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CLSG 710 Mission and Culture Theology

Essay 3: The Church

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INTRODUCTION

God is on a mission and we all play a part in His master plan. The Holy Spirit works in each of our lives to reveal the person of Jesus Christ and give us power to tell people about His good news. This evangelism takes place as a component of God's Church, a continuation of the manifest body of Christ on earth. The Church plays a crucial role in the mission of God as a witness to His redemptive power. One day sin will suffer its final defeat and all of creation will be restored to glorify God.

This essay will discuss the interlocking roles of the Holy Spirit *in* evangelism *in* the Church *in* the mission of God. Like a Russian nesting doll these concepts can be found within each other as we look within the outermost layer: God's mission. We will conclude by discussing some practical applications for the Church to move forward in evangelism with a clearer sense of purpose and direction.

THE MISSION OF GOD

We begin with the mission of God. This outer most layer encompasses everything that will follow. It is the grandest concept as it centers on the intended purpose for all creation: to glorify God. Howard A. Snyder writes in *The Community of the King* that God's master plan is to, "glorify himself by uniting all things in Christ... so that men can again serve their maker."¹ God's mission is to establish a Kingdom where his reign is eternal. Understand that the kingdom of God and the mission of God are two different things. Snyder describes the kingdom of God as, "the dominion or reign of God,"² while the mission of God is to *establish* said kingdom.

The Bible tells us the story of creation and how all things were deemed good until the fall of man.³ Sin entered the world and upset the natural order of things.⁴ This began God's mission of redemption. Christopher J.H. Wright describes God's mission in this light when he says, "God's mission is what spans the gap between the curse on the earth of Genesis 3 and the end of the curse in the new creation of Revelation 22."⁵

¹ Howard A. Snyder. *The Community of the King*. (Kindle Edition. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997.) loc. 341-342.

² *Ibid.*, loc. 84.

³ *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.) Gen. 1:1-2:4.

⁴ Gen. 3.

⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright. *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of Church Mission*. (Kindle Edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.) loc. 612-613.

Snyder agrees that God's focus is the *restoration of his creation*⁶ and so we begin to trace God's story through the Old Testament to this very day.

The call of Abraham began the first major phase of God's mission. He would select this family to become a great nation who would bless all the peoples of the earth.⁷ Abraham's blessing would be God's answer to the fall of man and the consequences of sin.⁸ God would enlist these people as instruments of his mission and they would serve as his witness. We follow the ups and downs of the Israelites through slavery, exodus, wondering, conquest, kings, and exile. God encouraged, challenged and condemned their acts through the ministry of the prophets. Their ability to follow God is as passionate as their rejection of Him. One cannot help but think that God may have made a mistake by choosing such a fickle people as his vehicle of redemption! Despite their humanity God remained faithful and would use Abraham's offspring as the champion of His Kingdom.

We come to the New Testament on the edge of our seat waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise to the people of Abraham. The Israelites were well aware of their part

⁶ Snyder, *Community*. loc. 342-343.

⁷ Gen. 12:3.

⁸ Wright, *Mission*. loc. 1059-1060

in God's story and were waiting for the prophecies of old to be fulfilled. Then, in the most unexpected way, Jesus was born.

Jesus would usher in the Kingdom of God and begin the final process of God's redemptive mission. George Eldon Ladd observes that, "this same Kingdom of God has come into history in the person and mission of Jesus."⁹ Jesus would conquer sin and death. Jesus would make a way for the world to be redeemed. Jesus would unite the family of Abraham with the rest of the world to bring glory to God and serve as His witness.

The Apostle Paul wrote to a church in Ephesus and described the redeeming work of Jesus. He said,

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to

⁹ George Eldon Ladd. *The Presence of the Future*. (Kindle Edition. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 1996.) p. 188.

bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”¹⁰

God used the blood of Jesus to redeem mankind. Sins are forgiven and, in God’s grace, unity is brought to all things under Christ. This essay will take the next step in the direction of the Church. It is the unity of Christ that gathers the Church and directs our role in the mission of God.

