

Acts 2:40-47 – “Community”

5/31/09 – Rich Lusk

With the move to the new building, I wanted to preach a handful of sermons on some core principles that we desire to shape our church life. Since it was Pentecost Sunday, I chose to start with Acts 2. Lord willing, in upcoming weeks, we'll look at trinity, liturgy, mission, mercy, culture, suffering, unity, forgiveness, and children.

Moving into a building of our own provides new opportunities but also new challenges. We need to remember the church is a people, not a place. As has been said, buildings don't reach people; people reach people. Buildings are tools and aids, but by themselves do not accomplish the mission of the church. An article from Christianity Today provides helpful insight

(http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=83535):

I think we need to be cautious about an excessive focus on buildings," adds Gerardo Marti, a sociologist at Davidson University. Marti studied Los Angeles's innovative Mosaic community for his book *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church*. "These discussions [about architecture] often lead us away from a core insight: that ministry is about how we can actualize God's love through community.

On Psalm singing: Perhaps instead of the “Sing the psalms, change the world” slogan, we should go with “Changing the world one psalm at a time.”

What is the church?

Ignatius, the church father, defined the church in terms of the presence of Jesus: “Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.” But, of course, this only begs the question: How do we know Jesus is really with us?

The book *The Ecclesiastical Law of the Church of England*, defines the church this way:

The Church is a society of men instituted for the worship of God, bound together by the profession of a common faith, the practice of divinely ordained rites, and resting upon a visible external order.

Christianity is inseparable from a community, in which it imparts its truths by regular course of instruction, and endeavors to secure the observance of its precepts by a moral and religious education; and being a revelation of the will of God is necessarily independent of municipal institution, and unconfined by the limits of places or kingdoms.

This definition is fine as far as it goes. The church is most certainly a society and community, gathered for worship, and circumscribed by God's ordained rites. But this definition is missing a missional component, which we find at the heart of NT's ecclesiology.

William, Temple once said the church is only institution in the world that exists for the sake of her *non*-members. In Christopher Cocksworth's book *Holy, Holy, Holy*, he articulates the centrality of mission this way:

Just as we are invited to step into the worship of the Trinity in which the Son glorifies the Father in the Spirit, so we are called to share in the mission of the Trinity in which the Father sends the Son by the power of the Spirit to redeem the world. The word "mission" is derived from the Latin verb for sending. The Church is missionary because it is sent by God who sends his Son. The Church does not have a choice about being involved in mission any more than it has a choice about being involved in worship. Worship and mission belong in the very being of the Church. We cannot be otherwise than a worshipping community and a missionary people because we have been adopted into the life of God. God's life is a life of worship overflowing into a life of mission.

Of course, community and mission go hand in hand, as Jesus indicated in John 13. By our love for one another, the world is drawn to the love of Christ. A community like the one in Acts 2:40-47 always has a surplus of love. Love overflows to outsiders. In our day, being a part of healthy church means we show active love to non-Christians. It means we learn to love those the culture wars say we should hate. As we minister in word and deed to one another and to those outside the household of faith, we bear witness holistically to the gospel.

To put it simply: *God has designed the gospel to travel along relational lines.* This is true inside the church – the gospel edifies and encourages us as we live and

worship together. But the gospel also flows to outsiders as we get to know them and love them.

Lesslie Newbigin's works on ecclesiology are very helpful in unpacking the meaning of Acts 2:40-47 for ecclesiology and mission. His entire missionary and literary career could be considered an exposition and application of these verses.

Newbigin that the witness of the church could not be credible in a secular age unless it was wed to a vibrant, cruciform community life. Newbigin writes:

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 227).

There is something remarkably attractive and eye-catching about a community that lives in a radical God-centered and others-centered way. If an individual Christian lives a life of radical generosity, prayer, and service, that can be impressive. However, it can also be intimidating, since others see the "super-Christian" and figure they could never believe him. But when a *whole community* lives this way, caring for one another, it has an incredibly profound effect. Thus, Luke tells us in Acts 2:43 that the outsiders were filled with fear. They were in awe. They were awe-struck at the church.

This is why the Lord added to their number daily, as Luke tells us in Acts 2:47. The growth of any local church is mysterious – why some churches grow and others do not is hard to explain. But we know that church growth is the Lord's work, and we know that the Lord delights to grow a church that lives this way. The early church described by Luke had God's favor and the people's favor. They didn't need a PR campaign, or a big evangelistic program, or a missions department. They simply lived as a Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered community, and so they exploded with growth.

The church has an incredible power that we do not even recognize. Perhaps we need to learn to see the church not only as God sees her (as the body and bride of

his Son), but as Satan sees her. In C. S. Lewis' brilliant *Screwtape Letters*, the senior devil describes the church this way: "the church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy." A church that lives out Acts 2:40-47 makes the devil nervous indeed! Satan has no counter-measures to use against a church that lives this way.

We often miss the communal aspects of the gospel. Community is not something tacked on to the gospel; rather, the church's community is part of the gospel's work. As it has been said, the gospel forms us into a counter-culture for the sake of the common good. This counter-culture will not be effective in reaching the world and demonstrating the power of the kingdom of God unless we have healthy relationships with one another. Anemic community kills missional effectiveness. If we cannot get along inside the church, why should anyone want what we have? However if people groups inside the church get along in ways they do not and cannot outside the church, the world has to sit up and take notice.

You do not have to be in a church for long to realize church community is intrusive, invasive, and messy. It can be joyful but it can also be painful. Flannery O'Connor wrote, "It seems to be a fact that you suffer as much from the Church as for it." In other words, we do not just suffer for the church at the hands of unbelievers; often, our suffering is inflicted from the church, by our own brothers and sisters in the body.

Despite the pain involved in church life, we must make taking care of church members our first priority. The church is our "first family." It is where our highest loyalties on earth are found. Sure there are other loyalties – to family members that are not part of the church, to our school, to our neighbors, etc. – but fellow Christians have a prior claim on us. This may mean we need to rethink our priorities in terms of who we choose to help with our resources. The fact that many Christians in other parts of the world go without basic necessities should bother us deeply – enough that we are willing to do something about it, as God allows. Such help may need to rank higher than helping in our local communities at times. True, local help is often a more effective witness, but we need to remember that those Christians on the other side of the world are our own flesh and blood in Christ and they often have far less than even the poorest Americans.

In Acts and the Pauline epistles, we see that Christians took care of their own. For example, Paul raised money from largely Gentile believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire to help the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. That is obviously a model for us. Christians should demonstrate trans-national, cross-cultural, multi-racial solidarity with one another.

When you help your fellow Christian, you help yourself. When you hurt a Christian, you hurt yourself. We are members of one body, so this is inevitable.

As I said in the sermon, fellowship is far more than coffee and donuts. Coffee and donuts are all that remain when the Spirit has left the building. But when the Spirit is at work, God's people develop thick relational bonds with one another. We learn to "one another" one another. We learn to embody the gospel in concrete acts of love towards one another.

Here are some quotes on community--

Neil Cole:

The gospel flies best on the wings of relationships.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize;
it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.

Bonhoeffer's entire book, *Life Together*, is well worth reading. It's one of the best expositions of Christian community ever written.

Here's another Bonhoeffer quote on how we should allow one another to "interrupt" our lives:

We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks, as the priest passed by the man who had fallen among thieves, perhaps - reading the Bible. When we do that we pass by

the visible sign of the Cross raised athwart our path to show us that, not our way, but God's way must be done. It is a strange fact that Christians and even ministers frequently consider their work so important and urgent that they will allow nothing to disturb them. They think they are doing God a service in this, but actually they are disdainful of God's 'crooked yet straight path' (Gottfried Arnold). They do not want a life that is crossed and balked. But it is part of the discipline of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service and that we do not assume that our schedule is our own to manage, but allow it to be arranged by God.

Here's more Bonhoeffer, this time from *Sanctorum Communio*:

Love finds community without seeking it, or precisely because it does not seek it. Those who want to lose their lives will save them. Those who want to lose their lives will save them. This is the only way in which surrendering myself to what God wills for my neighbor really leads to the community of *the sanctorum communio established by God*; to realize each person serves as an instrument of God. Thus we find that the Christian community of love has a unique sociological structure: the mutual love of the saints does indeed constitute 'community' as an end in itself, that is, community in the strict sense of the word.

Still more Bonhoeffer, from *Life Together*:

I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity....

...let him who until now has had the privilege of living in a common life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

Hans Urs von Balthasar:

Only in Christ are all things in communion. He is the point of convergence of all hearts and beings and therefore the bridge and the shortest way from each to each.

Flannery O'Connor's brilliant line on how we dehumanize our enemies in order to justify hating them:

It is hard to make your adversaries real people unless you recognize yourself in them – in which case, if you don't watch out, they cease to be your adversaries.

