

SOTERIOLOGY AND MISSION

QOHELET WEB MINISTRY

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As I understand it, "salvation" in scripture is basically fellowship of God's creatures with the creator. Keeping in mind that sin is a reality in the created order, a better way to put it would be this: Salvation is restoration of fellowship of God's creatures with the creator.

Before unpacking that statement, I will state my own theological suppositions. My first introduction to God was in the stories of his dealings with his people in scripture, especially the Hebrew scriptures. Rather than straight propositional truths about God, my view of God resulted from the stories of how God dealt with his people. Having gone through theological training with a Barton-Stone movement background, I did not develop a rigid, propositional faith in God or in his dealings with humankind. I find God's character in his actions more than in propositional statements. As a result, my view of God's sovereignty and the nature of his rule over creation is not a tidy mechanistic system, but has a certain level of give and take. God is free to make exceptions when he desires, usually in the interest of grace. My reading of Job demonstrates the tendencies even for sages to attempt to place God in a box. As a result, I do not class myself as Reformed nor as Arminian, though my views probably have more in common with Arminianism. As to salvation experience, I believe that repentance, confession, and baptism are all part of the expression of faith in Christ and are all an integral part of the salvation experience.

Having stated my suppositions briefly, I now turn to the expansion of my statement of my understanding of salvation as a restoration of fellowship of God's creatures with the creator.

The Christian Bible identifies the creator as *Elohim* in Genesis 1, as *YHWH* in Genesis 2, and as God in John 1. My Trinitarian understanding of God means that God

created the world not out of some inherent need as though he were lonely as the great poem *The Creation*<sup>1</sup> suggests. Instead, the triune God is already a self-contained microcosm of love and fellowship.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the act of creation was an act of love in which God shared his love not out of any sort of need, but out of love. This is why Paul states on Mars Hill that God is not served by human hands as though he needed anything (Acts 17:25). God does not "need" our fellowship; he already has fellowship and love in himself. God selflessly desires the fellowship of his creatures but does not need fellowship of his creatures.

The first few chapters of Genesis serve as a prologue to the history of salvation in the rest of scripture. Even though the entire created order is a reflection of the glory of God (Ps 19:1-7; Rom 1:18-20), humankind is God's image bearer in a unique way. Humans are the only part of the created order made in God's image. Human sin alienated humankind from God, so God had a plan to redeem humankind to himself.

God called Abraham in order to build a nation of people from his descendants that would be his chosen people. God's purposes were much larger than Abraham. God intended to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). Abraham's great grandchildren formed the twelve tribes of Israel. After God redeemed their descendants from slavery in Egypt, he brought them to Sinai for the next stage in his plan.

God indicates that his purpose for choosing Israel was relational in nature.

"Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians'" (Ex 6:6-7).

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<sup>1</sup> James Weldon Johnson, "The Creation," in *Myths Legends and Folktales of America: An Anthology*, edited by David Leeming and Jake Page (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61-62.

<sup>2</sup> John Mark Hicks, *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 55-59.

God's acts of deliverance were so that his people would know that he is Yahweh. But God also makes it clear that his relational purposes were wider than merely Israel.

"The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst" (Ex 7:5).

"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, let my people go, that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. For if by now I had put forth my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth. But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you my power and in order to proclaim my name through all the earth'" (Ex 9:13-16).

According to these passages, God's purposes were larger than Israel. His desire was that not only Israel, but Egypt and the entire earth could know the name of Yahweh. In order to ultimately accomplish this, God would not only display his signs in Egypt, but also charged the Hebrews to make his name known through all the earth.

"Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel" (Ex 19:5-6).

God intended for his people to be a "kingdom of priests." Their priestly role involved mediating the presence of God to the nations.

When God covenanted with his priestly nation, he gave them the gift of Torah to order their lives religiously, socially, economically, and politically. God did not merely intend to bless the Hebrews, but intended that his kingdom of priests be a demonstration of what the ideal looks like.

God reveals his desire for Israel to be a light to the nations in Isaiah. In the second part of Isaiah, God refers to Israel as his "servant" (Is 41:8-9; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 49:3). As God's servant, Israel had a God given redemptive purpose for the world. This is why God

designated them as a "kingdom of priests" in Exodus 19:6. Here are some of the passages in which God expresses this redemptive purpose.

Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise his voice, nor make his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait expectantly for his law (Is 42:1-4).

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison (Is 42:6-7).