THE CHURCH IN THE MISSION OF GOD

The biblical nature of the Church is rooted in the work of Christ. Paul said to the Christians in Corinth that, “you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”¹¹ We carry out the mission of Jesus Christ which is the redemptive mission of God to establish His kingdom. Ladd states that, “the church is the people of God,”¹² and so the promise of Abraham is fulfilled in Christ and a new covenant is made by His blood. Bright continues to bridge the gap between God’s relationship with the old and new Israel. He says that, “we are one body in Christ. As old Israel was bound together in a

¹⁰ Eph. 1:6–10.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 12:27.

¹² Ladd, *Presence*. p. 304.

brotherhood under the law of the covenant God, so the Church is bound together in Christ in the fellowship of the New Covenant.”¹³

What does the Church do? In what way can she testify to the work of Christ and the redemptive mission of God? Bright believes that the key role of the church is to submit to the rule of God on earth. He says that the Church, “is called to be a people over whom God rules, who exhibit the righteousness of his Kingdom before the world. In other words she is to witness by her distinctively Christian conduct to the fact that she is a people set apart to God.”¹⁴ The Church lives under the rule of God in the light of Christ’s redemption. Snyder makes a similar claim when he states that, “the Church’s task is to live out its faith that Christ has in fact conquered the principalities and powers, and thus to work for the progressive manifestation of the Kingdom until Jesus Christ returns to earth to establish finally and eternally the reign of God.”¹⁵ These men reinforce the concept that the Church in the mission of God is rooted in Christ and submits to God’s kingdom.

¹³ John Bright. *The Kingdom of God*. (Kindle Edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981.) p. 263.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261-262.

¹⁵ Snyder, *Community*. loc. 1047-1049.

As the Church submits itself to the redemptive mission of God it must take part in that mission. God never intended for the Church to be bystanders in his redemptive rollout. We have stated: the Church is the body of Christ. This body must continue His redemptive work. Paul explains that we have become *Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*¹⁶ He calls this *the ministry of reconciliation.*¹⁷ The Church must be willing to serve as Christ served and suffer as Christ suffered. Bright sums up this compulsion by stating that, "The Church is called to take, up the destiny of the true Israel, Servant Israel, and become the missionary people of the Kingdom of God."¹⁸ Becoming the *missionary people of the Kingdom of God* takes us to the next step of evangelism in the Church.

EVANGELISM IN THE CHURCH

Evangelism is an essential part of the nature of the Church. It is an action word that means *to proclaim the good news* and we understand this good news to be the unfolding mission of God to redeem the world through Jesus Christ.¹⁹ What does the

¹⁶ 2 Cor. 5:20.

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 5:19.

¹⁸ Bright, *Kingdom*. p. 233

¹⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harpers Bible Dictionary*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature, 1985.) p. 286.

Bible tell us about our role as evangelists? We know that we are God's messengers and that Christians are to shine the light of Christ to a dark world. We know that Jesus made salvation available to all people and that we must go and tell the world about Him. We are to be bold in our proclamation of Christ and teach others to obey His commands.²⁰

These are all Biblical aspects of evangelism in the Church. Bright sums up these thoughts by saying that the Church, "is to witness by her distinctively Christian conduct to the fact that she is a people set apart to God."²¹

We have highlighted two different methods for the Church to share the good news. One method consists of *words* and the other is made up of *actions*. The word evangelism is tied to the idea of *proclamation*, or spoken word. M.S. Mills uses the term *witnessing* to describe the action oriented method of portraying Christ through the *believer's lifestyle*.²² Whether in word or deed we know that the Church has been called to bring the redemption of Jesus to the world.

The Church must actively reveal Jesus to the world. This was the mission of Christ and is the same mission Jesus passed on to those who would follow Him. This

²⁰ Isa. 43:10–11; Mat. 5:14–16, 9:9–13, 28:18–20, 10:33.

²¹ Bright, *Kingdom* p. 262.

²² M.S. Mills, *The Life of Christ: A Study Guide to the Gospel Record* (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1999).

organization that we call the Church must not pursue this mission as a secondary goal.

The primary goal of the church is to become missional. Bright states that, “the Church, therefore, is not mistaken when she understands that her task is missionary. Indeed, her only mistake is that she has not understood it strongly enough. She is not to conduct missions as one of her many activities; she has in all her activities a mission; she is a missionary people-if she is not that, she is not the Church.”²³

This mission focused church must be deeply rooted in the knowledge of God. We must *know God in depth, from experience of his revelation and his salvation.*²⁴ We will know how to speak and act by understanding the character of God. The Holy Spirit empowers us to know God and to be a witness for Him. Paul explains:

“The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is

²³ Bright, *Kingdom*. p. 257.