We have to learn to see that we are not really all that different from our enemies. All of us are sinners in need of grace. This enables us to build community inside the church (since sometimes we find adversaries in the body) and build missional relationships with those on the other side of the so-called culture war.

John Ortberg:

The true indicator of spiritual well-being is growth in the ability to love God and people.

Eugene Petersen has reams of quotations on community. Here's a good one:

The gospel pulls us into community. One of the immediate changes that the gospel makes is grammatical: we instead of I; our instead of my; us instead of me.

Eugene Peterson on the institutional church:

What other church is there besides institutional? There's nobody who doesn't have problems with the church, because there's sin in the church. But there's no other place to be a Christian except the church. There's sin in the local bank. There's sin in the grocery stores. I really don't understand this naive criticism of the institution. I really don't get it. Frederick von Hugel said the institution of the church is like the bark on the tree. There's no life in the bark. It's dead wood. But it protects the life of the tree within. And the tree grows and grows and grows and grows. If you take the bark off, it's prone to disease dehydration, death.

So, yes, the church is dead but it protects something alive. And when you try to have a church without bark, it doesn't last long. It disappears, gets sick, and it's prone to all kinds of disease, heresy, and narcissism. In my writing, I hope to recover a sense of the reality of congregation - what it is. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit. Why are we always idealizing what the Holy Spirit doesn't idealize? There's no idealization of the church in the Bible - none. We've got two thousand years of history now. Why are we so dumb?

John Millbank on the church:

I'm very much in a tradition of Anglican thinkers going back to John Neville Figgis who have insisted that the church is the purpose of salvation, it's not just the collection of believers or the saved. The church is the realization of salvation, because the church is the realization of reconciliation, ultimately b/t everybody. Ultimately the church is, as the Eastern Orthodox stress, bigger than the cosmos, because it's the cosmos linked to God and returned to God. So church for me is a very big reality. It's the site of the true human sociality. So, again, very much in the tradition of Anglican socialism I tend to see the church itself as the political vehicle. You don't need a political party, b/c the church has a social purpose that goes beyond the political understood in the normal sense, because it's not just about equal sharing and punishing wrongdoers. It's about forgiveness and reconciliation and restoring and giving superabundantly to each other. So it involves some kind of social purpose that can't be fully realized in this world but can to some extent and goes beyond the social purpose and the political purpose of the state, so much so that even ideally state functions should be minimized in relation to ecclesiastical functions. The more we had real church in our economic practices, in our social practices ... the less you would need these state functions. Liturgy also is crucial here: the sense that worshipping God is the true social purpose and that everything, all our economic activities are ultimately oriented to making the true worship of God in the kind of ritual patterns of the daily life that come to a head in what happens in a church. Without a sense of what binds us together you don't have a real society.

C.S. Lewis on love:

The human loves can be glorious images of Divine love. No less that that: but also no more.

Lesslie Newbigin on the church:

The church is an entity which has outlasted many states, nations and empires, and it will outlast those that exist today. The Church is nothing other than that movement launched into the public life of the world by its sovereign Lord to continue that which he came to do until it is finished in his return in glory. It has his promise that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. In spite of the crimes, blunders, compromises and errors by which its story has been stained and is stained to this day, the Church is the great reality in comparison with which nations and empires and civilizations are passing phenomena. The Church can never settle down to being a voluntary society concerned merely with private and domestic affairs. It is bound to challenge in the name of the one Lord all the powers, ideologies, myths, assumptions, and worldviews which do not acknowledge him as Lord. If that involves conflict, trouble, and rejection, then we have the example of Jesus before us and his reminder that a servant is not greater than his master.

Henri Nouwen, from *Can You Drink the Cup?*:

Community is like a large mosaic. Each little piece seems so insignificant. One piece is bright red, another cold blue or dull green, another warm purple, another sharp yellow, another shining gold. Some look precious, others ordinary. Some look valuable, others worthless. Some look gaudy, others delicate. As individuals stones, we can do little with them except compare them and judge their beauty and value. When, however, all these little stones are brought together in one big mosaic portraying the face of Christ, who would ever question the importance of any one of them? If one of them, even the least spectacular one, is missing, the face is incomplete. Together in the one mosaic, each little stone is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to the glory of God. That's community, a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world.

Timothy Radcliffe:

At the centre of Christianity is community; we are gathered by the Lord around the altar.

From C.S. Lewis' *The Weight of Glory*:

No Christian and, indeed, no historian could accept the epigram which defines religion as 'what a man does with his solitude.'

Ted M. Gossard:

If there's one note missing from much of our Christianity over the centuries, and in the present day in my culture, it's the note of community. We're to be a community in Jesus. Too often an emphasis on the individual which has philosophical origin, has all but muted out the Biblical emphasis on community. The individual is still important, but as an important part of the whole, the community....

I am blessed to be in community everyday at work with other Christians. We live together as believers in our Lord. I miss contact with those who are not Christians. Though a few come in to do specific jobs there. But I also don't want to take for granted the blessing I have in being around fellow believers day after day.

I think what we chiefly need to do as followers of Jesus in regard to community is to keep meeting together, on a regular basis. When we do, and even before that (as Byard has taught us here, on Sundays), the Spirit is at work to make us a Body that will minister to each other, and indirectly as well as directly to the world.

This is a God-thing. Not something we can come up with, not program-oriented, not according to what we plan. Our one responsibility is to live as those who are joined not only to Christ, but to all who are in Christ. We need to live that out in practical ways, before the world while reaching out to others to become a part of us, in Jesus.

Alasdair MacIntyre's famous quote on strong forms of local community (= local churches) as the need of the hour:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark

ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitute part of the our predicament. We are waiting...for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict.

Christian community has its roots in God, who exists as a community of love from all eternity. Our God is three persons united eternally in love. Mark Galli gives some helpful thoughts:

If God-as-Trinity is the core reality of the universe, that means that the core of reality is community.

This is not easy for someone like me to accept. I have been suckled since infancy on the metaphor of the social contract: we are individuals first who then band together when it serves our self-interest. The community exists to help me self-actualize. I take it or leave it depending on whether it helps me do that. So, I never really commit to community.

My lifelong participation in the church seems to belie that, but I've learned the fine art of participating without being fully present, of doing a flurry of work for the church but hiding my deeper self from others. I never get deeply involved in the lives of others, because, well, that just complicates my life. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living community...

But the truth is that the core of my identity lies not in my individuality. Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau notwithstanding, it is not "I think, therefore I am." ... The deeper truth is this: "God speaks, therefore we are."

Doug Wilson reminds us that the present economic crisis is an opportunity to actually strengthen community:

We are living in the middle of a very significant financial crisis, and we are doing so when almost everyone is demanding that the false savior of the state deliver us from the peril. But the disaster is happening because God is not mocked, and nations as well as men reap what they sow. In addition, repentance for financial idolatry does not consist of even more financial idolatry.

Our response is to be that of loving one another, and doing so in true community. We sometimes think this is limited to the duty of giving to those in need—that is obviously central, but it is not the only thing. If you are in distress because of the economy, you have a Christian obligation to

not hide that fact from your brothers and sisters. If one part of the body hurts, it does not have the option of hiding that hurt from the rest of the body. Of course, you take care of your household first, and family members are next in line if you cannot do that. The members of the church ought not to be holding bake sales so that you are not forced to sell off your second yacht. But if your income has been cut in half, and you are struggling to meet your basic obligations, and your family has helped all it can, this ought not to be hidden from your friends and brothers.

Loving one another in these circumstances will begin with us being fully honest with one another.

If Henri deLubac is right that salvation is “essentially social” (which he is), then we must also remember that salvation is also “essentially missional.” God saves us so that we may become agents in saving others. He draws us in so that he can send us out; he gathers us so that he may scatter us.

It is impossible to separate the church’s communal aspect from the church’s mission. On the one hand, community gives rise to mission. On the other hand, mission flows back into community. A community without a shared purpose – a mission – is really no community at all, but at best a club. But if our going out to do mission does not return in ever-widening circles of community, the mission is not actually succeeding.

Community is vital to the spread of the gospel because the gospel travels best along relational lines. Gospel community and gospel mission are simply inseparable. Both of these are seen in Acts 2. Since the sermon focused mainly on community, here are some thoughts and quotes on mission to balance it out:

Colin Gunton articulates the relationship of community to the fulfillment of God’s purposes:

The will of God is realized through a kind of community of love, so that the centrality of the Trinitarian mediators of creation ensure the purposeful nature of the creation, its non-arbitrary character. The creation has a purpose: the world is made to achieve perfection through time and to return completed to its creator.

