

Rethinking the Basis for Authentic Mission, by David Takle

I graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary in June 2005 with a Master of Divinity and a concentration in Christian Formation. This paper was originally written for a missions class as a reaction to the “missional paradigm” that was taken for granted in the classroom. From my perspective, this paradigm is completely faulty and is incapable of sustaining a vibrant mission.

Abstract

The Biblical text consistently teaches that authentic mission can only arise out of spiritual vitality and personal experience of the power of God in one’s life. Recovery of this basic truth is vital to the future of missions, because mission based on obedience to some mandate is not only insufficient, but dangerous to the message we preach.

Missiologists have often observed that the West is in need of being re-evangelized and that the church here is largely made up of nominal Christians. At the same time they have attempted to develop a model of mission that could be undertaken by that very same church, as though the shift to an outward focus would be sufficient in and of itself to address the primary deficit in the church. I am convinced that such a view greatly underestimates the nature of the problem we face and generates a faulty basis for mission.

The Western church is in trouble not because it has lost its outward mission, but because it no longer knows its own message experientially. As Dallas Willard has so ably pointed out, we have reduced the gospel to a theology of sin management (Willard 1998:35-59). Churches at one end of the spectrum present the gospel as the means by which we go to heaven when we die; those at the other end insist that the gospel is about social justice and reform. But neither one is addressing the most fundamental issue of the New Covenant: that God intends to transform the human heart so that people truly desire to live in his will and are increasingly able to do so. That is the core of God’s mission in the world. Only when the church recovers its belief in and its experience of transformation will we be able to grasp the true nature of our mission to the world. This thesis echoes the sentiments of the Lausanne Covenant where it says that “evangelism should arise spontaneously from a Spirit-filled church ... evangelism will become a realistic possibility only when the Spirit renews the church in truth and wisdom, faith, holiness, love and power” (ICWE 1974:section 14).

My approach here will be to examine several passages that clearly demonstrate the relationship between spiritual vitality and mission, and then conclude with a summary analysis of the Scriptural data and a look at practical application of the premise.

Mission in the Restoration of David: Psalm 51

This Psalm contains one of the most famous prayers of repentance in all of Scripture. King David had committed adultery with a married woman and then arranged for the death of her husband so he could marry her and cover for her pregnancy. When Nathan the prophet confronted the king with a powerful parable, David saw the significance of his sin and went into deep mourning and repentance. This Psalm is his prayer.

Given the context, this would seem to be a most unlikely place for mission to arise. But in the midst of his sorrow over his sin, David looks beyond the present moment to the hope of restoration. He prays that his sin will be forgiven, for the cleansing of his soul, for a clean heart and steadfast spirit, the presence of God's Spirit, for joy, and for a willing heart to sustain him. And with the granting of these things he sees an important outcome – that he will be able to teach other transgressors the ways of God and that “sinners will be converted” (v.10-13).

In saying this, David is **not** vowing to do something good if God will answer his prayer. He simply anticipates the work of God in his life, and knows that when his restoration is complete he will have an incredible story to tell of the mercy of God, a story powerful enough to persuade other sinners to repent. Thus his idea of witness is not an earned right, a duty, or an arrangement that he makes; it is the privilege of one who has experienced the work of God first hand.

This is the basic meaning of “witness” that occurs repeatedly in the Psalms: people who cannot contain themselves but feel compelled to declare the wonders of God which they have seen. That is the kind of witness that David longs to be after he has experienced the mercy of reconciliation. If **he** can be restored, then anyone can be. That is something to be excited about and a message worth telling.

It is also important to note here that even though David is an acknowledged sinner, there is no hint anywhere that he will be a witness while he remains actively engaged in his sin, while he remains unrepentant or unforgiven, or while he retains a sense of separation from God. But more than that, David has nothing to witness to while he is hiding his sin. Any attempt to teach sinners would be a mockery born out of denial of his own condition and the lack of contact with the Spirit of God. This is as much a false witness as one who lies outright. He cannot bear a message he is not living. Only when he has been restored does the concept of “eye witness to the mercy of God” make any sense.

