits, and assumptions that define the world of power and injustice, so devoid of mercy and compassion in every arena of life. The call is away from ordinary life, ordinary possessions, and ordinary assumptions to a way of life that the world judges to be impossible. Thus the call is, indeed, to an impossibility.

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Discipleship is no easy church program. It is a summons away from our characteristic safety nets of social support. It entails a resolve to follow a leader who himself has costly habits, in order to engage in disciplines that disentangle us from ways in which we are schooled and stupefied and that introduce new habits that break old vicious cycles among us, drawing us into intimacy with this calling God. Discipleship requires a whole new conversation in a church that has been too long accommodating, at ease in the dominant values of culture that fly in the face of the purposes of God.

It is right to conclude, in my judgment, that the God who calls is the God of discipleship, the one who calls people to follow, to obey, to participate in his passion and mission. Such disciplines—in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and now—intend and permit a drastic reorienting of one’s life, an embrace of new practices and, most particularly, a departure from other loyalties that have seemed both legitimate and convenient.

GOD SENDS

The God who calls is the God who sends. This God sends because God has compelling authority to issue imperatives that anticipate ready acceptance, and God has a compelling passion for what is to be effected and enacted in the world that this God governs.

1. The sending of Abraham (and Sarah) is perhaps the overarching missional dispatch in all of Scripture. God issues to Abraham an initial imperative: “Go.” Then God makes extravagant promises to Abraham concerning land, name, and

¹The phrasing is from the “Statement of Faith” of the United Church of Christ.

blessing. But the sending culminates with this responsibility entrusted to Abraham: “By you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

Israel exists to cause a blessing that is to be widely shared. “Blessing” is not a religious or moral phenomenon in the world of Israel, but is a characteristic feature of creation that is fruitful and productive. Blessing means that the world should be generous, abundant, and fruitful, effecting generative fertility, material abundance, and this-worldly prosperity—*shalom* in broadest scope. Israel’s life is to make the world work better according to the intention of the creator.

Gen 12:1–3 functions, on the one hand, as a hinge to what follows.² The passage looks forward toward the entire family of Abraham that exists in order to evoke blessing in the world. More stunning, on the other hand, is the awareness that this mandate looks back to Gen 3–11, that is, to all the nations of the world that are under curse: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the flood, and the tower. All of these narratives tell of the families of the earth becoming alienated from God and living in contradiction to the will of God. In God’s missional mandate to Abraham, Abraham is called to exist so that the general condition of curse in the world is turned to a general condition of blessing, life, and well-being. Israel’s mission is to mend the world in all its parts.

Paul quotes this very text from Genesis in urging that the gospel pertains to the Gentiles: “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you’” (Gal 3:8). The wondrous phrase of Paul, “gospel beforehand,” is a recognition that from the outset the good intention of the creator God cannot be limited to any ethnic or racial or national enclave. Here is the warrant for a vision of a community of *shalom*, rooted in God’s own vision of the creation, that repudiates every death-bringing distinction and every leverage of some over against others. Moreover, the mandate in Genesis is not to make the nations over into Israelites, nor even to make them Yahwists. The focus is kept upon the improvement of the quality of life as willed by the creator God.

2. The issue of sending is rhetorically the same in the Exodus narrative, though the effect is very different. The sending of Moses is almost a humorous rhetorical act. YHWH issues a series of first person resolves, all concerning YHWH’s intention in the face of pharaonic oppression:

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians....The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.” (Exod 3:7–9)

But the next verse comes as a surprise. YHWH might then have said, “I will go to

²Hans Walter Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwist,” *Interpretation* 20 (1966) 131–158; Patrick D. Miller, “Syntax and Theology in Genesis 12:3a,” in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Papers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000) 492–496.

Pharaoh”; but YHWH does not. Instead, Moses hears, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (v. 10). The most difficult and most dangerous task of emancipation is not undertaken by YHWH alone, solely as divine deliverance. Rather, emancipation is a human task, to be undertaken amid the risky problematics of Pharaoh’s political reality.