But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, and he who formed you, O Israel, do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the LORD your God, The Holy One of Israel, your savior; I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place. Since you are precious in my sight, since you are honored and I love you, I will give other men in your place and other peoples in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, and whom I have created for my glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made (Is 43:1-7).

You are my witnesses, declares the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me there was no God formed, and there will be none after me (Is 43:10).

Passages such as these demonstrate that God's plan was to show his glory through his servant, Israel (Is 49:3). God's servant was to bring social justice to the nations (Is 42:1, 4). God's intent was always that he would make his servant a light to the nations so that his salvation would reach to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6b). God's salvation involved freedom from bondage and oppression (Is 42:7). Israel was to be an oasis of justice, equity, compassion, and mercy in a dark and cruel world. It was to be a place where slaves were treated with

dignity and compassion. It was to be a place where the poor had provisions. It was to be a place that lacked oppression and cruelty. It was to be a place that demonstrated the glory and character of God in the character of her people. Israel was to be a model of the ideal people. According to Isaiah 56, the foreigner and the alien were not excluded from the kingdom. They had opportunity to join themselves to Yahweh.

However, Israel failed in her priestly duty. Instead of demonstrating life under the Reign of God, Israel demonstrated violence, oppression, and wickedness not unlike the nations around them. They caused the name of Yahweh to be blasphemed among the nations. The shepherds, leaders, and kings of Israel failed to govern righteously and justly (Ezek 34:1-22; Mic 3:1-12). The people failed to uphold God's purpose as a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6). As God's servant and God's son (Ex 4:22; Hos 11:1), Israel failed to carry out God's purposes to the nations.

God never intended on giving up. According to God's plan, he would establish a new covenant for his people (Jer 31:31). This renewal would establish a reign of righteousness over the whole earth (Is 11:1-10). Oppression and violence would be a fading reality in the renewed Reign of God. God would establish his kingdom that would extend out to the whole earth and would never be destroyed (Dan 7:14). This new Reign would be a threat to other kingdoms and ultimately subvert them (Dan 2:44). There will be peace, justice, and righteousness under the reign of God (Is 11:6-9). As per God's original promise that began with Abraham and continued with Israel, the blessing of the Reign of God would be offered for all peoples of the earth.

Remaining true to his promise to bless on the families of the earth, God began the next phase of his plan. In the New Testament, God's Son is now Jesus instead of Israel (Mk 1:1).

As prophesied, God sends his servant to be a light to the nations. This servant is no longer Israel, but Jesus (Lk 2:32). As prophesied, everyone, Jew and Gentile,<sup>3</sup> would be able to see the salvation of God (Lk 3:6). The authors of the Gospels made it clear that the ministry of Jesus is a fulfillment of scripture and is therefore in continuity with scripture and with God's plan, especially Matthew and Luke in their infancy stories.

The central message of Christ was the "Gospel of the Kingdom" (Mt 4:23), or the Good News of the Reign of God. "Reign" is a better rendering than "kingdom," because "kingdom" implies geographical and political boundaries. The original Hebrew phrase was מְלָכֻת שָׁמַיִם, "Reign/Rule of Heaven," not "kingdom," which is מַמְלָכָה. The English word, "kingdom" came from the Greek language, which translated this phrase using the word, βασιλεία. This Greek word can mean either "reign/rule" or "kingdom." Context identifies which meaning is meant. The context goes back to the Hebraic word, מְלָכֻת, which the Greek word, βασιλεία translates. The "Reign of God" transcends geographical, social, and political boundaries. Indeed, Jesus said that his reign was not of this realm (Jn 18:36). This is why Jesus said that the Reign of God is "in you" (Lk 17:21).

Jesus inaugurated a new Reign of God, which was the fulfillment of God's promises. What does life look like under the Reign of God? What are the identifying marks of the Reign of God?