So for David at this point in time, mission was not an obligation or a theological necessity. It was the result of personal experience of restoration to God. And if the message was to have any integrity, it could be nothing else.

The Loss of Mission in Captivity: Psalm 137

If Psalm 51 is one of the greatest prayers of repentance, Psalm 137 is one of the greatest hymns of grief and loss. Having seen the destruction of their beloved temple and Jerusalem, the captives of Israel had been chained together and marched hundreds of miles to the heart of their oppressor's land. There they sat down on foreign soil never to see their homeland again, only to be taunted by their captors. “Where is your god now, Israel? Look at all the stuff we dragged here from your temple! What an impotent god you must have! Sing to us one of your praise songs, so we can laugh at your pitiful religion!”

And so they are left with a haunting question: “How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” (v.4). They have no voice, no response, no apologetic, no mission. Their sin has brought them to a place of alienation from God himself, and there is nothing of the truth that can be said here. There is no power to persuade, and no witness to the goodness and mercy of God. They have been defeated by their own hands, and have lost the privilege of mission.

Now one might be tempted to point to the judgment of God as the immediate cause for their loss of mission. After all, God is the one who raised up Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and carry away the people. So it was God who suspended their mission. But this fails to do justice to the broader scope. Israel had ceased being a covenant nation by choice, long before their exile. They had imported idolatry from the surrounding nations and profaned the name of God to the point where they had no light to share with the world. Instead of being a model of those who are in covenant with the one God, they were fast becoming just another pagan nation in a dark world. They were no longer a “witness” by definition of the word.

Secondly, there are significant parallels between Israel’s situation and the Western church. The connection between spiritual fidelity and mission can be seen in the messages to the Asian churches in Revelation. There Jesus is seen as a righteous judge who will move against the wayward churches. The church at Laodicea is characterized as “miserable and poor and blind and naked” (3:17), a condition that is diametrically opposed to their own optimistic propositions about themselves. In addition to their own spiritual poverty, they are presenting a false witness to their lives. The church of Ephesus is threatened with its very existence unless they repent (2:5), and removing their lamp stand has to mean at least the end of their witness.

Finally, Babylon is for Israel a symbol of all that they had already gone after spiritually. “Babylon was regarded as an epitome of religion and culture, and as such Babylon represents the kingdoms of this world” (Sproul 1995:1045). God was giving them that which they had been pursuing all along. The result was a form of bondage that they were unable to break free of. It is in this context that the songs of Zion became a painful memory instead of a message of light to the nations.

To whatever extent we allow the ways of the world to override the covenant that we have with God, we compromise our message and forfeit any integrity to its content. The gospel becomes a pipe dream instead of a way of life, at which time the world has every reason to ridicule and taunt us with “sing us one of the songs of Zion.” We are watching the church lose its voice not because the world has become more secular, but because we have compromised our integrity. Whatever words we might express have no meaning in “Babylon” because much of the church has fallen captive to the gods of this world. We would do well to remember Zion and pray for a return from exile, so that we could live as a covenant people of God with a message to share with the world.

Mission in the Restoration of Israel: Isaiah 55

It is precisely that sort of restoration that the prophet envisions in this well-known passage. The setting is again Israel’s exile in Babylon, with several implications for mission that are of significance for our study. First, this poetic message is among other things, a beautiful invitation to abundant life. God is not offering them eternity or life after death. Any theme of social justice is far removed. There are no theological abstractions regarding the proper role of humanity in creation. The focus is simply on enough abundance to delight the soul (v.1-2). This fact is extremely important. The reign of God is life to our body and soul. Its effects are not meant to be abstract, theoretical, or purely eschatological, but a present reality.

Second, this offer is extended to his own people. Isaiah is not preaching to the pagan nations with an offer of salvation. He is calling the people of God to repent (v.6-7) and turn to the Lord to receive a full pardon for their past wickedness, because they are the ones in need of reconciliation. In other words, the first

part of God's mission at this time is to bring his own people into a living reality of the covenant relationship, and in so doing to meet the deepest needs of their impoverished souls.

