



# Missional Journal

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## Narcissism and Materialism

In the last issue of the *Missional Journal* I shared my thoughts about how eschatological reductionism impacts our understanding of the gospel. I'd like to continue by addressing two other forms of reductionism that affect the way Americans read and hear the Bible.

### Narcissistic reduction

I grew up in churches that taught the need for sinners to "receive Jesus as personal Savior and Lord." This emphasis on the individual and particular nature of Christian faith is rooted in Scripture and in the Protestant Reformation. Churches that lose sight of this personal dimension are in trouble.

But it is also good to think about this teaching in light of the danger of reductionism. Does the culture of North America distort the way we hear the gospel on this point? The answer for many of us is "yes!"

Many culture-watchers have recognized that **individualism in America has gone to seed**. The descriptive term used by some is "narcissism"--excessive love or admiration of oneself. It is the outlook of a "me-first" generation. It is self-centeredness turned into a virtue defined vaguely as a feeling of "self-fulfillment."

Sociologist Robert Bellah has provided a powerful description of this cultural phenomenon under the terminology "expressive individualism." The problem, he says, is that people sense a ". . . lack of fit between the present organization of the self and the available organization of

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work, intimacy, and meaning. . . . In its own understanding, the expressive aspect of our culture exists for the liberation and fulfillment of the individual. Its genius is that it enables the individual to think of commitments--from marriage and work to political and religious involvement--as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives." (*Habits of the Heart* [Harper and Row, 1985], p. 47)

The problem for our hearing of the gospel in this context is "Christian narcissism"--**the disposition to understand salvation as a purely private transaction between God and the sinner.** From this perspective the gospel serves to underwrite the personal drive for self-fulfillment. Christian narcissism lacks a biblical understanding of the church as a community of believers committed to the Lord and to one another. Instead, Christian narcissists focus on meeting their own individual needs and evaluate the local congregation by its perceived success in advancing their own spiritual agenda. This obviously turns the congregation primarily into a dispenser of goods and services for spiritual consumers--what I call the "Wal-Martization" of the church.

Christian narcissism also distorts worship. After all, worship is a God-centered activity; whereas, narcissism is about *me*. Perhaps this is why so much of what passes for worship today is really emotional self-therapy. We often prefer to tell God about our *emotions in worship* rather than "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). So we tell the Lord we have had a tough week. Life is hard. "I love you, I need you, I'm desperate for you," we sing. God, give us an experience of your presence to help us cope with our frenetic life-styles!

But this gets the cart before the horse. As David Fitch points out, authentic worship ". . . cannot, however, pursue 'experience' as an end in itself because we cannot assume a truthful experience without first being shaped by God in worship. . . . The presenting, remembering, and re-presenting of God through the Word and the Table comes first to the congregation, which then in turn responds." (*The Great Giveaway* [Baker, 2005], p. 111)

All of this takes us back to our original question: What does it mean for us to hear the gospel *again for the first time*? It means we hear the story as a grand narrative of God's purpose from eternity to eternity. It is this drama that Jesus sums up in the phrase "the gospel of the kingdom." It is not a privatized

gospel, a transaction between God and me. It is rather the action of the eternal triune God who is on a mission to reconcile the world to himself.

Jesus calls me to participate in this mission. I do so by "receiving Christ as personal savior" AND by entering into a community of disciples (his body) who together share in the resurrected life of Jesus. In this body he is the head and I am one member among many. **The story is no longer about me but about him and his people, who are now on mission to the world.** For the narcissist this is a frightening reversal, and one that we would prefer to avoid.

### **Materialist reduction**

Jesus had tough words for the wealthy. Think of his words to the rich young ruler to "sell everything you have and give to the poor . . . then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). Or consider his "woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort" (Luke 6:24). The inauguration of the Lord's ministry is framed by the words of the prophet Isaiah: "the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Is. 61:1; Luke 4:18).

It is not surprising that the wealthiest culture in the history of the world would be uncomfortable with this aspect of the gospel. We prefer ignoring this teaching or, if we cannot ignore it, domesticating it. Yes, we say to ourselves, Jesus said these things but we know that wealth and possessions are not the real problem. It is our *attitude* toward money and things that Jesus is really concerned about. After all, Abraham was a wealthy guy, etc., etc. In some circles we are even told that God wants us to be rich. Financial success is part of the gospel!

Now my point is not to argue against a nuanced understanding of the biblical teaching about wealth and possessions. Nor is it to set a Christian standard for "maximum earned income" or to advise you to give away your retirement savings.

Rather, my concern is that as well-off western Christians we should not get comfortable with the Lord's teaching about wealth. His first hearers were shocked by his teaching ("who then can be saved?!). But we are not shocked. That we are so comfortable with his words suggests that there is some serious reductionism taking place.

Our culture is driven by the "need" to spend, acquire, and

consume far beyond what is healthy for any of us. The constant bombardment of slick advertising fans the flame of desire. We are consumed by consumption. But in our quest for more, we find that we have less, particularly in the realm of the Spirit.

Jesus, of course, knows full well how distracted we are. We should expect that he would address these questions, expect that the gospel would lay the axe at the root of the tree of our consumption. We should also expect that as western Christians our tendency would be to avoid the cutting edge of the kingdom message at just this point. And so we do.

What would happen in our churches if we were more open in speaking with each other about how we use our money, how much "stuff" is enough, or how our daily lives are structured around the pursuit of things? I suspect that much of our silence on these issues is also a reflection of the Christian narcissism which says that spirituality is about my private relationship to God but has little place for mutual accountability within the body of Christ.

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To summarize then, **missional churches** are alive to the challenge of faithfully communicating the gospel to the culture(s) of North America. This is more than just changing the form of the message or the style of presentation. The content of the message must also be evaluated because every generation faces the danger of *reductionism*. Therefore, missional churches will seek to hear the message again for themselves so as to communicate and live out more authentic expressions of Christian faith.