First of all, the Reign of God is not of this world. The Reign of God is subtle yet pervasive. It is quiet yet subversive. It redefines every aspect of thinking, motivation, and actions. For example, the Sermon on the Mount is an exposition of the Reign of God. Like

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<sup>3</sup> R. Geoffrey Harris, *Mission in the Gospels* (London: Epworth Press, 2004). Harris makes a compelling study of the Gospels that demonstrate that the Gospel writers emphasized that Jesus' intent was to inaugurate a mission that included the Gentiles.

the instructions for kingdom life in Deuteronomy that spells out the blessing of living under the rule of God, Jesus spells out the blessedness of living under the Reign of God in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, the opening beatitude begins with the Reign of God (Mt 5:3). What is interesting is that Jesus takes many concepts that were taken for granted and turns them on their head. Here are some examples. Jesus was crowned with glory and honor not by conquest, but through suffering (Heb 2:7-9). In God's reign, the nobody becomes somebody and the somebody becomes nobody (Mt 11:25-26; 1 Cor 1:28). In the Reign of God, kindness is returned for insults (Mt 5:39; Lk 6:28). In the Reign of God, one gives up everything in order to become rich (Mt 19:21). One gives up his life in order to live (Mk 8:35). One receives gifts in order to give (Lk 12:21). In the Reign of God, the greatest thing is to tend to the "least of these" (Mt 25:40; Mk 10:14). In the Reign of God, those who are persecuted for righteousness are the blessed ones (Mt 5:10).

The rulers and principalities of this world rightly understood the Reign of God as a threat to the current system. Several of the terms associated with the Reign of God were politically loaded words, such as εὐαγγέλιον,<sup>4</sup> σωτήρ,<sup>5</sup> βασιλεία,<sup>6</sup> and κηρύσσω,<sup>7</sup> all of which have uses in the political arena, usually in relation to rulers. The choice of these words are interesting, especially in light of the fact that there were other words available which did not carry the political overtones that these words do. The Reign of God had the potential to

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph P. Martin, "Gospel," in *ISBE* edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 1982), 2:529. "Gospel" was used of official decrees or announcements of long hoped for fulfillment of peace. An example is the announcement of the birth of Augustus as the Gospel, since he brought forth a new order/age of peace (Pax Romana). "Gospel" is rarely used in the Septuagint and in the cases where it is used, it translates the Hebrew word, "glad tidings" where it is in reference to God establishing a new reign of peace.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Schneider and Colin Brown, "σωτήρ" in *NIDNTT* ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 3:216-218. "Savior" is sometimes used of emperors because they brought and preserved peace. Calling Jesus savior could have been taken as a challenge to ruling powers, much as the title "king" was.

<sup>6</sup> "Kingdom"

<sup>7</sup> Lothar Coenen, "κηρύσσω" in *NIDNTT* edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 3:48-52. "To Preach" Used of public, authoritative announcements, usually from a king or other ruling official.



turn the world upside down not through a revolution of the sword, but through a revolution of the heart. Their hearts, minds, and souls no longer belong to the system of the world, but to the Lord and King Jesus Christ. These are the sorts of things Jesus demonstrated as being marks of the Reign of God. Truly, the Reign of God is not of this realm.

The Reign of God is also eschatological. Jesus made it clear that even though he would be crucified and buried, he would rise from the dead (Mk 10:33-34) and return to the Father in order to prepare a future home for his followers (Jn 14:2-3). The hope that Jesus offered was a hope that goes beyond this life. There would be a future consummation of the Reign of God. The new heavens and new earth would be a place where righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:13). The future hope of a place where there will be true shalom (Is 52:7), where the wolf would dwell with the lamb (Is 11:6), and swords will be beaten into plowshares (Is 2:4; Mic 4:3) will be realized in the final stage of God's plan in the New Jerusalem. The tree and water of life will be available to all in abundance (Rev 22:2, 17).

As a result of this eschatological perspective, there is a certain restlessness under the Reign of God. Even though Jesus has begun and inaugurated his reign during his earthly ministry, it is not yet a complete work. It will not find its consummation until the final trumpet sounds. Then the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of God and of his Christ and he will reign forever and ever (Rev 11:15). Even though Jesus had already begun his assault on sickness, demonization, and other forms of evil and oppression, and even though he charged his disciples to do caring and holistic ministries using his earthly ministry as a model, empirical observation demonstrates that this work is was not complete at the completion of his earthly ministry and will not be complete through the human efforts of his disciples today. This is why one of the characteristic qualities of kingdom people is their

mourning (Mt 5:4). Kingdom people mourn the evil and oppression that still exists in the world and look forward to the final consummation when they will find comfort under the completion of God's reign. This restlessness in the Reign of God is a forward looking, hopeful, and active restlessness as kingdom people participate in the redemptive purposes of Jesus Christ through their caring ministries and preaching of the Gospel.

