



Worthy Living: Work and Witness from the Perspective of Missional Church Theology

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The recent “missional church discussion” has been, at its core, a response to Lesslie Newbigin’s question: Can the church in the West become, again, a missionary church, given the fact that its context has become a mission field?¹ The question is urgent and relevant in light of the massive changes that have taken place in Western cultures in the last century. We are becoming used to hearing that “Christendom is over,” by which we mean that the complex partnership of church, state, and society established in Western cultures since Constantine is ending. But simply to say that “Christendom is over” can be little more than a rhetorically effective oversimplification. “Christendom” was and is an incredibly complex historical development. In spite of the obvious secularization of virtually all aspects of modern Western society, there are many ways in which Christendom is still functioning. Nor is there a clear consensus on what we really think Christendom was all about. How shall we understand the long history of Western Christendom, and how shall we assess what happened to the gospel and the church’s mission in that complicated history? In its meetings and publications, the “Gospel and Our Cul-

¹Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

If Christendom is dead, witness is not merely one of several things Christians are called to do; it is the definition of being Christian. Our work is our witness, so building a lay apostolate merits our full attention.

ture Network”² has sponsored a wide-ranging exploration of the many questions related to this “paradigm shift” that continues to challenge and baffle us in the West.

BASIC THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

This ongoing investigation of our changing context has led the missional church discussion inexorably into theological inquiry. Basic theological questions immediately surface when we try to sort out the Christendom legacy and our situation as it “ends.” What is, for the heirs and stewards of Christendom, the gospel? Does the gospel of late Christendom truly represent the gospel of the apostolic movement? The question can be put more broadly: What has been God’s missional intention across the panorama of the biblical story? If we affirm that God’s revealed purpose from Abraham onwards has been “the healing of the nations,” and if we understand the Bible as the diverse testimonies to how God has been making that purpose known and bringing it about, then how do we read these scriptures in terms of the missional character of God’s purpose and actions? Trinitarian theology has come to the center of the discussion as the theology of the “mission of God” (*missio Dei*) has become a guiding consensus. God the Father sends God the Son to carry out and complete the work of healing and reconciliation; God the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit, who gathers, empowers, and sends the confessing community as God’s missionary people “to be Christ’s witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

This leads to a critical examination of the ways that Western theology has reduced or domesticated the gospel. In our traditions, salvation tends to be discussed in individualistic terms, focusing on the status of the person both now and in eternity. By contrast, missional theology is critical of that reductionistic individualism and focuses on God’s restoration of all creation to wholeness (remembering that “salvation” refers primarily to wholeness and healing). This tendency towards a reductionistic view of salvation has shaped how we have understood the doctrine of election. The emphasis has been upon election to salvation, dealing mostly with questions like “Who is saved and who is not?” and “Why some and not others?” In place of that emphasis, Newbigin stresses that God elects some to service for the benefit of the entire creation that God loves. Karl Barth profoundly recasts the doctrine of election by locating its center in the cross and in the universal validity of Christ’s sacrificial death for all people. For both, the outcome of election is not a preoccupation with the question of who is saved and who is not, but rather a focus upon the missional vocation of the particular community God calls forth, the church, to be the instrument of God’s mission.

Obviously this rigorous inquiry into the nature and purpose of salvation, linked with election, must then engage the theology of the church. What is the

²See www.gocn.org.

purpose of the church within God's mission? If, as the Second Vatican Council put it, the church is missionary by its very nature, what are the consequences for its disciplines and structures, its practices and offices? How does the reclamation of the fundamentally missional nature of the apostolic church work itself out in a theological tradition that has largely neglected mission? That discussion reengages the exploration of the cultural context as it probes the ways in which the Constantinian project of partnership among church, society, and state reshapes and (in the view of many) profoundly distorts the church's vocation. This discussion also opens up new avenues of interaction with the growing churches of the non-Western world, as they intentionally explore how to be authentic witnesses in their own settings. That process often means a critical review of the "Western-ness" of their formation in the modern missionary movement, linked with new and often daring forms of translation of the gospel into their contexts. In that discussion, many are now turning to the church of the first four centuries to learn more about how it carried out its mission before Constantine began the process of privileging the church.