Lesslie Newbigin understood the connection between community and mission:

How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. (The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 227)

Newbigin's sterling and prescient 1957 book *Household of God* draws together both the communal and missional aspects of church life:

<http://www.newbigin.net/assets/pdf/53hg.pdf>. I highly recommend the work of Newbigin, even more the whole spate of missional literature it spawned.

Newbigin, unlike some who have taken up his mantle, kept a positive view of the state and an appreciation for the best aspects of Christendom. He also wed his emphasis on community and mission in the church to a high view of church office (e.g., episcopacy) and the sacraments. In this regard, his work is superior to others like Hauerwas, Cavanaugh, etc., who have veered towards a more anabaptistic view of the state and do not always hold together all the aspects of the "Newbigin synthesis."

Scott Thomas defines mission this way

(<http://pjtibayan.wordpress.com/2009/01/10/is-capitol-hill-baptist-church-home-of-9marks-ministry-a-missional-church/>):

The argument is often over whether a church is either relating to its culture or rejecting its culture (missional or non-missional). **I think there is a third way.** A missional church connects with culture *and* connects with God. It builds the Kingdom while building the local church. It serves the community where it resides while its congregants are served. Its focus is on engaging evangelism personally and in community with others and it fervently follows the Holy Spirit as it makes plans for the glory of God.

Harvey Conn was one of the best missiologists of the 20th century. He described the evangelistic task of the church as "gossiping the gospel," e.g., not making a hard sell or cold call type gospel presentation, but weaving the gospel into friendships in an organic way. He also described our task as "gospel show and tell" – we minister in both word and deed, and this dual witness to Christ in community is essential to the ministry of the church. Conn wrote:

For too long evangelical white Christian communities in the United States have had a “come” structure, a parochialism that identifies with saints. One cannot be a missionary church and continue insisting that the world must come to the church on the church’s terms. It must become a “go” structure. And it can do that only when its concerns are directed outside itself toward the poor, the abused, and the oppressed. The church must recapture its identity as the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of its nonmembers (23).

The gospel that ignores the sinned-against may work among the middle class, but it cannot possibly work among the overwhelming majority in Asia or the United States—publican peasants and workers. It conveys too much superiority, condescension, yes even pity, to be credible. What is missing is compassion. Compassion becomes possible when we perceive people as the sinned-against, as well as the sinning(47).

Let people know that by giving their allegiance to Christ they will be embarking on a great campaign to banish war and poverty and injustice, to set up a life where love and service and justice have taken the place of selfishness and power. Let people know that the church that sends out this manifesto plans to be an advance copy of the new world order it preaches (56).

Russell Moore reminds us that mission can never substitute social justice for the proclamation of the cross:

Satan ultimately has a power that is not found most importantly in moral decay or in cultural chaos. His power is in the authority to *accuse*. The power of accusation. The power of holding humanity captive through the fear of death and the certainty of judgment ...

Satan is not fearful of external conformity to rule. Not even to the external conformity of the rule of Christ – provided there is no cross. Satan does not mind family values – as long as what you ultimately value is the family. Satan does not mind social justice – as long as you see justice as most importantly social. Satan does not tremble at a Christian worldview. He will let you have a Christian worldview as long as your ultimate goal is viewing the world ...

He will let you get what it is that you want, no matter what it is – sanctity of marriage, environmental protection, orphan care, all of these good and wonderful things – he will allow you to gain those things *provided* you do

not preach and proclaim and live through the power of a cross that cancels *his* power of condemnation.

Sinclair Ferguson on what Acts is really about:

The Acts of the Apostles is not so much 'the Acts of the Holy Spirit' but 'the continuing Acts of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.'

David Bosch, a great missiologist, wrote on the Pentecostal origin of mission:

The gift of the Spirit is the gift of becoming involved in mission, for mission is the direct consequence of the outpouring of the Spirit.

Darrel Gruder is another helpful missiologist. Here are a couple of quotes:

Regardless of the actual shape and name adopted, the local congregation is the basic unit of Christian witness if we understand witness incarnationally. The gospel is always to be embodied by the people of God in a particular place. The sent-out community is sent out into a specific context in which it is located. There, it must grapple with the challenge to be faithful to its mandate while translating relevantly, which will mean that it struggles with the pressures to conform found in every cultural setting.

Mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. "Mission" means "sending," and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's action in human history. God's mission began with the call of Israel to receive God's blessings in order to be a blessing to the nations. God's mission unfolded in the history of God's people across the centuries recorded in Scripture, and it reached its revelatory climax in the incarnation of God's work of salvation in Jesus ministering, crucified, and resurrected. God's mission continued then in the sending of the Spirit to call forth and empower the church as the witness to God's good news in Jesus Christ.

Christopher Wright, Abraham's family (= the church, per Gal. 3-4 and Rom. 4) as God's answer to what is wrong with the world:

The call of Abraham is the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations and the groaning brokenness of his

whole creation.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon on every Christian's missionary calling:

Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter.

Jim Huffman:

Either you are a minister or you need one. Either you are a missionary or you need one.

John Stott:

If God desires every knee to bow to Jesus and every tongue to confess Him, so should we. We should be 'jealous' for the honor of His name—troubled when it remains unknown, hurt when it is ignored, indignant when it is blasphemed, and all the time anxious and determined that it shall be given the honor and glory which are due to it.

The highest of all missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission (important as that is), nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing (strong as that incentive is, especially when we contemplate the wrath of God), but rather zeal—burning and passionate zeal—for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Only one imperialism is Christian, and that is concern for His Imperial Majesty Jesus Christ, and for the glory of his empire or kingdom. Before this supreme goal of the Christian mission, all unworthy motives wither and die.

Augustine:

The world reconciled is the church.

Thomas Merton:

The mission of the church is to continue Christ's ministry on earth.

Scott Matheson:

The question is not a non-churchgoing community but a non-going church.

Tim Chester's book *Total Church* is an excellent work of missional ecclesiology:

God is a missionary God and God's primary missionary method is his covenant people. Humanity was made in the image of the triune God. The purpose of an image is to represent something and we were made to represent God on earth. God made us as persons-in-community to be the vehicle through which he would reveal his glory. But humanity has grasped for autonomy from God. We fell under the curse of God, and human community has become fractured. The image-bearers of God fall short of his glory...

You can probably see already what a big difference it makes to tell the story this way. God's loving purposes for you and me need to be set in the wider context of his loving purposes for humanity and the world. Thus... God begins his plan to create a new humanity with his promise to Abraham. By focusing on Abraham, God has not abandoned the rest of humanity, for through Abraham, blessing will come to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3).

The church [...] is not something additional or optional. It is at the very heart of God's purposes. Jesus came to create a people who would model what it means to live under his rule. It would be a glorious outpost of the kingdom of God: an embassy of heaven. This is where the world can see what it means to be truly human.

So, next time someone says to me, 'I can be a Christian without going to church, can't I?' (as though it's an optional extra) — even though I sympathise with not wanting to make church membership a precondition for a right standing with God — I'll just take a deep breath and start: 'Well, it depends how you tell the story...'

Most gospel ministry involves *ordinary people doing ordinary things* with gospel intentionality....

Why does this matter? It matters because we are failing to reach the working class with the gospel. Evangelicalism has become a largely

middle-class, professional phenomenon. When we invite people to our dinners and our churches, we invite our friends, our relatives, and our rich neighbors. We do not invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. What is at stake is the grace of God...

We demonstrate by our lives together as Christians what it means to live under the reign of King Jesus and so invite others to live under that reign...

The Triune God is a missionary God. The church, then, has a mission because God has a mission. The role of the church is to participate in the mission of God...

Theology must be in the service of the church and its mission. . . . A significant part of the problem behind academic theology and biblical scholarship is the way in which it is, all too often, self-referential. Professional theologians often write about and for other professional theologians. . . . If true theology is the fruit of engagement with the Bible set in the context of the local church, then much of what passes for theology is not theology at all. Why do we allow such people to set the agenda?

John Stott speaks to how we should handle the church's failures:

We need to get the failures of the church on our conscience, to feel the offence to Christ and the world which these failures are, to weep over the credibility gap between the church's talk and the church's walk, to repent of our readiness to excuse and even condone our failures, and to determine to do something about it. I wonder if anything is more urgent today, for the honor of Christ and for the spread of the Gospel, than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is—a single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as Peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due to his name. (God's New Society, 111-112)

Will Willimon uses an incarnational model to handle disappointments with the church:

When I was new, people sometimes asked, "What has been your biggest challenge as a baby bishop?" They think I'm going to say, "Moving from an intellectual to a nonintellectual environment," or "Having to work harder than I did as a professor," something like that.

I've come to say that the most difficult part of being a bishop is to have to live, on a daily basis, in that great gap between who Jesus is (a marginalized, fanatical, Jewish prophet who was the God we didn't expect) and what the church is (a rather sedate, rule-driven group of people who just want to be left alone so we can be "spiritual"). Jesus' Body, the church, is the greatest challenge in following Jesus. "I could believe in Jesus," declared the poet, Shelley, "if only he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the church."