The Holy Spirit is another mark of the Reign of God. Both Luke and John emphasize the role of the Spirit in both the ministry of Jesus and in the ministry of the church. The Spirit anointed Jesus for ministry at his baptism (Mt 3:16). Jesus gives the Spirit to his followers without measure (Jn 3:34). At the conclusion of his earthly ministry, Jesus breathed the Spirit into his followers (Jn 20:22), anointing them to continue his ministry with all the power and boldness that Jesus demonstrated while he was with them. The book of Acts demonstrates how the Spirit empowered the church for its ministry to be a light to the nations (Acts 4:31).

The most pervasive aspect of the Reign of God is mercy and compassion. When Jesus began his ministry, he quotes from Isaiah to lay out the purpose of his mission.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19).

The good news is not merely an eschatological hope. It is also a present reality. Jesus' declaration at Nazareth demonstrated that there was an integral social dimension to his Gospel. Jesus' ministry involved healing people oppressed by sickness, freeing the demonized, and showing the Lord's favor by his compassion to the downtrodden. Jesus introduced an alternative reality under his reign. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, there was a transcendent system that freed people from the oppressive and cruel principalities

of this world. In all the Gospels, especially Luke, Jesus shows a special interest in the poor, outcast and marginalized.

The invitation to the Reign of God came with a call to faith and repentance.

Acceptance of the Reign of God means a switch in allegiance to Jesus as Lord. This means not only a transformation of lifestyle, but a change in relationships as well. Those who accept the Reign of God became a part of a faith community that becomes the new family (Mt 12:48-50). This allegiance to Jesus as Lord means carrying out his purposes, which are as old as humanity. The description of Israel as a nation of priests also describes the community of Christ.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

The mission of the people of God under the new covenant is not unlike the mission of the people of God under the former covenant. The descriptions of Israel also apply to the church in this passage. As a royal priesthood and a light to the nations, the church proclaims the excellencies of Christ.

There are several implications in all of this for the church. The first implication concerns the nature of our purpose and calling as the church of the Messiah. Our love affair with our church buildings along with an institutional mindset contributed to the church building paradigm for Christianity. Many believe our mission and purpose is to manage the organization. Missions, outreach, evangelism, and a number of other activities take a back burner to building centered activities. Our budgets are also a reflection of this mindset. The majority goes toward maintaining the building and building related activities. If there is not enough left over, missions and outreach get cut. Even though most churches would not state

it this way, this practice seems to demonstrate that the building is primary and missions, evangelism, outreach, etc. is optional. Contrary to this unstated mindset, it is Jesus' desire that the church exists for mission and outreach. There is a problem when missions and outreach gets cut to fund church building expenses. The building should serve mission and outreach, not the other way around.

We are influenced by our culture's view of "institution." We have similar language and practices as those non-religious people who belong to an "institution." We often speak of "going to church" as one might go to a board meeting. We speak of being a "member" as one might be a member of a lodge. In theory, church membership is much more than this. But in practice, membership is mainly expressed by attending meetings in the building. Staff and leaders are often seen as managers and C.E.O.s of the institution. Everyone else in the institution is often viewed as members, consumers, and attendees. The result is a nominal Christianity that for many may not be a whole lot different than membership in some other institution. In this way, the church has accepted as "normal" what can only truly be characterized as "nominal" Christianity, while it views what the Bible characterizes as "normal" Christianity as something "extraordinary."

With an institutional mindset, many have missed the biblical emphasis that the church is the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, the church is to carry out the mission of Christ. As Christ's body, the church represents Christ and his mission in the world. The church's mission is not to send people, but to be a sent people. As the body of Christ, we are his hands, feet, and mouth to carry on the mission of the Lord. Christ did not come to establish church buildings, but to establish the Reign of God in the hearts of people. Our priorities are often backwards. Outreach, missions, etc. should be first and foremost. Anything we

construct or do should support that mission. If, as the body of Christ, we are to be ambassadors of Christ, representing his mission, it must be more than maintaining a meeting place or any other facility or resource. All resources exist to serve the mission, not for us to serve them.

