

A THEOLOGY OF MISSIONAL PREACHING

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DECEMBER, 2010

Introduction

Everything *missional* is catching on. In just over twenty years since the term *missional* was coined,¹ an industry has developed around the concept: There are missional books, missional conferences, missional articles, missional seminars, missional curricula, missional churches, and missional consultants. Leaders and churches seem to want to associate themselves with being missional. The term places a person within a certain theological and ecclesial arena that advocates a renovation of the church as a gathering of people carrying out the mission of God. Theologians and Christian leaders who support missional theology conclude that this and other missional propositions about the church's work must shape the church's visible ministry. The theology, therefore, is being applied to ways the church acts, such as teaching, worship, service and leadership. One particular act central to Christian worship only beginning to be explored in light of missional theology is the act of preaching.

Literature Survey

While there is extensive literature on missional theology, missional activity, and missional church, there is limited literature on missional preaching. Little published application of missional theology to preaching seems to have yet been made in book or article form. That preaching is such a cornerstone of evangelical Christianity and itself has such extensive literature, the discipline of distinctly *missional* preaching is a mine poised for exploration. The most targeted volume available on missional preaching is John Addison Dally's *Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of*

¹ Darrell L. Guder, et al. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

God.² This brief volume is a practitioner's guide to missional preaching, including a history of missional theology, Scriptural themes of missional theology relevant to preaching, a short pattern for making preaching missional, and exercises to find a biblical mandate for missional preaching. Dally's book was part of the literature highlighted at a workshop sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (USA) on missional preaching in 2009 and 2010. This Academy for Missional Preaching provided three cohorts of 25 pastors each the chance to learn about and practice missional preaching. Other than Dally's book on missional preaching, no other published literature available at the workshop discussed missional preaching in any depth. Even a survey of Dally's notes and bibliography reveal no other published literature specific to missional preaching.

Toward a Theology for Missional Preaching

It is the purpose of this paper to offer an abbreviated theology for missional preaching. A comprehensive theology for missional preaching would require far more space than allocated here. The growing acceptance of missional thinking and the priority of preaching in evangelical worship welcome such consideration. Furthermore, preaching in the current missional context could easily adopt the attractive or popular qualities of striving to be missional, resulting in a weak, faddish style of preaching. A strong, supporting backbone of a theology for missional preaching is necessary for preaching to be influenced to the same extent as missional theology attempts to change other facets of the church. To work toward a theology of missional preaching, this paper will: first, offer a brief history of missional theology; and second, list and link hallmark themes of missional theology with the act of preaching.

² John Addison Dally. *Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008).

A Brief History of Missional Theology

Karl Barth is widely understood to be the primary figure in launching the foundational thought leading to what is now called missional theology. Although Barth did not use the term *missional theology*, he did speak of the partnership of *mission and theology* and their influence on each other.³ Barth's ecclesiology led to the conclusion that for the church "mission is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent and in building up itself for the sake of its own being."⁴

During the ensuing two decades, the church developed extensive literature on the connection between mission and theology. Terminology such as *theology of mission* and *mission theology* was used to describe God's mandate for the church's mission character. This topic captivated theologians after Barth in the 1930s because of western cultural changes that demanded the church's attention. The church found itself in a very different landscape compared with recent centuries. Beginning most distinctively with the Constantinian era of Christianity, the church could generally be characterized as an institution increasingly focused on self-preservation. The legalization and even promotion of Christianity by the government bolstered Christianity's visibility and softened its mission intensity. Since the Roman Emperor and governing structure secured Christianity's place in society, the immediacy of evangelism and mission were often compromised. Over time, this affected the church's understanding of mission. Rather than being the purpose and character of the church, mission became one thing among many that the church did. With governments, families and individuals serving as

³ Darrell L. Guder, "From Mission and Theology to Missional Theology" *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 24, no. 1 (2003): 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

benefactors for the church institution, there was little internal pressure to promote mission and evangelism. The church realized that it could survive on its own.