Third, God wants to extend his mercy beyond the nation of Israel. His intention is to make his covenant people a witness to the nations (v.5). But he makes it clear that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between their renewal and their mission to the other nations. The reason that the nations will respond to the call of Israel is because the presence of God and the glory of Israel will be evident to them (v.5). A nation living in abundance (v.1), peace and joy (v.12), and the blessing of God (v.12-13) is attractive and inviting. So Israel's own restoration is the prerequisite for their participation in the mission of God. This order is necessary because the nature of mission is to tell to others what one has witnessed and experienced, and because only then is the message believable.

Finally, this is not an isolated message in Isaiah. The theme of restoration followed by mission to the nations is repeated many times, especially in the second half of the book. In chapter 43, the first seven verses describe the restoration of the Israel, emphasizing their experience, and the next few verses proclaim that they will then tell of their own salvation to the rest of the world as witnesses of God. This process is repeated in chapter 49 where the future mission of Israel is described as becoming a light to the Gentiles (v.6).

In much of this prophecy there are echoes of Psalm 51. Just as David expected to turn his renewal into a mission to others who had sinned, so also the restoration of Israel was to result in their being a witness to the other nations. That is the plan of God. Every encounter with the divine that transforms the person or community is a demonstration of the glory and grace of God, which cannot properly be contained. Thus mission is born naturally out of the experience of spiritual renewal.

Mission in the Witness of Jesus: John 3

It would be something of an understatement to say that Jesus was the quintessential missionary. His message of the Kingdom reign of God was the most powerfully demonstrated word ever spoken to our world. And within his revelation are clues to the nature of the relationship between message and messenger that we cannot ignore without endangering the Good News itself. One place in particular where this relationship is evident is his conversation with Nicodemus. Whatever the man's original reason for coming to Jesus, the interaction quickly became a direct encounter with the mission of God that was present in the person of Jesus (v.16). During that dialogue, a couple of things surfaced that are of importance to our thesis.

First, Jesus carefully laid out his claim to be a "witness" of the things of God. At the heart of his claim was the statement that "we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen" (v.11). John the Baptist reiterates this claim later on when he says that Jesus is declaring what he has seen and heard (v.32). This is a crucial point. Jesus is making a claim to authenticity and integrity in his message. He is not speaking about things he has never experienced, or things that he has simply been told are true or that he read in a book; he speaks of what he knows to be true because he lives in that reality.

Second, Jesus' statement raises an interesting question: What did he 'know' that was the basis of his witness? Well, certainly he knew the Father personally (Jn.1:18) and had a relationship with him that was beyond what anyone else had ever experienced. When Jesus taught about the Kingdom reign of God, he did so from the vantage point of living under God's reign himself. His offer of the Holy Spirit to all people came

from a life lived in the power of the Spirit (Lk.4:14). Teaching of resistance to temptation came from personal victory over temptation (Lk.4:1-13). The Sermon on the Mount was primarily a statement about what Kingdom life looked like from his perspective. And so on. Jesus never presented untested theory to the crowds or untested promises of what life could be like.

The lesson that we take from all of that is a well-rounded understanding of the term “witness” as one who tells what has been seen and experienced personally, not just in theory or in some hoped-for future event. As the primary agent in the mission of God, Jesus' example is not to be taken lightly or as an exception to the norm, but as the defining pattern.

Mission by the Gerasene Demoniac: Mark 5 (also Mt.8:28-34; Lk.8:26-39)

After Jesus and his disciples encountered the severely demonized man who lived in the tombs near Gadara (or Gerasa) and Jesus had delivered him from the demons, the people of the area insisted that Jesus and his disciples leave. At that point the healed man wanted to go with them, but Jesus sent him back to his home town with the command to report “what great things the Lord has done for you, and how he had mercy on you” (v.19). The man complied with Jesus’ directive, and the people in that region were amazed at his story of deliverance (v.20).