In order to do this, the church needs to have a balance of both an eschatological perspective and a present perspective in its mission and ministry. It needs to have an eschatological perspective because it will ultimately be transported to God in his eternal kingdom (1 Cor 15:24). There will be a new heaven and a new earth in which God's people will dwell (Rev 21:1-22:5). But as Jesus demonstrated, the Reign of God had already begun with his ministry (Lk 10:9; 11:20). As one of the signs that the kingdom has come, Jesus had announced, "...if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt 10:28). A sign of God's Reign was ministries of compassion (Lk 7:19-23). So there is an indispensable social dimension to the ministry of the church. Unlike worldly social agencies, the mission of the church is not merely to ease physical burdens, but to invite people into the healing and wholeness God offers. It is an invitation to shalom through faith and repentance. The church is to be a "city set on a hill" (Mt 5:14). The church's mission is communal and collective, not individual. As a royal priesthood, the church is to call and invite people to freedom from all kinds of oppression under the Reign of God, which is a different system socially, economically, politically, and spiritually than the system of the world.

The second implication has to do with the relationship of the church to the world. As I understand it, many churches defined themselves in terms of other denominations. Many churches' self-definitions was often in relationship to other churches and how they were

distinct from other churches rather than how they were set apart for Christ. This seemed to work well in a time and culture that was saturated with Christian ideas, symbolism, and language.<sup>8</sup> For some, including my own religious tradition, I am not sure that the emphasis was so much on Christ as it was that we were the most correct church. It seems that many were winning people to the church rather than to Christ. In a way, this was a reflection of our culture, which had a high view of "institutions," which affected us in ways we didn't realize. There was a clear institutional mindset. Much of the literature printed during this time period demonstrates this emphasis. Many articles and books concerning salvation approached it in terms of an idealized and oversimplified version of church history that highlighted the divisions in Christianity and one particular church as being either the restored church or the most pristine church. The church seemed to receive more emphasis than Christ. As a result of this cultural influence, the church as an institution remained squarely at the center of evangelistic writing for several denominations. This mindset with its language seemed to resonate with a Western, Christianized culture. Our "Christianized" culture held institutions in high regard and was full of denominations and sects, and we engaged it head on. Many proceeded with the assumption that most everyone was somewhat Christian, therefore the evangelistic task was to motivate people to choose the right church.

However, since the culture has become increasingly secular, many of the ways we identified ourselves are lost to the citizen who has not been "Christianized." It seems that we increasingly do not know how to engage a culture that has become increasingly secular. We do not realize that we have been shaped by our culture and that many of our practices are an

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<sup>8</sup> Darrel L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 48-55. The church once had an unofficial privileged place in American culture, but is now losing that place.

expression of our culture as much as it is an expression of our faith. We have trouble separating the two, not realizing that Christianity stands above culture and therefore is translatable to many cultures, whether it is African, South American, or our North American Culture, which is currently undergoing huge changes. Like more recent missionaries who recognize the need to import the Gospel but not Western Culture, we need to recognize that our efforts in our own back yard need to be the same. Some of what we promote is probably a form of Western Culture that is becoming antiquated and passing away. Western Culture is not Christianity as the Bible defines it. Some of the ideas and values of Western Culture squarely contradicts the ideas and values of the Reign of God. If we seem to be "irrelevant," the problem may be that we are promoting Western Culture more than the Reign of God.

This is why I believe we in the west need to think like missionaries in our own back yard. According to statistics, there are now more Christians in Africa than there are in North America.<sup>9</sup> Africa can no longer be called the "Dark Continent" as it was 100 years ago. More than ever, our own context is a mission; therefore we need to think missionally. This means employing mission methods that have been theologically and practically faithful in cross-cultural missions. In foreign missions, we expect missionaries to establish indigenous churches. In other words, we expect missionaries to plant churches that are not western transplants, but ones that reflect the cultural background, language, and customs of the people. We also expect missionaries to contextualize their ministries. We expect them to study and learn the culture, language, and customs of the people in order to effectively communicate the Gospel to them in meaningful ways. Missionaries don the clothing of the people and practice their customs and courtesies. In order to be effective in North America, the same needs to

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<sup>9</sup> David W. Smith, *Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalism* (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 19-23.

happen. American culture in particular has been in a process of change for the last forty years, which means that it is even more important to take note of, study, and understand the changing cultural trends in order to effectively engage our own culture. Some of what we take for granted as "Christian" is a result of a fading Christianized culture. We need to be able to evaluate what about the contemporary church is cultural and what is not. In this way we can remain true to the Gospel and at the same time be missionally faithful.

