



# Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

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## Hearing the Gospel Again for the First Time

In our last issue we looked at how Jesus' teaching about the kingdom resonated deeply with the hopes and aspirations of his first hearers, while also challenging some of their most cherished assumptions. We noted that this is what always happens when the gospel confronts specific cultures and people groups: there are elements that attract and elements that repel. The danger in all this is that any culture, including the culture of North America, tends to suppress or distort aspects of the gospel that are incompatible with it. Darrell Guder calls this problem "reductionism."

**Missional churches are concerned for both the fruitful reception and faithful communication of the gospel.** So the question is, how does the church in America stumble over the good news of the kingdom? Where might reductionism be obscuring or domesticating the strong words of Jesus and the apostles?

In this article and the next I suggest a few places where the kingdom teaching of Jesus confronts deeply ingrained cultural/theological assumptions in the lives of many Christians, including me.

### Eschatological reduction

The teaching of Jesus focuses on the present *and* the future. In many places we find an emphasis on the kingdom as a *present reality*. It is present in the power of Jesus to heal (Matt. 4:23), and to exorcise demons (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20), and to feed the multitudes. The kingdom is working in the world like seed germinating in a field, or yeast fermenting in bread. It becomes visible in the lives of Jesus' disciples who "seek first

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his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33) and who endure persecution even as they pray for their persecutors (Matt. 5:11, 44).

On the other hand, the fullness of the kingdom *awaits the end of the age*. Only then will the wicked and the righteous be separated finally and forever (Matt. 13:40-43). This is the renewal of all things (Matt. 19:28), when the King gathers with his disciples for the banquet of eternal celebration (Luke 14:15).

**What is important for the missional church is balancing these two aspects--present and future.** Reductionism occurs when we play one off against the other. If the church focuses too much on the present reality of the kingdom, it runs the risk of slipping into mere religious humanitarianism. This was modeled for us in the last century by Protestant liberalism. This type of reductionism entices us to lose sight of the kingdom as a supernatural reality that remains ever dependant upon the initiating and sustaining grace of God.

But there is also the risk that we will focus too much on the future aspects of the kingdom. This also was modeled in the twentieth century as many streams of fundamentalism reacted to liberalism by cultural withdrawal. Perhaps the most extreme cases were found in churches immersed in Dispensational theology. The older expressions of this theology believed the kingdom was specifically Jewish in its focus and had been "postponed" until the completion of "the times of the Gentiles." Such theology easily leads to a posture of separation and isolation from the surrounding culture--seeking God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33) is generally understood as a privatized "getting right with God"--what Dallas Willard aptly calls "the gospel of sin-management."

In contrast, **a balanced eschatology** is holistic. It understands salvation as a reality that is "already-but-not-yet." It touches all of life--private and public; individual and corporate; local, national, and international. Jesus taught us to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The second clause explains the first: the kingdom comes as God's will is done on earth.

Therefore, missional churches don't just ask, "How can we preach to more people?" or, "How can we grow larger congregations?" They ask, "What would our community (or nation, or world) look like if God's will were done on earth

today?" Certainly part of the answer is that people would know and love the one living and true God who has revealed himself in Christ. But wouldn't it also mean that injustice would be righted? That broken marriages would be restored? That abused children would be cared for? The oppressed liberated? The weak, the sick, and the hungry cared for?

**Missional churches believe that the gospel addresses all of life and that being God's missionary people means taking this holistic ministry to the world.** [Scot McKnight](#) recently wrote that the atonement is not just something that God does *for* us, but rather is what he does *in* us in such a way that we are called to participate with God in his redemptive work. The church therefore is called to incarnate the principles of a world set right with God and by God. "A thoroughly biblical understanding of atonement, then, is earthy," says McKnight. "It is about restored relations with God and with self, but also with others and with the world--in the here and now." (*A Community Called Atonement* [Abingdon, 2007], p. 132)

The idea of *incarnating* the gospel is critical. It reminds us that the mission of the church is patterned on the mission of Jesus. The incarnation of the Son of God was not an abstract metaphysical process for improving the world. It was God taking the form of a specific Jewish male in Palestine during the reign of the first Roman emperor Augustus. Jesus came to a specific people at a specific time and place in history.

Missional churches believe that the gospel still has this aspect of particularity and contextuality. They believe that the Spirit of God will lead them to embody the good news in fresh and distinctive ways for their own communities, and they cultivate a spirit of discernment which allows them to be "laborers together with God" in their specific context.

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Next time we look at two other places where reductionism threatens our faithful hearing of the Gospel.