Once again we see the pattern confirmed. A man is delivered from bondage and is given a mission of telling what God had done for him personally. His message was not about hoping to go to heaven when he died, but about encountering God while he was yet alive.

Suppose that the man had only seen Jesus from a distance and had never been set free from the demons. If he went into the towns to tell people he had seen Jesus, chances are they would have picked up sticks and rakes and chased him back to the tombs. Without transformation, his message would have had no meaning. But as a testimony of deliverance, he was a witness to the grace, mercy, and power of God.

It is interesting to note as well the reaction of the people to this strange man and his experience. Initially, they were frightened of his sanity (v.15), perhaps because his prior state was nothing short of legendary, and they may have had difficulty believing their eyes. But when he began his mission in earnest, they marveled (v.20). The transformation had come full circle: he was in a place to minister to them! How wonderfully ironic! How impossible! But that is the power of mission coming out of an authentic encounter with God. Nothing remotely like that mission could have occurred prior to the man's transformation.

Mission in the Witness of the Apostles: Acts 2

One final classic example of mission coming out of an encounter with God can be seen in the birth of the church in Acts 2. The event of course is Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit fell on the 120 disciples and changed their lives forever. Within hours, the church had grown by several thousand, and the mission given to the disciples was being fleshed out. All this from a band of people who a few weeks prior had been running for their lives, afraid that everything they had hoped for was coming to an end.

Within the sermon Peter gave that day are two elements of witness, both of which are relevant to our thesis. The first is Peter’s reference to the fact that there were 120 people present who had seen the risen Lord. This he offered to give credibility to the claim that he was an authentic witness. The second element is

Peter's reference to the manifestations that the people listening to him were witnessing. As God's witness, he was interpreting the event for them. But the point is that they were seeing the work of God in a way that they could not dismiss. This added credibility to the message of Peter, that the Spirit of God was now available to all who would repent and turn to the Lord. Peter and the others were real examples of Spirit-filled lives at that moment, to the extent that it was readily apparent to those observing. So Peter could speak from a place of authority and preach about the source of his newly found life.

Thus the mission of the church was born out of direct experience of the Holy Spirit. More accurately, the mission was a natural outcome of that experience. There was no time to develop mission paradigms, to debate the pros and cons of confronting people with their sin, or to design a seeker-friendly service. Peter simply participated in what God was actually doing at the moment, and the rest is history. For him, mission was little more than acting as an interpreter for the work of God that was already visible. Had he preached that very same sermon two days earlier, the entire 120 could easily have lost their lives. In one sense, it would have been exactly the same "mission." But there was one major difference: he was speaking out of a level of engagement with God that was not present before.

One observation we can make concerning this event is that even though they had been through three amazing years of training at the feet of Jesus, it still took the empowering of the Spirit to put fire to their mission. Now today, rather than direct access to Jesus like they had, we rely on textbooks, some history, a handful of flawed mentors, and a mere fraction of the total sayings of Jesus for instruction in the Christian life. How much more should we rely on genuine engagement with the Spirit and authentic experience of the Kingdom in order to birth a meaningful mission? On what basis can we trust any mission that arises instead primarily out of a sense of obedience to a biblical mandate?

Analysis

The above passages have all demonstrated that the natural outcome of a vital engagement with God is mission to others. And in most instances it was apparent that mission would have been meaningless or disastrous without that spiritual vitality. But for the sake of argument, suppose that mission was actually undertaken without it. How would it differ? The most obvious difference would be that the message itself would change. The Good News could not be about deliverance or transformation, because it would lack credible evidence. So then what? That God cares for the poor? So do hundreds of secular organizations and a good many governments. That you can go to heaven when you die? An interesting theory, but what does that have to do with today? And besides, there are a number of competing philosophies that sound just as plausible. So it would seem that when mission is separated from the spiritual integrity of the agent, it not only loses credibility in regard to addressing the mess in people's lives, but it is unable to find a meaningful message at all.