The mission of Moses is nothing less than the confrontation of a form of political power that no longer has anything of a human face. More than that, Moses’ mandate is to confront exploitative economic power that is understood to be an embodiment of false theology, so that the task of liberation and transformation of the empire is deeply rooted in a theological conflict between the Lord of liberty and the gods that endorse and legitimate exploitative economics (see Exod 12:12).

The mission is a human mission, with YHWH cast in a crucial but supporting role. God offers to transform the slave economy, but only in and through direct, risky human engagement. Moses immediately senses the problem and the risk of the call; consequently, we hear from him five points of resistance (Exod 3:11–4:17). Moses does not want the mission, which is nothing less than transforming the social system of Egypt from working according to the vision of the pharaonic superpower, bringing that economy in line with a covenantal vision of reality. The mission concerns the way in which power is practiced in the world. YHWH’s role is to legitimate, authorize, and support the human mission by shows of presence and power that are only available in the midst of alternative human action.

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3. The sending of the disciples of Jesus concerns both walk and talk. I take Matt 10:5–15 to be a model for Christian mission. The initial mandate to the twelve is to talk: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near’” (v. 7). The kingdom of heaven—the rule of God—has come near. The sentence is terse and does not last long enough to say, “has come near in the life and person of Jesus.” The Synoptic tradition insists that in the actions of Jesus—acts of healing, cleansing, feeding, forgiving—a new governance is now unmistakably in effect. The kingdom comes near when the creation begins to function according to the blessed intention of the creator. God has drawn near to usher in a new reality that is to be enacted and effected by human missionaries who act boldly on the basis of the proclamation that they themselves accept as true and as the basis for an alternative life in the world.

The second part of the mandate to the disciples is the walk: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (Matt 10:8a).

The imperative to act is fourfold: cure the sick (because the sick have fallen under powers that wish them ill); raise the dead (where the spiritual force of death

prevails, enact the power of life); cleanse lepers (make the unclean ritually acceptable); cast out demons (break the power that opposes the new governance).

In doing this, the disciples receive the mandate to “travel light”:

You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. (Matt 10:8b–10)

We conclude that the capacity to effect these transformative wonders requires complete reliance on the news of the new ruler; the negative counterpoint is the shunning of the resources of the status quo that will rob the disciples of power to be effective.

The mission is dangerous, because God’s will for the world is in deep tension with the way the world is organized:

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt 10:16–20)

The present population of those sick or dead, the lepers, and demon-possessed is not an accident. Rather, the present system works as it does precisely because a certain quota of lives has been “handed over” to antihuman forces, and the system prospers on their backs. The attempt to draw those “handed over” back into the realm of the human will evoke deep hostility, from wolves that, though viciously ravenous, will work by legal means under the guise of respectability. The normal state of the missionary is to be in trouble with the authorities who are characteristically defenders of systems that deny humanness.³

Now the text moves beyond mission and picks up on our other theme of discipleship:

A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! (Matt 10:24–25)

The people among whom Jesus is sent do not like him, so they will not like his disciples either. Clearly the mission is done by those under discipline. And perhaps the ultimate discipline is this:

So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do

³See C. S. Song, “The Politics of the Resurrection,” in *Proclaiming the Acceptable Year*, ed. Justo L. González (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1982) 25–39.

not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt 10:26–28)

4. Our talk of mission must, of course, pay attention to Matt 28:16–20, verses that are commonly understood as decisive for this theme. The imperative of the risen Lord to the remaining eleven followers is clear and firm: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach.

The post-Easter company of disciples, the inchoate form of the church in this most churchy gospel, is sent. Its task is to recruit others into the counter-community of Jesus:

- To make disciples means to bring others under the disciplines that mark the followers of Jesus. It is assumed that the primal core of disciples is under discipline itself, so that its members can instruct new recruits into the practices and habits that will sustain life and mission in the counter-community.
- Baptism, reflecting a more ecclesial assumption on the part of Matthew, has become the rite of initiation into an alternative community. In the earliest church, baptism was a decisive, dramatic transfer of life into a new community with new disciplines, new loyalties, and new obligations.
- Teaching is fundamental to the missional church that is sent. The primal curriculum of the church's teaching pivots on the twin trinitarian claims that (a) the historical person of Jesus is the embodiment and disclosure of God's true character and that (b) Jesus' spirit continues to infuse this community (and the world) after his departure from the earth. This mandating text at the close of Matthew already recognizes, in the earliest church, that knowledge of the tradition is fundamental to mission; ignorance of the tradition will make mission either impossible or undertaken for the wrong reasons.