This is intensely faithful and missional as Jesus demonstrated in his own ministry. Jesus' ministry was indigenous and contextual. He came to earth as a Jewish man speaking Aramaic. He wore a tunic and sandals. He was born as a baby into a working class family. He taught in Aramaic, the local language of the people. He used parables to teach people. This does not mean that God is inherently Jewish and speaks Aramaic as his "native" language. God does not literally have an ear that inclines to us when we pray, nor does he literally have a right arm to deliver us from oppression. God sent Jesus, a flesh and blood human being, to engage us on our level. This is the manner of ministry that Jesus demonstrates for us. We are to be culturally aware and meet people at their level. Since the culture is changing, we need to change our manner of engagement with our culture. The unchanging message has been translated to many cultures around the world and needs to be retranslated into American culture.

Another implication has to do with our message. Since our way of doing things and our message was shaped by our culture and tradition, we speak a language that is stranger than ever to the "un-Christianized" person who is now living in a changing culture. Even when we are able to communicate it in a way that can be understood, it may often seem irrelevant. Indeed, it often is. I believe that this is because we have not understood the nature



of the Reign of God and how it is to look in a world that is under a different reign. The Reign of God is more than merely the church as we normally think of it. While the church is important and biblical, it is not what the early church emphasized in its preaching to those outside. As I see it, themes such as the Fulfillment of the Reign of God, the Gospel, The Return of Christ, The Holy Spirit, and a Call to Faith and Repentance were all part of the message that Jesus' apostolic message that has been passed down to us. In my religious tradition, these are not themes that we have typically emphasized. Some of these themes as the Bible portrays it are foreign to us. Our emphasis has often been to highlight what makes us different than other churches. Whether it was baptism, Communion every first day of the week, instrumental music, multiple elders, etc., we emphasized those things that made us more correct in comparison to other churches. As a result, many people were won to a form rather than to a person. In a culture where institutional loyalty still existed, the church appeared to thrive in numbers with this emphasis.

However, our culture does not have institutional loyalty any more. In fact, the general feeling in our culture now is a general distrust of institutions. In the past, the church has operated in more of an institutional paradigm. People do not want to be converted to an institution anymore. Indeed, God does not want anyone to be converted to an institution either! We are called to Christ, not an institution. Historically, when the "institution" was overemphasized in the church, all kinds of problems followed. There are numerous examples of this in the medieval church with all of its institutional forms. Our message should be more in line with what Jesus emphasized in his ministry. The message is not the church, but Christ.

The Gospel is not merely recruitment for the church, but an invitation to holistic<sup>10</sup> salvation that involves both an eschatological hope and a present reality. God's mission is not merely standing on street corners and preaching, but going to where the people are with a spirit of compassion as Christ demonstrated. God's message is to be embodied in our actions. Our message needs to be communicated in the way that Christ demonstrated it.

Another implication in all of this has to do with the nature of spirituality. There is an emphasis on the giving of the Spirit in the Gospels, especially in Luke's writings. There is a mystical element to the Christian faith. That makes many of us in North America very uncomfortable even though African, Asian, and South American Christians do not have a problem with this. The reason is that Western Culture has shaped us along with its rationalism and empiricism. We have a tendency to reject anything that cannot be observed, tested, and explained. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the power of the word of God and things of this nature are usually de-emphasized or reinterpreted to mean nothing more than a rational exercise of our mind and will informed by a reading of the Bible. There is little mystery in the daily life of a Christian and little emphasis on the disciplines that create the right conditions for spiritual growth. For some, Bible study is not a whole lot different than reading a philosopher and becoming his "student." Much of faith is very academic in nature and a personal relationship with the Lord is little more than knowing correct doctrine. Religion is reduced to a set of rules and preaching often becomes moralizing on certain topics. There is little need for fasting. Praying is a duty rather than an expression of love and desire for God. Bible reading, if it takes place at all, is for the purpose of knowing the Bible rather

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<sup>10</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 33. Bosch points out that in many cases, the Gospels connect "save" not only with salvation from sin, but also with healing.

than knowing God. Spirituality is where we may be the weakest of all. While we often speak of spiritual growth, we often cannot define what that means. Rather than defining spiritual growth as learning to grow in our love for God in all things, it is usually defined more in terms of the amount of Bible reading one does or then number of events one attends. All of these are good, but are secondary to loving God. Part of loving God also involves loving one's neighbor. Spirituality, then, is not merely an individualistic concept. It is very much communal. Since God is a communal God, it makes sense that spirituality would also be communal.