²⁴ Wright, *Mission*. loc. 39-341.

from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.”²⁵

The Holy Spirit plays a major role in evangelism and so we take our final step in understanding evangelism, the Church and the mission of God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN EVANGELISM

The gospel never comes alone. It is always accompanied *with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction*.²⁶ Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to empower his followers to be his witness to the ends of the earth. Jesus told us that we would, “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”²⁷ The early Church must have heard these words and understood that the blessing of Abraham had come to the world at last. It would now be their mission to pass it on. Wright describes this one-two punch of the *command* of Jesus and the *leading* of the Holy Spirit.²⁸

Believers in Christ are empowered to proclaim the good news. The gifts of the Spirit would begin to operate as parts of a whole. Snyder claims that the Church can be

²⁵ 1 Cor. 2:10–12.

²⁶ 1 Thes. 1:5.

²⁷ Act. 1:7–8.

²⁸ Wright, *Mission*. loc. 1225-1227.

*seen as a charismatic organism, and that, the Church is the community of the Holy Spirit.*²⁹ This community would receive a list of gifts that include a *message of wisdom, a message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.* Note that each of these gifts are distributed for the common good and that they are all works of the same Spirit.³⁰ Write reminds us that these gifts provide power to, “expect real change in lives and societies, while keeping our eyes on the corporate, not merely individual, dimensions of Christian mission.”³¹ The role of the Holy Spirit is to unite the Church under Christ in powerful witness.

We are nearly at the center of this dissection of God’s mission. We have seen the promise of Abraham become fulfilled by Jesus Christ and passed on to the Church. We have discussed the role of evangelism in the church and how the Holy Spirit flues the fires of Christian witness. Before we conclude we must discuss a practical application for the modern day church.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR THE CHURCH

²⁹ Snyder, *Community*. loc. 460-461.

³⁰ 1 Cor. 12:8–10.

³¹ Wright, *Mission*. loc. 599-600.

How does this understanding of evangelism in the mission of God change the way we become the church? What should we do in response to this discussion? Take home this: the church must be culturally authentic, active in Christ's redemption and humbly embrace its role in God's master plan.

The church must be culturally authentic. Wright believes that, "the greatest hindrance to evangelism in the world today is the failure of the church to supply evidence in her own life and work of the saving power of God."³² This lack of evidence is a disregard for the good news of Jesus Christ. If we fully understand how we have been justified by faith then our outward self will be transformed along with our inward self. Paul wrote to a church in Philippi and said, "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you."³³ It is this conduct that determines whether or not the world will consider us authentic. Note that Paul is encouraging this church to be authentic in the face of fear. The church must express the redemptive story of Christ through words and

³² Ibid., loc. 2486-2487.

³³ Php. 1:27-28.

deeds regardless of external threats or pressure. Snyder agrees that, “to the extent that this witness was verbal, it included preaching ...But it was more than verbal; it included service (diakonia) as well as proclamation.”³⁴ Our words and our deeds will help people decide if we are true in our love of Jesus.

The church must be active in Christ’s redemptive plan. It is not enough for us to count ourselves blessed while the world be damned. Christ’s work on the cross defeats the consequences of sin and death. This is more than a cerebral transition from dark to light. This is a redemption of the whole self engaged in society and culture. Wright believes that, “Paul’s missionary goal was not evangelism only, in the sense of communicating a message for mental assent. Rather, his aim was nothing short of ethical transformation among those who received that message and responded to it by faith.”³⁵ The church must aim for the holistic transformation of society.

The church must embrace its role in God’s master plan. This is the final piece of the puzzle and completes the picture we wish to assemble. We must understand that the Holy Spirit gives us power to evangelize as part of Christ’s Church that is fulfilling the mission of God to establish His kingdom. It is a mouthful and a mindful as we speak

³⁴ Snyder, *Community*. loc. 1317-1319.

³⁵ Wright, *Mission*. loc. 3975-3976.

and understand. Remember that this should also be a handful as we live out the work of God in our world. Our purpose is to bring glory to God using very available avenue of witness. We must remember that God is on a mission and we are all part of His master plan.

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