



Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

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You Respond

I've appreciated the thoughtful responses I've received from my e-mail letters. I'll be sharing some of them with you in this newsletter. Your comments are welcome, please e-mail us!

president@biblical.edu

Hi Dave,
Your thoughts on authenticity in the latest Missional Journal strike right at the heart of what I sense postmodern unbelief is searching for.... I am reminded of an article entitled "Zarathustra Shrugged" by Andy Crouch in which he insightfully pointed out, the question that people are asking today is not "Is Christianity true?" but "Is Christianity worth believing?" Crouch states that the distinction between the two questions lies in their respective requirements for satisfactory answers. The first requires propositional argument, marshaled in courtroom language. The second requires an attractive vision, shaped by authentic living.

Rick Patton
MA, 1988

Greetings! I read this journal a few times this morning. I am so blessed that I attended Biblical. Trust me when I tell you that experience truly changed my whole life. Thank you.

The Missional Congregation-Part 2

In this issue we continue to reflect on the question, what does a missional congregation look like? (Part 1 of this discussion considered authenticity as a defining mark of a missional church.)

Spiritual Formation

The need for authenticity leads to the question, "How does a congregation develop a life-style that encourages spiritual growth?" One important answer offered by a number of missional leaders is the recovery of ancient practices of spiritual formation. These are habits with proven value in developing Christian identity.

They do not, however, fit easily with the frenetic pace and shallow spirituality of much of our Christian existence. Americans who spend any time overseas often testify to the shock they experience upon returning to the States. Our blatant consumerism and narcissism are more apparent when seen from the perspective of newly industrialized countries or the "two-thirds" world.

In a similar way, spiritual practices passed on to us by Christians of other times and places provide important perspectives to positively shape our discipleship. In this article I mention two of the basic disciplines.

The Daily Office (Fixed Hour Prayer)

Praying with the church at fixed times of the day is a monastic practice rooted in the Old Testament and the prayer life of Jesus. A variety of prayer manuals combine extensive biblical materials (particularly from the Psalter) with hymns, readings, and profoundly theological prayers. Missional leaders, along with other contemporary Christians, are rediscovering the soul-shaping rhythm of praying with

Karen Cooper
MDiv, 2004

Excellent article, and I love the series...
One challenge for our church is that we've historically been a "seeker targeted" church in the modern sense. We're now finding that seekers have changed and that Missional Ministry is much more compelling than simply a "kickin' program."

Dave Johnson, Pastor
Kalamazoo Community Church
MA, 1997

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the global church.

Calvin Miller has described his own interest in ancient Celtic prayer tradition: "This fire that burned in the century after Rome had burned was a flame fueled by an ardor that most Western Christians have never known. I wanted to find the flame again. For it is sometimes by looking at the past that the present amends its dead soul, and there dawns a hope that the future will be born with new vitality." *The Path of Celtic Prayer* [IVP, 2007], p .8.

These orders of prayer are not alternatives to private or spontaneous prayers, but an invaluable complement. In times when our private prayer life is cold or shallow, fixed-hour prayers help us verbalize what our own hearts cannot articulate. In a culture of radical individualism, the daily office drives home the reality of our confession: "I believe in the holy catholic church." We are reminded that we are not alone in the Christian journey but are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses-many have gone on before, many are currently on the road with us.

Another deeply formative benefit of this discipline is that it challenges our frantic life-styles. We are driven by the clock. Scot McKnight asks, "Is there another way? There is: That other way is to let the hours of prayer shape our days. The blessings of life that enter most deeply into our soul do not come by our finding more free time or more leisure. Those blessings enter the soul when we let soul rhythms, the sacred rhythms of prayer, shape the structure of our day." *Praying with the Church* [Paraclete Press, 2006], p. 36.

McKnight is a self-described "low church" evangelical who, like me, is rediscovering elements of ancient Christian wisdom that profoundly challenge the assumptions and practices of Christians in the modern /postmodern West. His book is a very accessible introduction to a variety of prayer manuals from different theological traditions.

What lessons could be learned if a small group (or a large group!) in your church committed to a six-month experiment in fixed-hour prayer? Suppose everyone in the group kept a journal of the experience and then met together every week to share what they learned? Transformational? No doubt!

Disciplines of the Word

Missional churches will need to reinvigorate the classical spiritual disciplines related to Scripture: hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on God's Word. Here, as in the case of

prayer, there is much that has been lost in the modern church. **Most people do not listen well, read thoughtfully, study diligently, or memorize effectively.** And very few have any clue on how to meditate—they may even confuse biblical meditation with the techniques of non-Christian religions.

What the church needs is a broad engagement of the congregation with the overall story of the Bible, not simply better sermons. A welcome recent development in biblical hermeneutics is the emphasis on narrative and the power of narratives to shape our lives. All of us live out a story. Generally, however, we live out the American story built around ideas of rugged individualism, personal freedom, materialism, and the drive for self-fulfillment.

There is a better story for us to learn and live into. It is the story of a people called to share in the life of the triune God and to join his mission of reconciling all things to himself. It is a radical, subversive, and dangerous story that challenges all other stories, including the American story.

Most of our congregations no longer know much of the biblical story and so are not shaped by it. Eugene Peterson laments the fact that in a day of increased interest in spirituality "...there is not a corresponding revival of interest in our Holy Scriptures... It is a matter of urgency that interest in our souls be matched by an interest in our Scriptures." *Eat this Book* [Eerdmans, 2006], p. 17.

The Bible is the primary shaper of Christian identity, but it is not a magic book. It will not transform our lives just because we say great things about it, such as it is holy, inspired, infallible, inerrant. Many who affirm these words are largely unaffected by their truth. Frequently we come to the Bible with the wrong agenda. As Peterson notes: "It is possible to read the Bible from a number of different angles and for various purposes without dealing with God as God has revealed himself, without setting ourselves under the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who is alive and present in everything we are and do." (p. 30.)

Above all, the temptation is to read Scripture from the standpoint of the *sovereign self*. We want to use Scripture for our own agenda, to make it "relevant" to our individual lives, to find "principles" for developing successful careers, raising healthy families, and finding emotional healing. All of this easily misses the point: **the biblical story is not about us but about God.** An elderly pastor once said to me, "The goal is not to apply the Bible to your life, but to apply your life to the Bible." Exactly!

To see change we must once again become learning communities focused on the Word. Preaching needs to communicate the broad movements of biblical history that give meaning and depth to the gospel. New members (and frequently old members!) need a basic survey to orient them to the narrative flow of the Bible. And we must teach people once again the basic practices of biblical study and (especially) meditation.

So how about challenging a small group to read through the Old Testament (or the whole Bible) in a year? And suppose they were to meet every other week to discuss what they were learning? What about a "lab course" in which believers practice meditation on a common biblical text and then meet to share what the Spirit is teaching them? Or what about some group experiences with *Lectio Divina* (a method of prayer and scripture reading intended to promote communion with God) in order to cultivate biblically based meditation and discernment?

I am convinced that unless we allow the ancient practices to reshape our congregational life, the renewed concern for mission will be still-born.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Davis", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.