A weak spirituality probably leads to the difficulty for seeing the world as it really is and our assigned place in it. Without this clearer vision of our identity, we find it a very difficult challenge to know how to engage our world with the mission of Christ. A strong, growing spirituality could help get a better understanding of ourselves and the nature of our relationship with God and his calling for us as his people.

Perhaps the most pervasive implication is in the way the Gospel reorders all of life in the Reign of God. Paul makes it clear that the central element of the Gospel is the death of Jesus on the cross for our sins, his burial, and his resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-4). Death and resurrection are not merely a set of facts that list what Jesus has done for us, but is also a call to us. James Brownson gives a good example.

But to speak of Jesus as an "example" does not quite convey, in our cultural context, the role that Jesus plays in the pages of the New Testament. In the ancient world, the character of the king determined the character of the nation that served him...

Perhaps a more contemporary analogy will be helpful here. When a new president is elected in the United States, he brings with him a new administration, composed of hundreds of governmental officials. These officials look to the president to discern how they are to conduct themselves. Not only the explicit policies of the president, but also the style, demeanor, and values of the president must shape the administration as a whole. The presidential transition in 2000 from Bill Clinton and

his administration to the team of George W. Bush provided a dramatic example, as casually dressed, up-all-night, pizza-eating policy sessions in the White House gave way to staff in suits who attended more formal meetings in a working day marked by a clear beginning and end. ...

The whole administration acquires its identity through the behavior, values, and pronouncements of its president. In the same way, the early church looked to Jesus as the one who defined for them what life in the kingdom of God was like, and how it was to be lived.<sup>11</sup>

The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ are not just what Jesus did, but a pattern he set. The call to repentance is a call to see this Gospel, this death, burial and resurrection as the pattern for all of life. Living under the Reign of God is also to live the dying of Christ daily. Some examples of this perspective appear in the following scriptures:

"And he was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Lk 9:23).

"Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

"Is not the cup of blessing, which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread, which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16).

"Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5-8).

"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:8-11).

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to

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<sup>11</sup> James V. Brownson and others, *Stormfront* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 54-55.

the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of his glory you may rejoice with exultation" (1 Pet 4:12-13).

In addition to dying with Christ, resurrection with Christ is also a model for living.

This is why Paul says "we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). The significance of resurrection is not limited to resurrection after we physically die to live eternally. This fact becomes clearer when you read the passages of scripture concerning resurrection against the backdrop of the Old Testament. Brownson correctly points out that resurrection in the Old Testament is not about the individual quest for immortality, but about restoration to God.<sup>12</sup> For example, the well-known resurrection passage from Ezekiel 37 is about the restoration of Israel to God. The apocalyptic passages from Isaiah 24-27 refer to a resurrection (26:19), which refers poetically to a restoration of Israel, punishment on Israel's enemies, and a restoration of justice.

These Old Testament resurrection passages demonstrate that God will once again live among his people. Not only will he vindicate the righteous, but he will also restore justice in the land. Therefore, resurrection in the Old Testament is about restoration of an ideal life with God that is characterized by justice rather than the more self-seeking quest for immortality.

Seen against this backdrop, our dying with Christ and rising to "walk a new life" takes on a deeper significance that involves our relationship with other people. There is much more than just an otherworldly hope of the resurrection of the body. There is an important this-worldly dimension to resurrection living, which is why Paul says that when we are baptized, we die with Christ and rise to "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). He didn't say that

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<sup>12</sup> Brownson, *Stormfront*, 58.

someday we will resurrect from the dead, but that we currently walk in newness of life.

Though Paul clearly teaches a future bodily resurrection in other passages, he also teaches resurrection as a current reality as he does in this passage. Resurrection is both a future home and a present reality.

As the Old Testament imagery suggests, there is not only a restoration of fellowship with God, but also a restoration of justice. Jesus' manifesto in Nazareth indicates that the Gospel of the Kingdom involves release of captives and freedom from oppression (Lk 4:18-19). When John the Baptist wanted confirmation as to whether Jesus was truly the one, Jesus pointed to the signs, which included release from all kinds of oppression, whether physical, spiritual or religious (Lk 7:20-22). In the kingdom, the poor, hungry, and marginalized are all blessed (Lk 6:20-22). Under the Reign of God, everyone shared with anyone who had need (Acts 2:44-45). Things are quite different in under the Reign of God. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is a good summary of what walking this new life under the Reign of God is to look like. Things such as faithfulness in relationships, honesty, integrity, servanthood to even enemies, authenticity, mercy, helping those in need, and things of this nature are all marks of the Reign of God according to the Sermon on the Mount.