THE "MISSIONAL CHURCH" PROJECT

The project group that generated the study set out to identify the salient themes of a theology of the church that understood mission as the very essence and purpose of the church.³ Such an undertaking was, of course, polemical. It was based on the widely observed fact that the theologies of the church in Western Christian traditions virtually ignore the theme of mission. This process is documented in David Bosch's magisterial study, *Transforming Mission*, especially in his discussion of the paradigms of Western mission over the centuries.⁴ The intention of the *Missional Church* study was to stimulate a conversation. We recognized that we were raising questions and pointing out trajectories that called for much more intensive and wide-ranging investigation.

The project group has been gratified to see that this discussion has been taking place with great vigor. We have not been surprised by the many critical voices that have raised issues that obviously merit attention. At the very first public discussion of the book (in October 1998), friendly critics raised questions about the meager emphasis upon the theology and practice of worship in the project. That justifiable criticism must, I think, be addressed within an even more serious gap in our early discussion. That has to do with the theme of this edition of *Word & World*: the relationship between the missional nature and purpose of the church and the work and witness of the Christian in the world.

The missional church discussion, as I have noted, has critiqued in many ways the reductionistic theologies and practices of the church that have characterized Western Christianity. We have raised questions about the ways in which the

³See Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁴David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Mission Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

church has adapted itself to the agenda of its worldly context, has accepted roles and functions that serve its culture while betraying its vocation, and has diluted the gospel in order to fit more compatibly into its setting. We have talked about the many ways in which the maintenance of the church replaces or distorts its mission. We have questioned the priority placed upon the institution and its preservation at all costs. Because of the perceived weaknesses of the inherited theologies of the church in Christendom, we have placed much of our attention on their critique and revisioning. That is understandable.

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But the impression is still left that the church is the priority. This impression is, I think, valid, in spite of all our emphasis upon the trinitarian definition of mission, and the theological ordering of the church within that trinitarian progression (Father—Son—Spirit—church). The process of theological reordering, which is certainly taking place, constantly struggles with the residual power of the long history of Christendom. Even if the structures are changing, even if our Western societies are secularizing, even if church buildings are being sold and made into cafés and shops and private homes, the attitudes of Christendom are still deeply implanted in our corporate consciousness. People in Europe still want the church bells to ring, even if they never intend to go inside the building. People in America still want to believe that we are a “Christian nation,” even if there are few evidences in our public culture that this is true. Addressing the fact that Christendom is ending can generate enormous resistance in American congregations, where people are often struggling with the rapid changes in culture and want the church to be the one place that does not change.

That inward focus of so many North American congregations obstructs the fundamental trinitarian understanding of mission that has the whole world in view. Mission rooted in the trinitarian nature and action of God must take the emphasis upon “cosmos” in both Testaments seriously. It relates theologically the calling and practice of the church to God’s healing purposes for the whole world. This must mean, then, that the presence and action of Christian witness within that world must become a central emphasis of missional theology. The preservation of the institutional church as we have known it is not the purpose of the gospel; the church is the instrument of God’s mission in the world. Thus, the “work and witness” of the missional church in the world, carried out by its members, is the unavoidable and crucial implication of such a missional theology. If the church is missionary by its very nature, then the life and calling of every Christian person is fundamentally missional. But it must be conceded that this has not been sufficiently emphasized in the gospel and culture discussion up to now.

WORK AND WITNESS

The resources for a missional exposition of work and witness are, however, certainly given in the current missional church discussion. They can and should be unpacked in the context of the missional understanding of witness as the Christian vocation and in the dynamic understanding of the interaction between discipleship and apostolate. Linked to both is the exploration of a missional hermeneutic that seeks to interpret scripture for the formation of the community for its vocation of witness.

“Witness’ is not merely one of the several things that Christians are called to do. ‘Witness’ is the comprehensive definition of what a Christian is.”