One of last year's most popular church books was entitled, *Leaving Church*. Oh to rise above the muck and the mire of the corporeal and the ecclesiastical so that we can be free to descend ever more deeply into the subjective and the personal.

We're in Advent, that time in the church year when we attempt to prepare for the shock of the Incarnation, the shock that God Almighty refused to stay above us but got down and dirty with us, in the flesh, moved in with us.

Jesus Christ, Lord of Lords, has chosen to be a people, a family, this people, this church.

Bonhoeffer, before he went willingly to be hanged by the Nazis was forced by God unwillingly to hang out in the church. There he discovered the power of a God incarnate. Bonhoeffer, put it this way: "A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities. They are heard, learnt, and apprehended, and that is all. But the incarnate son of God needs not only ears or hearts, but living [people] who will follow him. That is why he called his disciples into a literal, bodily following, and thus made his fellowship with them a visible reality. Having been called they could no longer remain in obscurity, they were the light that must shine, the city on the hill which must be seen."

In my own life, the church that previously had been relegated to the margins of the university as a "sometimes helpful spiritual influence," has now assumed a large place. As a bishop the church has for me, in Bonhoeffer's words, "taken up room". It's a "Treasure in earthen vessels," (2 Cor. 4:5-7) yes, but it is also for me the sprawling, cracked earthen

vessel that takes so much of my time there's precious little room left for the treasure.

To be a lay or ordained leader of the church is to be called to care for the visibility of the church, the corporeal mass, the machinery. This task is particularly trying in age in the grip of anti-institutionalism and solipsistic spirituality.

Jerome Burce calls our age that of "spiritual agnosticism" (Marcus Borg and the so-called "Progressive Christians") in which "The Fundamental truth claim of our culture with respect to matters spiritual is that we cannot know about them with anything approaching sufficient certainty to command the allegiance or shape the conduct or, least of all, correct the spiritual and/or moral opinions of another."

Flee the Body in order to ascend to some disincarnate spiritual realm.

Time magazine's "Person of the Year" last year was, "You" - we have lost interest in anything but us.

Professor Bart Ehrmann, professor at the University of North Carolina, wrote a bestselling book, *Misquoting Jesus*. Surprise, there are all sort of stenographic errors in scripture, errors of transcription and questionable renderings of what the Jesus Seminar says Jesus said. So Ehrmann ends his book asking present day Christians (Ehrmann was a fundamentalist as a kid and appears not quite to have grown out of it), "Do you really want to put your trust in a flawed, thoroughly human book like the Bible?" Well Bart, just where on earth would we put our trust? We actually believe that God became flesh, took on our flawed, thoroughly human corporeal nature. So if we're going to put our trust in God, it will have to be in this God, it will have to be here, now, the same God who has condescended to take up room among us as the United Methodist Church. When we put our trust in the "thoroughly human" we actually believe we're putting our trust in God who loved us enough to become human. We can't love Jesus without loving his body. It is a crucified body, to be sure, in bad shape, statistically speaking, but a body all the more in need of a loving caress.

We are those called, at this time in the history of Christendom, to worry about what constitutes a church, to be a sign of the visible unity of the church, to keep encouraging members of the body to honor one another, and sometimes even to promise a dead, decadent body nothing less than resurrection. An embodied, incarnate Christ sanctifies our mundane ecclesiastical body work as his. The church is Christ's way of taking up room in his still being redeemed world.

The night I was ordained, a bishop laid hands on my head, repeating the ancient words of the Ordinal, "Never forget that the ones to whom you are called to minister are the ones for whom he died." There I was, wondering, "Will the church appreciate my superior training? Will I get an all-electric parsonage?"

And there was the church, once again forcing me to be a Chalcedonian Christian, once again forcing me to believe in the blessed Incarnation, once again telling me, "The often disheartening, sometimes disappointing ones I'm making you fortunate enough to serve, are the ones for whom I died. This is my idea of salvation. Don't mess it up." Oh the challenge of believing the Incarnation.

Reggie Neal is right when he says, "These are the best of times to be the church, and these are the worst of times to be the church."

The church in our day in the West looks to be on her death bed. Thankfully we serve a Savior who knows how to find his way out of a tomb. When the church does recover, it will be largely because she has rediscovered the practices described in Acts 2:42f.

More on church as community:

Tim Chester writes about "one anothering" one another in the NT (<http://timchester.wordpress.com/2009/05/05/one-anothering-caring-for-each-other-in-community/>):

All the New Testament writers refer often to what we are to do to or for 'one another' (or 'each other' – the Greek is the same). This concept of 'one anothering' is a central feature of New Testament ecclesiology, albeit one which receives little attention in contemporary academic discussions. Some time ago I worked through these 'one anothering' statements and summarized them in to the following categories...

- * be at peace with one another, forgiving, agreeing, humble, accepting, forbearing, living in harmony and greeting with a kiss
- * do not judge, lie or grumble
- * show hospitality to one another
- * confess your sins to one another

- * be kind to one another, concerned, devoted, serving and doing good
- * instruct and teach one another
- * admonish, exhort and stir up one another
- * comfort and encourage one another

See also <http://timchester.wordpress.com/2009/04/15/the-word-imagination-counter-worlds-and-community-building/> on the church as alternative culture, using Israel under Torah as the model.

Greg Soderburg points to a helpful quote from the early medieval church::

Wonderful quote from Dorotheus of Gaza, a mystic from the 6th century. As she imagined, “ the world as a circle on the ground at whose center was God, she wrote, ‘Leading from the edge to the center are a number of lines, representing ways of life. In their desire to draw near to God, the saints advance along these lines to the middle of the circle, so that the further they go, the nearer they approach one another as well as God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another’” (Judith Dupre, *Churches*, 156).

Many non-Christians see the church as worthless, but others see church as an outright threat. Many non-Christians are scared of us. They look at the medieval Crusades and the killing of abortion doctors, and they think we want them dead. As Jerram Barrs has said, ‘Non-Christians think that we hate them.’

Obviously, for the church to reach the culture with the gospel, she has to overcome this kind of stigma. The only way we can do so is by getting to know non-Christians in our neighborhoods and workplaces, and extending the grace and love of Christ to them. Strong-arm evangelistic techniques and self-righteous sounding declarations on moral issues will not do it. We must work at adorning our lives with the beauty of the gospel. They or may not convert, but they will at least see the attractiveness of the gospel of Christ at some level.

While it is entirely appropriate to speak of the church as a culture, as need to be careful about such language. In reality, there is not just one form of Christian culture. In reality, the gospel is extremely flexible, culturally speaking. It can adapt to, inhabit, thrive in, and transform virtually any culture. Church

culture/Christian culture in, e.g., China, is not going to look like it has in America, nor should it. Perhaps instead of speaking of Christian culture, we should speak of Christian culture^S. Thus: The gospel can manifest itself in a variety of musics; there can be multiple prayer forms made use of by Christians in different host cultures; Christian in different cultures will dress differently, and pastors may use different types of vestments; etc. The dangers of Western cultural imperialism are real; Christianity is not “our thing” any more than theirs in other parts of the world. Every ethnic group can be reshaped and remade by the gospel, but obviously the outcome of the gospel’s work is going to be somewhat different in each case. We need to appreciate those differences.

The church’s mission is Triune in origin:

The Father so loved world, he sent his only Son into the world to redeem it.

The Son so loved world, he died for the sins of the world.

The Spirit so loved world, he comes to remake it into the new creation.

Now the church is to so love the world that we carry onward the mission of the Triune God. We are to love world by going to where lost and hurting people are found, and standing at the intersection point between their pain and God’s love. The church is a bridge from heaven to earth, bringing the love of heaven to people here who are estranged from God.

Mercy ministry is a distinctly theological problem, as Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev pointed out:

The problem of bread for me is a material problem, but the problem of bread for my neighbor, for all, is a spiritual, religious question.

There are different ways to describe the mission of the church. Take this as a sample:

We believe that God has called us to be part of the spiritual renewal of the city *so that* we can be part of the social and cultural renewal of this city (and the world). Because we believe God is redeeming this world, our desire is to build a great city for all people here in Birmingham. Through the grace of Christ, we long to

see the lost converted to faith, community formed, society made more just, and culture transformed.

John Wesley on freedom:

True Christianity is to have the mind of Christ, which is demonstrated in love for God and neighbour. The real freedom of a Christian is not the freedom from guilt or release from the pangs of hell but the freedom to love with the love of God Himself shed abroad in the heart by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Freedom is nothing higher and nothing lower than this - love governing the heart and life, through all our tempers, words and actions - Christian perfection is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is giving God all our hearts.