Not until the cultural changes of the middle 1900s was the church spurred to re-think its own identity. Called the de-Christianizing era in Europe and America, this period witnessed a culture of people who no longer accepted and supported the Christian church institution out of heritage. The church could neither rest on its prior reputation because it was no longer valued nor count on the loyalist mentality of previous generations because they no longer existed in younger generations. People questioned their faith and the church and wanted to see how the church was being the church it claimed to be. This sense of crisis sent scholars and theologians to the Bible in an effort to recapture an identity for the church strong enough to address the culture's demands.

The search for a new identity and orientation of the church intersected with the questions Barth and others were raising about the church's relationship to mission. David Bosch described the thought process as changing from a "church centered mission...to a mission centered church."⁵ A portion of theologians and church leaders were being swayed toward the idea that the church was in essence a missionary endeavor. A decisive movement was taken by scholars from the Gospel and Our Culture Network when they began researching the question, "If one were to do one's ecclesiology missiologically, what would it look like?" The findings from that study were published in 1998 as *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Missional theology, therefore, was born out of a quest to define the church's identity as mission.

Since that time, the term *missional theology* and its perspective is working into the language of church leaders and the orientation of congregations. The reaction to

⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

missional theology is evident in the flood of literature that applies the missional church view to church ministry. Church leaders are making a thorough investigation of the implications of missional theology for the church and its ministry.

Themes of Missional Theology for Missional Preaching

The identity of the church that missional theology provides is best represented in themes. These themes are the milestone theological shifts that have occurred—and continue to occur—in reorienting the church toward a missional identity. A helpful step in developing a theology of missional preaching involves highlighting and linking these themes to the task of missional preaching. Just as these themes are central to missional theology, these themes help create a framework for missional preaching. Following are five hallmark themes from missional theology and how they connect to the task of missional preaching.

Theme 1: The church’s mission and the *missio dei*

The term *missio dei* is Latin for “mission of God” or “sending God”. It refers to God’s initiated activity of redeeming people for himself through people God sends. For example, God sent individuals (e.g. the patriarchs from Genesis), families (e.g. the twelve sons of Jacob), the nation of Israel, Israel’s kings, prophets, and finally the church through Jesus Christ. Karl Barth is widely credited with providing the groundwork for the *missio dei* concept to be developed into a fundamental theological theme.⁶ His writing on the subject articulates the relationship between the church and the mission of God:

“The congregation, the so-called homeland church, the community of heathen Christians, should recognize themselves and actively engage themselves as what they essentially are: a missionary community! They are not a mission association

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

or society, not a group that formed itself with *the firm intention* to do mission, hut a human community *called* to the act of mission.”⁷

The concept of *missio dei* is perhaps most foundational for missional theology in that it recaptures the idea that God is continuing to fulfill God’s own mission for creation and it returns the church’s priority to God’s mission over against any other mission.⁸ The concept of *missio dei* corrects the false idea that mission is a segment of the church’s ministry and something the church does. Instead, mission becomes something the church is by nature: a missionary community. In developing this new perspective on the church, Barth and others began interpreting Scripture as describing God’s mission.⁹ This returned God to the sovereign seat of vision and direction for the people of God who then join God on God’s mission. The people of God are the agents by which God accomplishes God’s mission.

The concept of *missio dei* is powerful ammunition in the evangelical preacher’s arsenal. It bolsters an understanding of the sovereignty of God; it reminds people that God remains active in the world; it offers people something bigger than themselves to be part of; it makes people privileged to join God in God’s work; and it connects together the entire redemptive story of Scripture and the church today. Because the *missio dei* is pervasive throughout Scripture and in the world today, it is a theme possible to relate to virtually any preaching topic. To the extent that preaching intends to motivate people to action, the *missio dei* content for such motivation as God’s continuous action in the world to which God invites God’s followers. The context of the preaching event, furthermore, is worship, which is an inherently missional activity. Clayton Schmidt suggests that

⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

⁸ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 85.

⁹ Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 19.

“worship is fundamental to God’s mission. It is the place where God acts to draw people together as the body of Christ...and sends them out into the external activities of mission that take place beyond the church doors.”¹⁰ The act and context, therefore, of preaching can benefit substantially when infused with the theme of *missio dei*.