Long before the term “missional” came on the scene, Karl Barth argued that the classic definition of the Christian, as the person enjoying the benefits of salvation, needed to be corrected and replaced with the vocation of the Christian as witness, which was, in fact, the “goal of vocation.”⁵ Both in my early attempt to develop a theology of evangelistic ministry as “incarnational witness” and my later contributions to the missional church discussion, I have proposed that the New Testament concept of “witness” should be the overarching definition of Christian life and practice.⁶ The thematic center of Luke and Acts is Jesus’ affirmation to the disciples on the Mount of the Ascension, “You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). Luke demonstrates how the disciples were formed by Jesus the rabbi for their vocation of witness, and Acts tells the story of that unfolding vocation as the church spreads from “Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). “Witness” is not merely one of the several things that Christians are called to do, next to worship, service, and spiritual disciplines. “Witness” is the comprehensive definition of what a Christian is. Jesus did not say “You shall give testimonies,” or “Now and again you will function as a witness.” He defined the future vocation of the apostolic church as “witness.” Everything that the Christian community is and does relates, either obediently or disobediently, to this vocation to witness. The alternative way of saying the same thing is found in Jesus’ discourses in the Synoptic Gospels, when he describes his followers as light, salt, and leaven.

Thus, from the perspective of missional church theology, the work of the Christian is witness. The “you” in Acts 1:8 is not restricted to a particular few, but defines the entire community. Everyone gathered in the upper room at Pentecost was granted that empowering symbolized by the “divided tongues, as of fire” that

⁵Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, in *Church Dogmatics 4/3/2*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962) 554–614.

⁶Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church’s Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985); *The Incarnation and the Church’s Witness* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999); *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

“appeared among them” and “rested on each of them” (Acts 2:3). Everyone is empowered and sent out to make this good news known. Everyone is to be about the “work of ministry” for the equipping of which Christ gives to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph 4:11). This is the actual meaning of baptism: the disciplines of vocation, formation, and commissioning as part of the witnessing community for one’s own life of witness. Certainly that is the understanding that underlies the catechetical formation for baptism that characterized the early Christian church and that is being reclaimed today by the Roman Catholic Church with its Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults. And Protestant contributors to missional church thought, such as William Abraham and Patrick Keifert, are advocating a reclamation of those disciplines as basic to our work and witness today.⁷

DISCIPLESHIP AND APOSTOLATE

This comprehensive understanding of witness as the central vocation of the Christian and of the Christian congregation is strengthened and deepened as we engage our Lord’s formation of the missional church with his disciples. Mark’s Gospel summarizes the missional intent of Jesus’ calling and formation of the disciples: “And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14–15). A comprehensive theology of the missional church resides in these verses. The church is the result of Jesus’ election and calling—“Jesus called to him those whom he wanted” (Mark 3:13). The intention of his calling was that they should become his apostles, his “sent-out ones” (the observation that some ancient texts lack this phrase does not diminish the fact that the early church understood itself as fundamentally missional, but rather underlines it!). Discipleship was not an end in itself, not a means to the spiritual maturity of those chosen. It was not a matter of the benefits to be gained from discipleship. Its purpose was rather that these disciples, trained intensively by Jesus during his earthly ministry as they were “with him,” should become “apostles.” The gathered life of the church must flow into the scattered and sent-out life of the church. They were to be “sent out by him to proclaim the message,” both during his earthly ministry and then as their comprehensive vocation after Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost.

The same pattern of discipleship leading to apostolate is basic to all four gospels. We have spoken of “witness” as the central theme of Luke-Acts. In the Great Commission that ends Matthew’s Gospel, the disciples are promoted to apostles as they are instructed to “disciple the ethnicities” by baptizing in the name of the Triune God and by “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20). This text is not so much the conclusion of the gospel as it is a recapitulation of the content of the gospel: what the disciples have learned

⁷William Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

from Jesus they are now to pass on in the formation of witnessing communities in every “ethnicity.”