Where the Spirit is, there is liberty (2 Cor. 3). That liberty is the liberty to love and serve, not the liberty to live for ourselves (which is really slavery).

At TPC, we have to work very hard at developing the kind of community Acts 2 envisions. For one thing, we have geographic challenges: we are a spread out bunch. For another thing, we are very diverse, especially for a church our size. That diversity is a strength, but it means that we do not necessarily have the "affinity groups" that easily link people together in other churches.

However, one thing I think God has done is use our communal diversity to stretch us and to open our eyes to many truths we would have missed in a more homogenous church body. Community is not supposed to be easy. In fact, the challenges of community are often key cogs in our personal growth. Those people that you consider "difficult" are often chisels God is using to sculpt your character.

Acts 2 also raises questions about the role of the church in society. The new community formed by the Spirit is obviously not a privatized entity, but a public institution. But how does a public church relate to the surrounding society? To the city? The nation? The empire?

I've already mentioned Newbigin as a scholar who deals with these sorts of questions in a very helpful way. I would also recommend Peter Leithart's *Against Christianity*.

P. T. Forsyth has some good thoughts on the church's social place in his 1914 essay, 'Christianity and Society':

The Church's true attitude and action in the world is Christ's. It is that of him whose indwelling makes it a Church. The question, therefore, of the Church's relation to Society is really the whole question of Christology...

The Church is not simply the superlative of religious society. It is not spiritual Humanity coming to its own. Christianity is not the republication of the *lex naturæ* with supreme *éclat*. Grace is not a mere reinforcement of nature. There is a new Creation. That is the vital thing....

The principle of the Church is thus the antithesis of the world; and yet it is in constant and positive relation with it. They co-exist in a vital paradox which is the essence of all active religion. The Gospel can neither humor human nature nor let it alone. That is the grand collision of history, however its form may vary ... Hence the first business of the Church is not to influence man but to worship and glorify God, and to act on man only in that interest. All its doctrine, preaching, culture, and conduct is a confession and glorification of the Saviour. The Church does not save; it only bears living witness and makes humble confession, in manifold ways, of a God who does. It is not a company for the promotion of goodness, but a society for the honor of God....

The evil neglect of the theologian [and pastor] by the public today is in a measure his own fault. His truth has not kept pace with the growth of social interest. It has been too idealogical, and not enough social. His doctrine has not remained a living expression even of his own society of the Church. He has failed to show how necessary it is for the social interest itself. And he has not so construed the Gospel as to force a social regeneration on the Christian conscience. He has been often occupied with a God of substance, process, or ideas, instead of a God of act, life, and the Kingdom.

Christianity has more and more to face a dechurched civilization. The circumstances are thus quite different from the medieval state of things.

The traditional civilization is turned more and more upon its own resources. Can they save it from anarchy? It is on its trial.

... our eyes are being purged today to see many things. We feel the effects of a modernized Pelagianism, the effect of worshiping (if it is worship) a God whose revelation is too little of a moral crisis and re-creation of human nature, and too much of its glorification. We inherit a Christianity which allows too much to human nature, and therefore is conquered by it.

Forst is basically saying that the church has to live up to what she is: she is not merely another human organization, but God's new creation. She does not belong to this world, but has been into the world to bring about its healing and renewal. In a secular, dechurched society like ours, we have to bear witness against widespread idolatry. But we also have to show that humanity's common good cannot ultimately be found in secular society, but only in the supernatural society of the church. The gospel give us a new worldview, a new way of doing everything, a new way of being human.

Michael Goheen and Albert Woltersnon the breadth of our missional task:

The task of God's people is to make known the good news of God's renewed reign over the entirety of creation. Christ's kingly authority extends over the whole world. God's mission is equally comprehensive: to embody the good news that Jesus again rules over marriage and family, business and politics, art and athletics, leisure and scholarship, sex and technology. Since the gospel is a gospel of the kingdom, that mission is as wide as creation.

William Cavanaugh works present a devastating assessment of privatized, consumerist Christianity. He argues that the church provides an alternative world – an alternative way of life, an alternative economics, and an alternative politics. Thus, Cavanaugh criticizes the modern idea that the state must be the final arbiter of public morals and the common good. In his essay, 'Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is not the Keeper of the Common Good,' Cavanaugh states:

The nation-state is neither community writ large nor the protector of smaller communal spaces, but rather originates and grows over against truly common forms of life. This is not necessarily to say that the nation-state cannot and does not promote and protect some goods, or that any

nation-state is entirely devoid of civic virtue, or that some forms of ad hoc cooperation with the government cannot be useful. It is to suggest that the nation-state is simply not in the common good business. At its most benign, the nation-state is most realistically likened, as in MacIntyre's apt metaphor, to the telephone company, a large bureaucratic provider of goods and services that never quite provides value for money. The problem, as MacIntyre notes, is that the nation-state presents itself as so much more; namely, as the keeper of the common good and repository of sacred values that demands sacrifice on its behalf. The longing for genuine communion that Christians recognize at the heart of any truly common life is transferred onto the nation-state. Civic virtue and the goods of common life do not simply disappear; as Augustine saw, the earthly city flourishes by producing a distorted image of the heavenly city. The nation-state is a simulacrum of common life, where false order is parasitical on true order. In a bureaucratic order whose main function is to adjudicate struggles for power between various factions, a sense of unity is produced by the only means possible: sacrifice to false gods in war. The nation-state may be understood theologically as a kind of parody of the Church, meant to save us from division. The urgent task of the Church, then, is to demystify the nation-state and to treat it like the telephone company. At its best, the nation-state may provide goods and services that contribute to a certain limited order – mail delivery is a positive good. The state is not the keeper of the common good, however, and we need to adjust our expectations accordingly. The Church must break its imagination out of captivity to the nation-state. The Church must constitute itself as an alternative social space, and not simply rely on the nation-state to be its social presence. The Church needs, at every opportunity, to “complexify” space, that is, to promote the creation of spaces in which alternative economies and authorities flourish.

I am not entirely comfortable with Cavanaugh's view of the state. It seems to me that the traditional (pro-Christendom) view is that the state has been incorporated into the kingdom of Christ and can therefore play a role in serving the common good, provided she takes her direction from God's Word. Cavanaugh is rejecting such a view of the state. But Cavanaugh's emphasis on the need for the church to occupy a crucial place in society is on target. We need to pay more attention to the church's social role.

I highly recommend careful study of all of Cavanaugh's works, including *Torture and Eucharist, Being Consumed*, and *Theopolitical Imagination*.

Atypical Baptist Michael F. Bird, in “Re-Thinking a Sacramental View of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper for the Post-Christendom Baptist Church,” in *Baptist Sacramentalism 2* [*Paternoster Studies in Baptist History and Thought*], writes on the place of the church in our historical moment:

I suggest that we conceive of the church as a missional and displaced community that does not really fit into contemporary society rather than comprising the religious wing of modernity. ... [W]e should see ourselves as heralding the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The church must become a menace to our pluralistic society and threaten to undermine the philosophical premises that the *pax postmoderna* is built on. The scandalous message and perplexing praxis of Christians should invoke umbrage and curiosity. Why don’t you abort foetuses? Why don’t you approve of gay marriages? Why do you believe that only your religion is true? The answer is not a programme, not four spiritual laws, and not seeker sensitive services; rather, the answer is a story and community. ... Let me show you what renewed and redeemed humanity really looks like: justified and Spirit-led new creations, abounding in love for one another, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus. And what tools do we have that tell the story and display the community: baptism and eucharist. That is where the postmodern pagans may come and hear, see, taste, and experience the good of God in word, symbol and presence among his people.

As a postmillennialist, I do not always expect the church to be displaced as she is today. The church’s social centrality ebbs and flows in history, though it will flow in the end. But Bird gives a very on-the-money description of the church’s calling in our present time (including the need for a high sacramental theology!).

The sharing of goods in Acts 2 does not justify a government-imposed socialism. In fact, such socialism is a threat to the church precisely because it takes away the need and possibility for the kind of community Luke describes. Craig Carter explains:

The Church is called to take care of widows, orphans, the weak, the poor, and the disabled and Acts 2 gives us a snapshot of the early Church doing exactly that. Christians are to give sacrificially of their time and money to

help those in need. Socialism is a political doctrine designed to eliminate the need to do that. Moreover, socialism today is opposed to caring for the weakest among us and in fact sanctions their murder if they are inconvenient.

There is actually a pretty fair amount of evidence that socialized government care for the poor can actually be detrimental to the church. Obviously, the church has to learn to thrive in any society she finds herself. Her success is not dependent on worldly economic systems. But in Western democracies, the rise of socialism usually means the decline of the church.