Theme 2: The church’s mission and the incarnation

The incarnation—the belief that God was born a human in Jesus the Christ—has long been a central doctrine defining Christianity. It has also come to serve a pivotal role in missional theology as the culminating step in God’s mission activity, thanks to Guder. The incarnation, according to Guder, represents “the specific and historical event in which God’s mission reaches its central point and its fullest disclosure.”¹¹ Missional theology adopts what the incarnation represents and applies it to the task of the church today. In this way, the incarnation of Jesus is a model for the ministry of the church. Just as God sent Jesus to be with and for His creation, Scripture mandates followers of God to be with and for the world.¹² Christ’s followers are to continue the incarnational ministry of Jesus by being witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Incarnational ministry became a popular topic in the recent decade as scholars and leaders capitalized on the idea to enhance the church’s relevance in its changing culture. A flurry of literature centered on the ideas of “being Jesus where you are” and “going to them” to communicate the Gospel. Although a right corrective to the extent that the church had frequently become irrelevant in its context, this narrow adoption of incarnational ministry limited the theology’s scope. Guder expands on the application of

¹⁰ Clayton J. Schmidt, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 46.

¹¹ Darrell L. Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church’s Witness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

the incarnation for the church's missional witness by claiming that Jesus was a model for the church in *everything* he did: teaching, loving, conversing, suffering, dying, to name a few. The presence (incarnation) of Jesus is the perfect model for how the church can carry out the mission of God.¹³ This includes avoiding selecting portions of Jesus life and ministry that seem preferable, and instead considering the whole of Jesus' ministry when witnessing to it. If the incarnation is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, it should hold an equally fundamental place in missional theology.

Preaching incarnation missionally is more than communicating that God sent Jesus as a human as part of God's mission. This is only the beginning step. To preach the incarnation missionally is to relate God's incarnation of Jesus with God's incarnation of people. Because the church is the workforce of God's mission, the church must be incarnate in all the ways that Jesus was. As followers grow in Christlike discipleship, they become more thoroughly incarnate in their context, thus participating in the *missio dei*. Preaching is the proclamation of this possibility—the invitation that God gives for people to represent God as incarnate models of the Gospel.

Theme 3: The *sent* church and the context of mission

Central to the missional dialogue is the concept of *sending*. The Gospel writer John recounts the resurrected Jesus pronouncing a commission to the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:21) This verse and commission takes primary position in missional theology because it frames the purpose of all God's action,¹⁴ corrects centuries of misunderstood church identity and points out a proper trajectory. As Guder describes, “Before the modern period, the church had not commonly

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴ Guder, *Missional Church*, 4.

spoken of its ministry and expansion as mission. The sense of the church as commissioned by Christ, as ‘sent into the world’ had been replaced by the imagery of the church as God’s city built upon the foundation of Christ, the institution which represented Christ’s rule and administered God’s grace.”¹⁵ Because the church exists for the world, the sending of God’s people is a call to missional action. Phrased in another way, Ed Stetzer and David Putnam exegete John 20:21, “With this one command, Jesus announced two thousand years of direction for the church.”¹⁶ The church finds its mission in God’s mission and its call in Jesus’ call.

For a church to understand that it has been sent presents a contemporary ecclesial shift. Craig Van Gelder uses three broad organizational models to distinguish between the missional church and traditional church perspectives. In contrast to the Established Church model that replicated the European state-supported church mindset and the Corporate Church model that grew out of the hierarchical and production-oriented business structure of America, the Missional Framework model understands the church this way: “A community created by the Spirit that is missionary by nature in being called and sent to participate in God’s mission in the world.”¹⁷ Being a sent church, therefore, suggests modification on all levels of ministry, including church structure and governance.

Preaching the theme of the church as sent by God for God’s mission is a distinct honor. That God would actively send imperfect people to accomplish a perfect God’s mission is baffling and humbling. For the preacher it is a privilege to preach this

¹⁵ Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 13.

¹⁶ Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 31.

¹⁷ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 73.

message; for the hearer it is a call to action. As younger generations want to feel a sense of involvement and participation in that to which they commit themselves, the theme of the church being sent is uniquely applicable to this demographic. People who are sent are people who are involved. Preaching the theme of God sending the church is inviting the church to participate in God's mission.