In John’s Gospel, the linkage between discipleship and apostolate is, if anything, even more dramatic. The stories of the calling of Jesus’ first disciples portray how Andrew and Philip moved almost immediately from their formation as disciples to their mandate as apostles (John 1:40–51). After responding to Jesus’ invitation to “come and see,” Andrew went out and found Simon, his brother, and brought him to Jesus, who immediately confirmed his calling as he changed his name. Similarly, Philip responded to Jesus’ invitation to discipleship, “follow me,” by finding Nathanael and inviting him with the basic apostolic message, “come and see.” All through this gospel, Jesus emphasizes his own “sending” (we need always to remember that “mission” means “sending”), only then to draw that overarching theme together into the climactic assertion of the gospel: “As my Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

FORMING DISCIPLES

If, from the missional church perspective, the work of the Christian is witness, both corporately and individually, then the central function of scripture is to continue the formation of disciples for apostolate that was initiated by Jesus and continued in the apostolic establishment of witnessing communities. This affirmation that the work of the Christian is witness certainly emerges out of the missional interpretation of the New Testament. This is one of the most provocative and transformative aspects of the missional church discussion. Guided by missional thinkers such as Lesslie Newbigin, Karl Barth, and David Bosch, we are learning to approach the biblical word asking this question: “How did this written testimony continue the formation of Christian communities for their missional vocation then, and how does it do so today?” We see this pattern especially in Paul’s interactions with New Testament communities. The purpose of his evangelization was always to form a community to continue the witness. His concern, expressed in his epistles, was that they should continue to carry out that mandate. They were to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which [they had] been called” (Eph 4:1; see 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:11; Phil 1:27; Col 1:10). They were to continue to be “Christ’s letter to the world” (2 Cor 3:3). They were, as clay-jar Christians, to bear this treasure faithfully so that “grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God” (2 Cor 4:15).

When one examines the imperatives in the New Testament epistles, it becomes very clear that the “work” of early Christians was their “witness.” Every dimension and aspect of their life before a watching world, to borrow John Howard Yoder’s oft cited phrase, was crucial to their witness. Witness was, as we said above, not one of several activities, but the description of who they were and what they were for. How they lived together, how they dealt with their disagreements, how they interacted with the customs and practices of their pagan context, how rich

treated poor, husbands treated wives, owners treated slaves, parents treated children, how they practiced their sexuality—everything was subsumed under this one vocation: “you shall be my witnesses,” and demonstrated what it meant to “live a life worthy of one’s calling.” It is, therefore, of enormous importance that they learn from their apostolic evangelists the way of life that communicates the gospel.

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The purpose of the formation of these communities, initiated by Jesus with his disciples and continued by the apostles, was not to create enclaves of the pure and the righteous who lived in legalistically defined isolation from their polluted environments. These communities were to demonstrate before the world the nature of the love and healing that God had made real for all in Christ in the way that they lived and related. Paul teaches the Corinthians that, in spite of their frailties and the opposition and rejection they experience, they are to live in such a way that “the life of Jesus may also be made visible in [their] bodies...the life of Jesus may be made visible in [their] mortal flesh” (2 Cor 4:10–11). Their work, beginning with how they earned their bread, to how their families lived, to the character of their called communities, to their interactions with their neighbors, was defined as their witness. It seems to me to be clear that the necessary outcome of the basic assumptions and insights of the current missional church discussion must be a strong focus upon the work of witness, which means, I believe, that the lay apostolate merits our full attention. As we see more and more evidence of the “end of Christendom,” especially in our public and cultural life, the issues of ministry in daily life become more urgent. The constant question of the earnest Christian in the workplace is, “How shall we then witness?” The answers are by no means easy. To assume that North American society is still, in its core, Christian, is both dangerous and illusory. But the response is not to retreat to “fortress ecclesia.” Rather, it is to take the fundamentally missional character of the gathered church so seriously that we begin to ask, “How shall we prepare one another for our work as witness when we are gathered for worship, nurture, and fellowship?”

The missional church discussion does indeed need to address the questions of worship, of sacramental practice, and of church discipline. But it must do so not as ends in themselves—we have learned from our critical examination of the Christendom legacy that this focus upon the church as an end in itself is at the heart of our problem! Rather, we need to explore how our gathering for worship, for sacramental celebration, for mutual encouragement and edification, can serve to equip each of us for our “sent-outness,” for our apostolate as the church dispersed. We need to work seriously on what it means to be light, leaven, and salt. We really

don't know, in this late-Christendom world, what it looks like to "lead our lives worthy of the calling with which we have been called." But that is our work, and it constitutes our witness, and it must be the focus both of our theological efforts and their translation into the structures and practices of our witnessing communities. ⊕

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