To critique socialism is not to suggest that the state has no positive role to play. Scripture does not totally exclude the government's role in caring for the poor (Joseph's work as an economist in Genesis; Dan. 4; Jer. 22; etc.), as a kind of safety net when the family and church cannot rescue someone from poverty. However, we should also affirm that government's role should ideally be carefully circumscribed so that the church has a field on which she can play out her mission with minimal interference. Of course, if the church is not faithful in caring for the poor, we should not be surprised that the state will have to step in. If we will not have "mother church" we will always get the "nanny state."

Church Colson's "Breakpoint" article offered this info on the relationship between socialism and the church right after I preached the Acts 2 sermon:

Big Government and Religion

An 'Inverse' Relationship

June 3, 2009

Could the rise in government spending—from economic stimulus to health care reform to education spending—endanger the vitality of religion in America? That's a question University of Virginia Professor W. Bradford Wilcox discussed recently in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Wilcox zeroed in on a fascinating study entitled "State Welfare Spending and Religiosity." The study's authors, Anthony Gill and Erik Lundsgaarde, found an "inverse relationship between religious observance and welfare spending." Put more simply, the more a government spends on welfare, the fewer people go to church.

This is why it is that church attendance is so low in welfare states such as Denmark and Sweden compared to countries like the U.S. and the Philippines—where government doesn't provide cradle-to-grave assistance.

Anthony Gill hits the nail on the head. "For many centuries," he writes, "average citizens and local communities have often relied upon the support of religious organizations to meet their various social needs, including assistance for the poor, counseling in times of crisis, and education for the young."

But as the government grows, it elbows out the church and other voluntary associations. So Gill writes, "Many people have found that they can get the same services from the government without having to give a time commitment to the local church."

Now, we would like to think that most people don't stay in church just because they get help in times of trouble. But the truth is that many people first encounter the Church when they are in need: at a crisis pregnancy center, a soup kitchen, or in counseling for drug abuse or alcoholism. So as Wilcox writes in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Many of those who initially turn to religious organizations for mutual aid end up developing a faith that is as supernatural as it is material."

Now, as Wilcox points out, there are other factors behind declining church attendance in America. But the recent turning of the body politic toward government as the answer to all our problems does not bode well for the Church.

Nor does it bode well for the future of American democracy.

In his classic book, *Democracy in America*, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at how Americans could accomplish almost anything through voluntary associations—especially churches. They built schools, hospitals, sent missionaries all over the world. He wrote, "I frequently admired the boundless skill of Americans in setting large numbers of people a common goal and inducing them to strive toward that goal voluntarily."

De Tocqueville doubted that government could ever accomplish all that American citizens could do through their associations. But he also warned that if government should supplant the good work of these associations, the American people would ultimately end up dependent upon government. And this, he said, would imperil not only American democracy, but “civilization itself.”

In times of trouble, it’s natural to echo the question of the Psalmist:
Whence cometh my help?

Sadly, it seems that more and more Americans these days would answer,
“It cometh from Uncle Sam.”

Here is a very helpful post on community from the iMonk
(<http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/what-did-jesus-version-of-community-look-like>):

What Did Jesus’ Version of Community Look Like?

By iMonk on Jesus Shaped

Commenter: Please explain what you mean by: “community as Jesus exemplified it”. Thanks.

It is the community that Jesus created and demonstrated during his earthly ministry.

I would describe it as:

Cross cultural: Jesus crossed every available cultural barrier to announce and practice the Kingdom.

Counter cultural: Jesus was offering an alternative to the dominant cultural and religious options in his world.

Inclusive: Jesus was creating community that included all of the excluded at every level. He did this– as he did all of his community movement– with total intentionality.

Kingdom Gospel-centered: Jesus the King made the reality of the present and coming Kingdom of God the center of his movement. This center was clearly seen, and stood in contrast to the “Kingdom boundary” thinking of other Jews.

God-centered: God is present and active, as Father, creator, and redeemer of a broken and lost world.

Confrontative: Jesus confronted the powers at every level, using the weapons of love, truth and the Holy Spirit.

Radical: Jesus' version of community was radical in its nature and demands. Compare it to the expectations people had of family and religion.

Sacrificial: Jesus' community was identified with sacrifice, i.e. a willingness to suffer that God's will might be done.

Healing: Jesus' movement was restorative, including praying for and working for healing of persons and relationships. (This included spiritual warfare and deliverance.)

Didactic: Jesus constantly taught his disciples his constantly reflect on the meaning of the Kingdom of God.

Prayerful: Jesus taught his disciples to pray.

Invitational and Open: All were invited to come. All were invited to believe in Jesus as the messiah....

Missional: Jesus' movement was focused on the Gospel ministry and engaged in other kinds of ministry that established the presence and power of God's compassionate Kingdom.

Jesus shaped and Jesus centered.

Becoming part of this movement was what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

Darrell Gruder, on the missional church

Mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. "Mission" means "sending," and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's action in human history. God's mission began with the call of Israel to receive God's blessings in order to be a blessing to the nations. God's mission unfolded in the history of God's people across the centuries recorded in Scripture, and it reached its relevatory climax in the incarnation of God's work of savlation in Jesus ministering, crucified, and resurrected. God's mission continued then in the sending of the Spirit to call forth and empower the church as the witness to God's good news in Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from *Discipleship*, on the relationship of the Word to the Christian community (an important point in light of Acts 2):

The Word of God seeks out community in order to accept it. It exists mainly within the community. It moves on its own into the community. It has an inherent impulse toward community. It is wrong to assume that on the one hand there is a word, or a truth, and on the other hand there is a community existing as two separate entities, and that it would be the task of the preacher to take this word, to manipulate and enliven it, in order to bring it within and apply it to the community. Rather the Word moves along this path of its own accord. The preacher should and can do nothing more than be a servant of this movement inherent in the Word itself, and refrain from placing obstacles in its path.

Community and mission thrive when we receive life in every sense as a gift from God. We recognize that our lives (and therefore our money, time, bodies, homes, etc.) are not our own, but must be bent to serve God's purposes.

Stanley Hauerwas

Long story short: we don't get to make our lives up. We get to receive our lives as gifts. The story that says we should have no story except the story we chose ... is a lie. To be human is to learn that we don't get to make up our lives because we're creatures.... Christian discipleship is about learning to receive our lives as gifts without regret.

John Swinton

time is not simply a commodity to be wasted, spent, saved or used but is rather a gift given....time is a gift.... in Jesus, time has been redeemed for the practices of peace.

John Stott on mission:

JESUS SENDS US into the world, as the Father sent him into the world. ... In other words our mission is to be modeled on his. Indeed all authentic mission is incarnational mission. It demands identification without loss of

identity. It means entering other people's worlds as he entered ours, though without compromising our Christian convictions, values, or standards.

John Stott on mission as the church's proper approach to culture, to avoid both assimilation and isolation:

We often go to one of two extremes. Either we are so keen to live in the world that we imbibe non-Christian ideas and standards, and become conformed; or we are so keen not to lose our distinctive identity that we withdraw. The best way to avoid these two mistakes is to engage in mission. We are sent into the world as Christ's representatives, so we can neither conform to it (or we cease to represent him) or withdraw from it (or we have no one to represent him to).

Stott is right that we must neither withdraw nor sell out; the way to cut through these false options is with missional engagement.

Phil Ryken on the church's relationship to the city:

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.
Jeremiah 29:7

That is not how Christians usually think about the city. Many Christians write the city off. At most, they try to establish their own fortresses within the city. But God does not tell his people to seek peace in the city; he tells them to seek the peace of the city.

We need to live in such a way in the sight of our neighbors that even if they hate what we believe they will have to respect and admire the way we live, and they will rejoice in our presence in the city.

How do we make community and mission work? As one pastor put it, it is simply *hard work*. Sure, God is at work, and we need to know that. His work is the presupposition of our work. But success in church community and mission will not happen apart from our intense labors and costly sacrifices. In the end, there are no shortcuts.

Not all evangelicals are happy with the terminology of “missional church.” An example of qualified appreciation for Newbigin and other missiologists may be found here:

<http://sites.silaspartners.com/CC/article/0,,PTID314526|CHID598014|CIID2265778,00.html>

Newbigin on the kingdom, Jesus, and the dangers of privatization:

When the message of the kingdom of God is separated from the name of Jesus two distortions follow, and these are in fact the source of deep divisions in the life of the church today. On one hand, there is the preaching of the name of Jesus simply as the one who brings a religious experience of personal salvation without involving one in costly actions at the points in public life where the power of Satan is contracting the rule of God and bringing men and women under the power of evil. Such preaching of cheap grace, of a supposed personal salvation that does not go the way of the cross, of an inward comfort without commitment to costly action for the doing of God’s will in the world – this kind of evangelistic preaching is a distortion of the gospel. A preaching of personal salvation that does not lead the hearers to challenge the monstrous injustices of our society is not mission in Christ’s way. It is peddling cheap grace.

