



Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

November 2007, Vol 1. No. 9

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What is the Gospel?

Asking this question feels a bit unnerving to many of believers. After all, if we don't know the answer to this question after 2000 years, we've got a problem, right? But, in fact, missional churches are asking the question seriously. In this article I want to help you understand why this is a sign of strength not weakness.

Reductionism

Every now and again we need to remind ourselves that the gospel was given in a particular cultural and historical milieu--1st century Judaism in the larger context of the Mediterranean world. In succeeding centuries Christians translated the gospel into the languages and thought forms of the Greco-Roman world. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312 signaled their success--though it might be argued that this important event was also the first step toward the sort of church-state cooperation that eventually left the church compromised and confused about its true mission.

This process of translation, which is a necessary part of mission, always runs the risk of compromising or distorting the message. Translation is necessary, but if we are not careful the gospel we believe and proclaim morphs into something pretty different from what Jesus intended. However--this is very important--**no Christian community can escape this risk.**

Darrell Guder has written very helpfully about a process he calls "**reductionism**." Reduction is an unavoidable aspect of

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any translation process, even translating the Bible into new versions. The translator is never able to convey all that is in the original--anyone who has had the least exposure to learning another language recognizes this fact. Missionaries live with the constant challenge of translating the gospel message into culturally appropriate and relevant categories.

The problem is not reduction, says Guder, but *reductionism* which he defines as **reduction plus control**.

"Reduction, as a necessary aspect of our humanness, is thus not necessarily a problem for biblical faithfulness, until the sinful human desire to control begins to do its work. The message is committed to earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). The gospel can be reduced by these vessels in a great diversity of ways. The danger rests in our desire to 'control God' which leads us to regard our unavoidable reductions of the gospel as validated absolutes. We are constantly tempted to assert that our way of understanding the Christian faith is a final version of Christian truth. We tend to enshrine one cultural articulation of the gospel as the normative statement for all cultures. . . . **Reductionism is at work when we as human witnesses are no longer aware of our own reductions of the gospel.**"(*The Continuing Conversion of the Church* [Eerdmans, 2000], pp. 100-1)

Now if Guder is correct--and I believe he is--then there is always a need for the church to be reflective and self-critical. We can never just assume that we know the gospel in its fullness. We must not think that *others* have distorted or misunderstood elements of the message while *we* have not. Remember that the early Protestants described the church as "reformed and always reforming."

One of the strong points in favor of the missional church movement is its willingness to reexamine the gospel. **We must go back to Scripture in order to communicate the message faithfully to the next generations.** Is it possible that

our hearing of the Word has been compromised by our immersion in the culture of North America? Have ideas or experiences of individualism, prosperity, sexuality, ethnicity, or power colored our understanding of the movement Jesus began?

Of course, by asking these questions I am implying that the American church has been guilty of some *reductionism*. If so, where do we begin reassessing our understanding?

The Good News of the Kingdom

One of the more fruitful lines of inquiry focuses on the ministry of Jesus and particularly on the theme of the kingdom of God (kingdom of heaven). This terminology occurs over 100 times in the NT with the majority of the occurrences found in the Synoptic Gospels. The preaching of John the Baptist is focused on the imperative "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 3:2). On hearing that John has been imprisoned, Jesus takes up the same message (4:17). He travels throughout Galilee "teaching in their synagogue, preaching the good news (gospel) of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (4:23).

So what is this gospel of the kingdom? First, it is an idea deeply rooted in the OT and the consciousness of the Jewish people. The prophets and poets of the OT lived with the conviction that the Lord is the great king over all the earth. "The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble! (Psalm 99:1). Israel is blessed of the Lord when she resides peacefully in her own land with her own king who rules justly and mercifully as God's representative on earth.

The closest approximation to this vision in Israel's experience was the reign of David, the man after God's own heart. Although most of David's descendants failed miserably to follow his example, the prophets looked forward to a day when a descendant of David's would take the throne and bring salvation and blessing to Israel (Jer. 33:15-16; Amos 9:11; Micah 5:2). This king would be the Lord's anointed, the Messiah. In his days "the mountain of the Lord's house will be established as chief among the mountains . . . and all nations will stream to it" (Isaiah 2:2). The Messiah would set the world to right. He would overthrow the oppressor, deliver the weak, and cleanse the land from its idolatry. Jesus' teaching about the kingdom was guaranteed to resonate deeply with the

hopes and aspirations of his first hearers. But it also challenged some of their most cherished assumptions.

This is not surprising because they, like us, were also prone to reductionism. For example, many of them made the assumption that because God had chosen to reveal himself in a special way to Abraham that they, as descendants of Abraham, would automatically be blessed by the arrival of the kingdom. But John the Baptist quickly disabused them of such arrogance--and Jesus told them that many (like the Roman centurion) "will come from east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside" (Matt. 8:11). The book of Acts shows us that the early Christians continued to struggle with assumptions of Jewish privilege at least until the Jerusalem council (Acts 15).

Obviously the good news of the kingdom came to its original hearers as a message of hope, but also as confrontation and challenge. Only those with "ears to hear" would enter; only those who allowed some of their most fundamental cultural and religious assumptions to be corrected would become followers of Jesus.

Next time around we will reflect on what this teaching about the kingdom means to the North American church. Stay tuned!

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