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5. The difficult and demanding task is to complete the sequence that extends from Old Testament to New Testament to early church by trying to line out what that sending now may mean to us in our circumstance. It is clear that the sending is not to another place, on the assumption that some places have already been “won over” and other places remain to be “taken.” That, of course, was the old assumption of mission—characteristically “foreign” mission—uncritically assuming that the home base was “secure” for the gospel. Rather, this sending means to be dispatched as an alternative power in every place where anti-creation powers rule, dispatched there to talk and walk the truth that the legitimate power of governance belongs to the One who authorizes restoration of what belongs rightly—at the out-

set and at the finish—only to God. That is, the sending is to be understood as becoming alternative community in the midst of conventional communities:

- To enact alternative community in the midst of conventional communities is highly conflictual, as it was for Moses and for Jesus in his own life, and as it was for the early church. The powers of the conventional have acute antennas for the ways in which status quo reality is thwarted and called into question by alternative reality.
- Enactment of alternative community requires intentionality sustained by carefully embraced and regularly practiced disciplines, so that discipleship is a *sine qua non* for mission.
- This counter-community has as its core task the naming and confrontation of alien spiritual powers that govern the conventional society into which we are all, in many ways, inducted.⁴
- These alien spiritual powers, however, characteristically are manifested as socio-political-economic powers, so that religious and political-economic issues are always both spiritual and political-economic, never either one or the other. This both/and reality in turn means that the old quarrel between evangelism and social action is a cheap, misinformed argument. It is precisely the talk of the evangel that matches the walk of action in the world on behalf of the new governance that is proclaimed in the evangel.

The news of a restored creation is counter to a system of meaning and power that I term technological-therapeutic-military consumerism—a system that in our society unrelentingly offers a total worldview that comprehends all and allows no opening for any alternative. This dominant mode of power and meaning is a way of rendering reality that silences “the news” and voids the One who is the subject of our “news”:

- technological—the reduction of life’s choices to technological options in which critical voices of alternative are screened out and eliminated. Thus “techno-speak” can allow no room for the slippery, dramatic Character who is at the core of the church’s news.
- therapeutic—the assumption that our goal in life is to live a pain-free, stress-free, undisturbed life of convenience. Most television ads are aimed at this elusive and impossible goal, which stands deeply opposed to any news that has a cross at its center.
- military—the deployment of immense forces, funded by massive resources, to protect an entitled advantage in a world that is committed to an unsustainable standard of living.
- consumerism—the deep and unexamined assumption that “more” (of whatever) will make us safer and happier, a claim difficult to maintain

⁴See Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

when one ponders the fact that massive consumerism is matched by pervasive unhappiness and profound insecurity.

To characterize our culture as marked by an ideology of technological-therapeutic-military consumerism—to which all of us subscribe in some serious way—is to mark a primal mission context for the evangel. In that world, the mission to be enacted by those under discipline is to cure, raise the dead, cleanse, and cast out demons; to make disciples, teach, and baptize.

So consider: the calling God calls; the sending God sends. This God calls and sends because God the creator intends that the world will again be free, able and competent to be God's abundant creation. That prospect, however, requires breaking the grip of alien powers that impede the fullness of creation. It is the intention of the creator, we confess, that the kingdom of this world should become the kingdom of our God who is the creator. The New Testament version of that claim is, of course, that the coming rule of our God will be the coming rule of his Messiah (Rev 11:15).

Those called and sent in our time have a mandate not unlike that of Abraham and Moses, and not unlike that of the disciples of Jesus, because the talk and the walk are in every time and place fundamentally the same.

DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM

This biblical background now permits us to propose certain theological pre-suppositions for discipleship and evangelism:

1. That God calls and sends with authority attests to our common conviction that this God is entitled to such imperatives among us, that is, that God acts with appropriate authority in calling and sending.

2. The God who calls and sends is the God of the good news, the one who created the world and calls it "good," the one who in Israel is manifested through wonders of emancipation and sustenance, wonders that constitute the dazzling miracles of Israel's doxologies; this is the one evidenced in Jesus of Nazareth, who caused the blind to see, the lame to walk, the lepers to be cleansed, the dead to be raised, the poor to rejoice (Luke 7:22). The God who calls and sends has a long history of miracles of transformative goodness.

3. This God of creation and redemption, of newness and transformation, is a God with a concrete intention for the world, an intention of well-being that is articulated in concrete mandates and commandments, one who will be obeyed by those who offer praise.

4. This God who calls and sends is the originator, sponsor, and advocate for *shalom* in all the world; God summons creatures of all sorts to join in the enactment of that *shalom*.

5. This God of the gospel, evidenced in miracles and voiced in imperatives, is a counterforce in the world, a counter to all of the powers of death and negation that operate in every zone of creaturely reality. God calls us to disengage from those

powers to which we have tacitly sworn allegiance and sends us to confront, struggle with, and defeat those powers for the sake of God's counter-will in the world.

6. The calling and sending of God place us regularly in crisis because (a) we do not want to disengage from the powers of negation to which we are deeply inured, and (b) we do not want to struggle against those mighty powers. Thus a willing response to God's calling and sending, in praise and obedience, entails sustained, disciplined, concrete intentionality.

It is the character, reality, will, and purpose of God that propel us into a crisis of discipleship and evangelism. The dominant script of our society wants to silence the voice of this God of miracle and imperative. Where the dominant script succeeds in eliminating God, moreover, the possibility of discipleship and the capacity for evangelism evaporate, because it is only the option of the good news that produces ground and opportunity for either discipleship or evangelism.

Discipleship

Discipleship is not just a nice notion of church membership or church education; it entails a resituating of our lives. The disciples of Jesus are the ones who follow their master, able to do so because they have been instructed in his way of life, both his aim and his practice of embodying that aim. The disciple is one who is closely associated with the master-teacher, a profoundly undemocratic notion, for the relation consists in yielding, submitting, and relinquishing oneself to the will and purpose of another.

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Discipleship fundamentally entails a set of disciplines, habits, and practices that are undertaken as regular, concrete, daily practices; such daily disciplines are neither greatly exciting nor immediately productive, but like the acquiring of any new competence, discipleship requires such regimen—not unlike the learning of a new language by practicing the paradigm of verbs; not unlike the learning of piano by practicing the scales; not unlike the maintenance of good health by the tenacity of jogging; not unlike every intentional habit that makes new dimensions of life possible. The church is a community engaged in disciplines that make following the master-teacher possible and sustainable.

How shall we speak of such workable disciplines?

We may begin with the constants of the early church in the book of Acts: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

The four disciplines of the early church are undertaken immediately upon baptismal entry into the alternative community; they become the basis for the startling missional activity in the narratives that follow. Thus the disciplines

stand exactly between the entry of baptism and the mounting of mission. The practices are:

- teaching: instruction into the tradition. We know from 1 Cor 11 and 15 that, according to Paul, the tradition to be learned and transmitted concerns especially the practices of the Eucharist and the most succinct assertion of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. A baptized church is a studying church.
- fellowship. The church is a face-to-face community of people who are together for good stretches of life, for whom company with other believers is enjoyable and important. The pragmatic reason for this practice is that resistance and alternative are not possible alone, a point long known in the twelve-step programs.
- breaking of bread. Nothing is so elemental as solidarity in eating, where we are bodily engaged with each other.
- prayer. Prayer is the regular communal act of ceding one's own life and our common life over to the real subject of the "news." We may imagine, further, that these prayers of the church include table prayers, the church's most intimate practice of creation theology wherein we marvel at the inscrutable production of bread, a gift freely given to us.