Looking at the problem from another angle, exactly what kind of mission are we talking about in the first place? If the God's mission is primarily to dispense grace to humanity, then the church might focus on making sacraments available to all or getting people to recite "the sinner's prayer" or whatever else is determined to be the means of grace. If God is all about reforming society, then the church's mission would clearly be to fight injustice, poverty, and all the bad systemic problems of the world. If God is primarily

interested in forming a covenant people who live holy lives in relationship with him, then the church should be proclaiming a message of deliverance and transformation. The point is that whatever the purpose of God's mission, it changes the focus of the church and even the propositions we make regarding God's redemptive activity. And since I believe that only a mission of full reconciliation to God can be supported by Scripture, we must look toward a message of transformation and discipleship, which in turn is entirely dependent upon the character of the church that is proclaiming the message.

Now for whatever reason, this aspect of mission seems conspicuously absent from a great many missiology texts. Especially disturbing is what appears to be the opposite approach, which assumes that with enough training, motivation, and outward focus, we can be good missionaries. Spiritual development becomes a secondary concern, relegated to those "less focused" on outward mission. But this misses the fundamental nature of God's mission, which is spiritual formation, not making converts. In the process we drive a huge wedge between missional concerns and pastoral concerns, and do serious damage to the credibility of the gospel.

There is a glaring problem in the West of rapidly declining church attendance and the decreasing number of people who can articulate what it means to be a Christian. If the church is unable to hold its own people, how is it that we think we are prepared to do convince those outside the church to join? There seems to be a major disconnect here between our "mission" and our own experience of the very message we are proclaiming.

Finally, with each passing decade, the world is less and less interested in our propositions. What they seek is authenticity. Like the book of James they ask for faith to be demonstrated by works. So until the church becomes the kind of people that live naturally under the effective reign of God, no message that it proclaims will be taken very seriously by the world; nor should it. As someone once said, you cannot export what you do not grow at home.

Application

The thesis that authentic Christian mission can only arise out of personal experience of the power of God in one's life leads inevitably to an important mission strategy: the primary avenue to dynamic mission in the North American context is to bring renewal to the church and those who already claim the name of Christ. Any hope of re-evangelizing the Western World is completely dependent upon the church's willingness to re-disciple its own people. There are places where this is being done: the current Spiritual Formation movement; Richard Foster's Renovare organization; and through the works of people like Dallas Willard. We are not talking about another educational program, but a real-world, relationally-based apprenticing model that promotes inner healing and intentional character development. As our churches begin to grow up spiritually, the outreach and service aspects of ministry will grow with us. Of course the mission of renewal does not mean that all mission to the lost must wait until some time in the future when we feel sufficiently healed to offer an irresistible message to the world. The process is to some extent incremental: a little renewal will bring a little mission, which in turn will aid in our development, and so on. But the path to authentic mission is clear.

Conclusion

Mission is not the proclamation of a theology or an attempt to convince people that we know the true facts about life after death. Nor is it simply a mandate in which we must participate in order to be obedient to the Word of God. Mission is declaring the wonders of a God who is at work in our own lives: alcoholics being set free; angry people coming to peace; depressions being lifted; selfishness turning to generosity; lives of abundant joy, and so on. If these things do not exist, if instead we are completely acculturated and afflicted by the same problems that characterize society in general, then what message do we really have? If our concept of social justice is indiscernible from Greenpeace or Unicef, then there is no rational reason why anyone would need revelation. “Good News” becomes “old hat.” Without restoration of joy, without freedom from captivity, without personal experience of the work of God, we have no distinctively Christian mission.

If there is any truth to the above analysis, then any noticeable lack of mission in the church should point us to a deficiency in our spiritual character. Conversely, the problem with the church today is **not** a lack of external focus or a failure of contextualization. What we lack is vital experience of the reign of God in our own lives that would compel the gospel to go forth in all its power. My prayer is that this will not persist much longer in either our churches or in our theology of mission.

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