On the other hand, when the message of the kingdom is separated from the name of Jesus, the action of the church in respect of the evils in society becomes a mere ideological crusade

Leslie Newbigin on the role of the pastor as missional leader:

The task of ministry is to lead the congregation as a whole in a mission to the community as a whole, to claim its whole public life, as well as the personal lives of all its people, for God’s rule. It means equipping all the members of the congregation to understand and fulfill their several roles in this mission through their faithfulness in their daily work. It means training and equipping them to be active followers of Jesus in his assault

on the principalities and powers which he disarmed on the cross. And it means sustaining them in bearing the cost of that warfare . . .

[The pastor] is not like a general who sits at headquarters and sends his troops into battle. He goes at their head and takes the brunt of the enemy attack. He enables and encourages them by leading them, not just by telling them. In this picture, the words of Jesus have quite a different force. They all find their meaning in the central keyword, 'follow me'.

From Newbigin's "Can the West be Converted":

That human beings exist to glorify God and enjoy him forever is not a fact. It is an opinion held by some people [in the Enlightenment/modernist worldview]. It belongs to the private sector, not the public. Those who hold it are free to communicate it to their children and church; it has no place in the curriculum of the public schools and universities. And since the publicly accepted definition of a human being excludes any statement of the purpose for which human beings exist, it follows necessarily that (in the ordinary meaning of the word "fact"), no factual statement can be made about what kinds of behavior are good or bad. These can only be private opinions. Pluralism reigns. Here, I submit, is the intellectual core of that culture which, at least from the mid-eighteenth century has been the public culture of Europe, and has – under the name of modernization extended its power into every part of the world. Two hundred years ago it was hailed in Europe as, quite simply, the dawning of light in the darkness: the Enlightenment....

Let us attempt something quite different from what Berger proposes. Instead of weighing the Christian religious experience (along with others) in the scale of reason as our culture understands reason, let us suppose that the Gospel is true, that in the story of the Bible and in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the creator and lord of the universe has actually manifested himself to declare and effect his purpose, and that therefore everything else, including all the axioms and assumptions of our culture have to be assessed and can only be validly assessed in the scales which this revelation provides. What would it mean if, instead of trying to understand the Gospel from the point of view of our culture, we tried to understand our culture from the point of view of the Gospel?

From another Newbigin essay, on how the church must challenge the contemporary Western worldview with the alternative framework provided by the gospel:

To take this position means, of course, to be a minority in our culture. It means questioning the things that no one ever questions – like the Christian missionary in India questioning the law of karma and samsara. And it means, I believe, being enabled to find a more rational way of understanding and coping with our world than that which is offered in our contemporary culture, a culture which is enormously productive of means but unable to speak about ends, fertile-in finding new ways to do things, but incapable of answering the question: ‘What things are worth doing?’ It is not, let me insist, a matter of appealing to ‘revelation’ against ‘reason’. This absurd opposition is, I am sorry to say, a commonplace in English discussions. Reason is not a separate source of knowledge. It is the power by which we seek coherence in the data of experience and it operates, can only operate, within a complex of language, concepts, symbols, images which make up the ‘fiduciary framework’. No move towards understanding reality is possible except by the use of reason; the question is, ‘Within what “fiduciary framework” is reason operating?’ And when we offer a different fiduciary framework, alternative to the one which is dominant in our culture, we are calling for conversion, for a radical shift in perspective.

We need the boldness of the foreign missionary who dares to challenge the accepted framework, even though the words he uses must inevitably sound absurd to those who dwell in that framework. In the contemporary crisis of western culture there is a widespread failure of nerve. There is a widespread tendency to retreat from the whole splendid adventure of western culture and to look elsewhere – especially to the East – for something different. That is a terrible mistake. We cannot run away from our responsibilities. It is we in the West who have developed this culture which is penetrating the whole world under the name of modernization, It is we Christians who have failed to challenge its fundamental assumptions, who have allowed the Gospel to be co-opted into it instead of challenging it. It is upon us that there now rests the formidable responsibility for a task which is both intellectual and practical: to recover a concept of knowledge which will heal the split in our culture between science and faith, between the public world and the private; and to embody in the life of our congregations a style of life which expresses in

practice the purpose for which God has created all things: to glorify him and to enjoy him for ever.

The gospel not only calls us into a new status, it calls us into a new community. We have not fully preached the gospel unless we have connected the message of Jesus with this community, the life of the church.

Of course, entering the new community of the church does not mean leaving all old communities and relationships behind. But it does mean we recontextualize those relationships in light of the gospel. Sometimes new Christians make the best evangelists because they still have the strongest ties to the old communities in which they were surrounded by non-Christians. They still live in two worlds, so to speak. One challenge facing the church is developing rich community on the inside without completely severing ties on the outside, because it is precisely those ties with non-Christians that leave open the door to effective evangelistic witness. We cannot reach postmodern people if we do not know them and care for them. We have to win the right to be heard. They will not care what we know until they know that we care (as the saying goes).

More Lesslie Newbigin, this time from *The Open Secret*, on a variety of ecclesial, communal, and missional topics:

Mission is the proclaiming of the kingdom of the Father, and it concerns the rule of God over all that is. We have seen, therefore, that the church has been led by the logic of its own gospel to move beyond preaching into actions of all kinds for the doing of God's justice in the life of the world.

But mission is also sharing the life of the Son, for it is in Jesus that God's kingdom is present in the life of the world, and this presence is continued — under the sign of the cross — in the community that confesses Jesus as Lord and belongs to him as his body. We have therefore to speak about this community, how it grows and is sustained in its mission. It is futile to talk about the task of the church as agent of liberation — in whatever terms we understand that task — unless we also pay attention to the ways in which the church in any place comes into being and grows. It is useless to talk about the task if you are not concerned about the agency that is to carry out the task. We have to ask not only "What is to be done?" but also

“Who is to do it?” The opening announcement of the gospel, “the kingdom of God is at hand,” is followed at once by a call addressed personally to Peter and Andrew, James and John, to follow Jesus and to share in the work of the kingdom. The calling of men and women to be converted, to follow Jesus, and to be part of his community is and must always be at the center of mission.

One of today’s most influential schools of missiology takes this as its central emphasis. The Institute of Church Growth of the School of World Missions, located at Fuller Theological Seminary and under the leadership of Dr. Donald McGavran, has forced missionary agencies in the many parts of the world to ask why churches do not grow and to plan deliberately for church growth and expect it as the normal experience of missions.

Dr. McGavran’s convictions were developed out of his experience in India, where he observed that some churches were multiplying rapidly while others in similar situations stagnated. He saw that these contrasting experiences resulted from contrasting missionary methods. On the one hand was the method centered on the “mission station.” (Since “mission” means going and “station” means standing still, one might think that “mission station” was the perfect contradiction in terms. It has been, nevertheless, the central element in the program of missions during most of the modern period.) In the “mission station” approach, as McGavran sees it, converts are detached from the natural communities to which they belong, attached to the foreign mission and its institutions, and required to conform to ethical and cultural standards that belong to the Christianity of the foreign missionary. The effect of this policy is twofold. On the one hand the convert, having been transplanted into an alien culture, is no longer in a position to influence non-Christian relatives and neighbors; on the other hand the energies of the mission are exhausted in the effort to bring the converts, or more often their children, into conformity with the standards supposed by the missionaries to be required by the gospel. Both factors have the effect of stopping the growth of the church.

Schools, colleges, hospitals, and programs for social action multiply, but the church does not. McGavran traces this failure to a misreading of the Great Commission. According to the text of Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus instructed his apostles to disciple the nations, to baptize, and to teach. The order of these three words represents an order of priorities that must be

observed. The primary business of missions is to disciple and baptize. Teaching must follow, not precede, the others. It is no doubt the task of the church to teach men to observe all that Jesus has commanded, but this can come only after they have been part of the church. The "mission station" strategy has resulted in the stopping of growth because missions have been devoted to perfecting the energies that should have been given to discipling. By contrast, the strategy of the "people's movement" actively seeks and fosters the corporate decisions of whole social groups to accept the gospel. This avoids the breaking of natural relationships. "Men become Christians without social dislocation so that the resulting churches have leaders and loyalties intact. Churches are therefore likely to be more stable and self-supporting and to bear up better under persecution."

Churches that are the products of such people's movements tend to grow, and in fact the great majority of those who have become Christians from among the non-Christian religions have come in this way.

The biggest reason churches fail to develop community or engage in mission is that they start off with a very truncated understanding of the gospel – basically, a gospel that does not include the kingdom. Scott McKnight gives some helpful thoughts (<http://blog.beliefnet.com/jesuscreed/2009/05/kingdom-gospel-1.html>):

If "kingdom" is the solution, what is the problem?