A second version of early church discipline is "prayer and fasting" (see Mark 9:29, marginal note). According to some manuscript traditions, fasting is a precondition of the power to heal and transform. Fasting is essentially an alien notion in much of the Reformed tradition, because we shun visible spiritual practices and because we affirm the goodness of life. If, however, we think of fasting as breaking the vicious addictive cycles of loyalty to a consumer society, then we will certainly recognize prominent forms of addiction—notably television—that may admit of disciplined disengagement.

*"fasting is breaking the vicious addictive cycles of loyalty
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To these I would add that in current discussion, the recovery of Sabbath as a day of disengagement from the power of production and consumption may be important. I have noted of late connections made by Jewish scholars between Sabbath and stewardship, Sabbath as relinquishment of control over my life and stewardship as a recognition that life is not our own.

The most characteristic neighbor practices of the Christian life are to be understood as acutely countercultural, especially generosity, compassion, and forgiveness. The daily commitment to such practices is grounded, I have no doubt, in study, prayer, and fellowship. The practices themselves, however, are profoundly countercultural in a society that is deeply lacking in the elemental ingredients

of common humanness. These practices significantly challenge the dominant assumptions in our culture.

These disciplines, if taken seriously, are immensely inconvenient. But of course that is part of their purpose in a culture that imagines it need never be inconvenienced. The disciplines function to inconvenience us enough that we become conscious, self-conscious, and intentionally aware of who we are and what we are doing with our lives. Indeed, only those who are inconvenienced enough to be intentional will have energy for mission.

Evangelism

The term “evangel” is a rendering of “gospel” that is in turn a rendering of “news,” “good news.” The most succinct usages of the term in the Old Testament are in Isaiah:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!” (Isa 40:9)

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” (Isa 52:7)

The phrasing that occurs in these texts—“Here is your God” and “Your God reigns”—is gospel talk. The two statements assert that the God of Israel whom Babylon had silenced and voided is back in play. The evangel asserts the revivification of this God long dormant:

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable. (Isa 40:28)

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:14–15)

The talk of gospel is an announcement of new governance. The walk of gospel is to act as though the new rule of God were in effect, though there continues to be much data to the contrary. Thus the talk and the walk of the news constitute an act of resistance and the embrace of an alternative, even when the ground for the alternative is readily doubted in dominant culture. The “as though” proviso is an act of defiance and refusal, as the prophet notes:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17–18)

As discipleship is not simply church membership, so evangelism is not simply church recruitment of new members. Evangelism is the invitation and summons to resituate our talk and our walk according to the reality of this God, a reality not easily self-evident in our society. The call of the gospel includes the negative assertion that the technological-therapeutic-militaristic consumer world is false, not to be trusted or obeyed, and the positive claim that an alternative way in the world is legitimated by and appropriate to the new governance of the God who is back in town.

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evangelism is not simply church recruitment of new
members”*

We should not be too grandiose about the alternative. There are indeed occasional times appropriate to spectacular evangelical assertion. On most days and in most places, however, the talk and the walk of good news become the slow, steady engagement with and practice of God’s will for generosity, compassion, and forgiveness in a world organized against those practices. Such practices are undertaken in the conviction that such acts on the spot make an important difference to the condition of the world and on the further conviction that the effect of such testimonial living is cumulative and will prevail, because such practice is rooted in the reality of the Messiah of whom we confess: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

God’s call is a summons, but a summons away from a world too hard. God offers a genuine alternative to life in a distorted world, an alternative that will produce joy and well-being:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:28–30)

God’s sending is risky, and it is to be celebrated. Lest we congratulate ourselves too much on being sent, here is Jesus’ word on the return of the evangelists who report success:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10:17–20)

The outcome of the news is that the ones under discipline have their names written in heaven—utterly safe, utterly loved, and utterly treasured—where moths do not consume and where thieves do not break in to steal. This is a good destiny offered and promised to the ones called and sent. ⊕

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN is emeritus professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia. He presented a form of this material to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA in June 2002. His book of prayers, Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth, edited by Edwin Searcy, appeared in 2003 (Fortress).