So, walking in newness of life is much more than a future hope. There are practical and daily implications of resurrection as well as the future ones. This is quite different than the typical privatized, individualistic and consumeristic versions of soteriology. The versions of salvation that leave out the social, communal, and daily implications seem to be heavily influenced by Western culture which is defined by individualism and consumerism.

Many scholars summarize the New Testament preaching related to the Kingdom using the word the early church used, "kerygma." Elements of the kerygma usually include the following:

1. The new things that are happening are the dawning of the new age and are a fulfillment of scripture
2. Jesus Christ inaugurates the new age with his ministry, death and resurrection
3. Jesus died and was raised from the dead and has been exalted to the right hand of God
4. The Holy Spirit is given in the new age
5. The new age is open to both Jew and Gentile and granted on the basis of faith
6. The new age will reach its ultimate consummation in the return of Christ, when all the dead will be raised and everyone will be judged by Christ
7. All people are called to repent, which is when they will receive the offer of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit and salvation.

The word the New Testament writers often used for the desired response to the kerygma was "repentance," which signifies both a change in belief and in actions. The Gospel of the Kingdom is not just about receiving an individualized salvation, but also about incorporation into the body of Christ, into the Kingdom, into Christ, which means identification with him. This involves dying and rising with him in order to carry out his mission. This mission and the manner in which Jesus models it identify the nature and mission of the church. The Christian life is not just about knowing and articulating the right teaching concerning the atoning work of Christ on the cross, but about action, doing, and living out the dying and rising of Christ daily in order to accomplish God's purposes as demonstrated in Christ.

The church, then, is missional in its very nature. It takes up the mission of Christ that he entrusted it with. It is not an entity that merely sends, but it is a sent entity. The church is the people of God, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation that God calls into the world as an invitational, alternative reality that reflects the very nature of God. Holiness, commitment,

compassion, and love for all peoples are some of the characteristics of God's missional people. In a sense, the church is to be the embodiment of God. What Jesus did is what the church is to do. As God sent Jesus, and as Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, now the Holy Spirit sends us into the world to continue the mission that Jesus started.

Soteriology goes hand in hand with mission. Soteriology is more than the work of Jesus on the cross. It is more than our response of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. It is more than the initial personal salvation experience. While these are related topics, they are not central in soteriology. Soteriology is not merely the matter of an individual's salvation. The individualistic and personal emphasis on salvation in many protestant churches is colored heavily by Lutheran theology.<sup>13</sup> An example of this misplaced emphasis comes from one of the common views of the book of Romans among protestant Christians that sees Romans as a summary of the Christian faith with an exposition of justification by faith at its center. This emphasis misses the practical purpose of the book of Romans that some more recent Romans scholars are now seeing. For instance, the concluding five chapters of Romans demonstrate that Romans is not an exposition of the Gospel for the sake of an exposition of the Gospel, but is an attempt to unify a church that is divided among Jewish and Gentile lines. The purpose of this unity is to enable the church to focus on and engage in its true calling of missions.<sup>14</sup> The Roman Christians needed to learn to accept each other as Christ had accepted them, recognizing that God accepts everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, on

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<sup>13</sup> Karl P. Donfried, "Introduction 1977: The Nature and Scope of the Romans Debate," in *The Romans Debate*, 2d ed., edited by Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), xli. Donfried points out how Luther's assessment of Romans as a "compendium of the Christian religion" as been the standard view of the book of Romans in protestant Christianity. Many view Romans as an exposition of the Gospel for the sake of giving an exposition of the Gospel.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 79. Fitzmyer makes the case that the purpose of Romans was to unify a divided church so that they can focus on the Christian mission further west to Spain.



the basis of their faith in Christ. Romans 14-15 demonstrate that God accepts people with different convictions on certain things. Therefore, all Christians who are different from each other, even as different as Jew and Gentile, need to accept each other so that God's mission can be taken further into the world. Romans is rightly the most detailed exposition of the Gospel, but the purpose was not for individual salvation, but to unite a church under the Gospel so that God's mission could be taken further into the world.

This practical conclusion and culmination of the book of Romans demonstrates that any theology that takes soteriology seriously needs to consider the daily, practical implications of the Gospel as well. Soteriology and mission go hand in hand.

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