Theme 4: The church's mission witnesses to the reign of God

To announce the reign of God is to claim God's continuing and sovereign participation in the world. It presumes that God is up to something and that, since God is in charge, the church's job as followers of God is to join God. Closely tied with language about the Kingdom of God, the reign of God is distinct in that it focuses on God's leadership in the world. By contrast, the Kingdom of God focuses on the state of the world when under God's leadership. The concept of God's reign restores in the minds of God's followers that God is in a place of authority and power in contrast to any other ideas about church leaders or institutions being in ultimate authority.

The concept of the reign of God has unique power when applied to missional preaching. As Dally describes,

“The Christian sermon has for a very long time been reduced to the status of an essay on religious ideas or an interesting story with theological significance rather than a life-changing oral event that confronts its hearers with the *krisis* of God's reign breaking into human history and demanding a response of faith and allegiance.”¹⁸

The theme of the reign of God continues to empower preaching with action-oriented content. God's reign breaks into history, confronts people, and often causes a shift of attention and priorities. This is the content of proclamation. Robert Howard further

¹⁸ Dally, *Choosing the Kingdom*, 12.

illustrates the preaching value of the reign of God in describing its prophetic quality.¹⁹ Beginning in Old Testament times and continuing until the second century, Howard argues that preaching tended to contain prophetic language that pronounced the coming reign of God and God's activity in the world. After about 200 A.D., preaching transitioned to become primarily an interpretation of Scripture, looking backward to understand what Christ did. Howard asks, then, "Can we pronounce the reign of God in light of what God in Christ has done and prophetically utter it today?" The reality of the reign of God in the world gives powerful content to the preacher's proclamation of God's mission and action in the world.

Theme 5: The church's mission invites people to the Kingdom of God

In nearly every volume on the missional church, reference is made to the Kingdom of God. Referred to numerous times by Jesus in the synoptic Gospels, only pictures and metaphors are given in defining it. The Kingdom of God, therefore, has been defined in many ways similar to each other, captured succinctly by Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer's definition: "The kingdom of God is present on earth whenever life accurately reflects the will and sovereignty of God. It is the way of life and society would be if a compassionate God were in charge."²⁰ The Kingdom, as Dally points out, is nothing that the church can manufacture; instead Scripture uses such verbs as "be received", "entered into", "waited for", "proclaimed" and "inherited" to describe the people's reference to the Kingdom.²¹ Intertwined with the missional themes discussed earlier, the Kingdom of God describes the present state of God's mission where God reigns and God's followers are

¹⁹ Robert Howard. "The Prophetic Edge of Preaching", The Academy of Missional Preaching. 22 July 2010, Malibu, CA.

²⁰ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001) 17.

²¹ Dally, *Choosing the Kingdom*, 50.

incarnationally responding to God's sending initiative. Just as Jesus came to proclaim the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15), so is the church on mission with God to proclaim this same Kingdom.

If missional preaching is to be about the *missio dei* and be incarnational, it must include the theme of the Kingdom of God since this theme was so integral to the proclamation of Jesus. At least 125 times Jesus mentions the idea of the Kingdom of God (or Matthew's parallel Kingdom of Heaven). Perhaps because of the mysterious quality of the Kingdom, preaching has often avoided this topic. Yet, Jesus invites people to the Kingdom, and preaching can as well. Just as followers of God are invited to join God in the *missio dei*, so are followers of God invited to participate in the Kingdom of God. Dally's application of missional theology for preaching yields a constructive pattern that is distinct from traditional preaching. Instead of the traditional pattern of exegesis/illustration/application, Dally offers the revised pattern of proclamation/implication/invitation.²² In preaching the kingdom, the preacher has an opportunity to proclaim an open invitation to participate in the Kingdom: life the way God designed it to be.

Conclusion

Missional theology provides a framework for revolutionizing today's preaching. Instead of explanations of Scripture and the past action of God, preaching according to missional theology uses these resources as background for proclaiming what God is doing and will do according to God's mission. A theology of missional preaching, when considered in light of the above themes, serves as an invitation to the church to join God in God's mission. Though God has never rescinded the invitation, missional theology has

²² *Ibid.*, 113-121.

given new language and immediacy to this invitation. Missional preaching may be the primary voice of this invitation for the church.

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