Jesus' gospel message of the kingdom of God is itself a blue parakeet for many today. In fact, many have tamed Jesus' blue parakeet message of the kingdom and this chapter may well provide a reason why some feel this way. Encountering Jesus' kingdom gospel not only makes us think, but it makes us think we just might have gotten lots of things wrong. It makes us rethink how we are reading the Bible. It makes us think about what the gospel itself is. It also makes us back up to the elements of the Story - creation, cracked Eikons, covenant community, Christ, and consummation - and see which of these elements are the focus of Jesus' own preaching. In this chapter we will examine how Luke tells the Story and we will see that his focus is squarely on two elements, Christ and covenant community. Some are surprised by what they see when they read Luke's Gospel.

I grew up on a gospel that was neat and trim; it was clear and simple. The more I read the Bible the more convinced I became, though, that something was wrong on center court. When some folks read the Bible, they only want to see creation, cracked Eikons, Christ and the consummation (heaven).

The gospel that deconstructs church

Many readers of the Bible read the whole Bible through the lens of the gospel they believe and this is what that gospel looks like:

God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.
But you have a sin problem that separates you from God.
The good news is that Jesus came to die for your sins.
If you accept Jesus' death, you can be reconnected to God.
Those who are reconnected to God will live in heaven with God.

Every line of that statement is more or less true. It is the sequencing of those lines, the "story" of that gospel if you will, that concerns me and that turns Jesus' message of the kingdom into a blue parakeet. And it is not only the sequencing, it is the omitting of major themes in the Bible that concerns me. What most shocks the one who reads the Bible as Story, where the focus is overwhelmingly on God forming a covenant community, is that this outline of the gospel above does two things: it eliminates community and it turns the entire gospel into a "me and God" or "God and me" gospel. Who needs a church if this is the gospel? (Answer: no one.) What becomes of the church for this gospel? (Answer: an organization for those who want to do that sort of thing.) While every line in this gospel is more or less true, what concerns many of us today is that this gospel makes the church unimportant.

I believe this gospel can deconstruct, is deconstructing, and will deconstruct the church if we don't change it now. Our churches are filled with Christians who don't give a rip about church life and we have a young generation who, in some cases, care so much about the Church they can't attend a local church because too many local churches are shaped too much by the gospel I outlined above. To be truthful, the gospel above is a distortion of Romans. More and more of us, because we are reading the Bible as Story, are seeing the centrality of the church in God's plan and the gospel being preached too often is out of touch with the Bible's Story.

Yes, Jesus said something like every one of those lines though he never packaged them quite like that. (Nor did Paul in Romans, to be honest.) Is this the gospel? Yes, this gospel is right. The problem is that it isn't right enough. I can give a bundle of problems with this packaging of the gospel, but it all comes down to one big problem: this gospel above isn't the Bible's Story. It is like taking five stars from the sky, knocking them out of their orbits and solar location, and lining them up like ducks in a row and then saying, "Here's our starry sky!" The only way to understand stars is to learn their location and their history and their connections and let each star shine in its place in the sky - and the only way to read the Bible is from front to back. It doesn't make sense if we don't read the whole thing and to see how each chapter relates to the whole Story. Once we do we come to terms with the gospel that emerges from the Bible's Story.

If reading the Bible as Story teaches us anything, and we need to emphasize this one more time, it teaches us that God's work in this world is to form communities that visibly demonstrate the power of God at work in this world.

Bonhoeffer wrote of burden bearing in his *Discipleship*:

God is a God who bears. The Son of God bore our flesh. He therefore bore the cross. He bore all our sins and attained reconciliation by his bearing. That is why disciples are called to bear what is put on them. Bearing constitutes being a Christian. Just as Christ maintains his communion with the Father by bearing according to the Father's will, so the disciples' bearing constitutes their communion with Christ. People can shake off the burdens laid on them. But doing so does not free them at all from their burdens. Instead it loads them with a heavier, more unbearable burden. They bear the self-chosen yoke of their own selves. Jesus called all who are laden with various sufferings and burdens to throw off their yokes and to take his yoke upon themselves.

In bearing one another's burdens, we sustain the community the gospel has created, and we imitate Jesus, who bore all our burdens on the cross.

Bonhoeffer again:

Human love lives by uncontrolled and uncontrollable dark desires; spiritual love lives in the clear light of service ordered by the truth. Human love produces human subjection, dependence, constraint; spiritual love creates freedom of the brethren under the Word. Human love breeds hothouse flowers; spiritual love creates the fruits that grow healthily in accord with God's good will in the rain and storm and sunshine of God's outdoors. The existence of any Christian life together depends on whether it succeeds at the right time in bringing out the ability to distinguish between a human ideal and God's reality, between spiritual and human community.

The life or death of a Christian community is determined by whether it achieves sober wisdom on this point as soon as possible. In other words, life together under the Word will remain sound and healthy only where it does not form itself into a movement, an order, a society, a *collegium pietatis*, but rather where it understands itself a being a part of the one, holy, catholic, Christian Church, where it shares actively and passively in the sufferings and struggles and promise of the whole Church. Every principle of selection and every separation connected with it that is not necessitated quite objectively by common work, local conditions, or family connections is of the greatest danger to a Christian community. When the way of intellectual or spiritual selection is taken the human element always insinuates itself and robs the fellowship of its spiritual power and effectiveness for the Church, drives it into sectarianism

How do the Eucharistic meals in Acts 2:42 relate to the household meals mentioned in 2:46? Randy booth gives some helpful thoughts on the relationship between the Lord's Supper and to our common meals:

The Lord's Table is the archetype of our family tables. Or perhaps we should say that our family tables *should* be an imitation or reflection of The Table. We come to the Lord's Table each Lord's Day to be fed by the Father, Who meets our needs above and beyond all that we could ask or think. He has given us life. He sustains that life. He protects that life. The Table is the very image of fatherhood; the essence of which is love. We begin each week gathered around the Table as children to be instructed and nourished, just before we are sent out to live. And so too, we go to our

homes and gather around smaller tables to be instructed and nourished, and from there we also fan out to live. The liturgy is practice for life.

We gather again and again around our tables—small societies of Christians—learning to commune and share, to pray and talk, to receive and give thanks, to serve and be served, to love one another and to be renewed. We cannot neglect such an important huddle without the fragmentation of our little societies. Develop it, guard it, and practice it often.

Doug Wilson with helpful thoughts on the church's mercy ministries and mission

(<http://www.dougwils.com/index.asp?Action=Anchor&CategoryID=1&BlogID=6111>):

When theology does what it was designed to do, which is flow through the streets of our nations like molten lava, it doesn't behave very much like a cold museum piece of basalt, something that *used* to be lava centuries ago.

To follow the logic of the Lord Jesus, we should remember that He once said those who are sons of Abraham should bear some kind of family resemblance to him. In the same way, those who call themselves Calvinists should do the works of Calvin. This is really an enormous subject because the Reformation brought a huge transformation in the realms of liturgy, doctrine, politics, ethics, and, to bring us to the point before us now, *social welfare*. The Reformation brought a transformation in how the poor were loved, cared for, taught, and equipped to be self-sufficient. This means those among the Reformed today who urge that mercy ministry be at the very forefront of our labors are not necessarily in the process of "going liberal." Care for the indigent was one of the great works displayed in the Reformation. It was one of the central ways the solafidian Reformed answered the taunt -- "show us your faith." John Calvin himself put it this way: "Do we want to show there is reformation among us? We must begin at this point, that is, there must be pastors who bear purely the doctrine of salvation, and then deacons who have the care of the poor" (David Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin*, p. 18). Hall also notes one study that shows, "contrary to some modern

caricatures, the Reformers worked diligently to shelter refugees and minister to the poor" (Hall, p. 16).

The kind of thing Calvin had in mind consisted of far more than feel good charitable gestures. He knew that living according to the gospel means *sacrifice*.

"In the period from October 1538 to 1539, the city hospital assisted 10,657 poor strangers as they passed through Geneva. This figure does not include those Genevans (estimated at about 5 percent of the total population) who received regular assistance from the hospital. Thus, when this order was issued, Geneva, a city of about 12,000 persons, was attempting to support 600 local poor people on a regular basis and an additional 10,000 in a one-year-period" (William Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, p. 122).

The Reformers were in it for the long haul. "The ordinances which Calvin drew up in 1541 speak of the 'communal hospital' which had to be 'well maintained' with amenities available for the sick and the aged who were unable to work, a quite separate wing for widows, orphaned children and other poor persons, and a hospice for wayfarers" (Ronald Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva & the Reformation* p. 92).

And it is not possible to say that Geneva was an oddity or quirk. This kind of thing was characteristic of all the Reformers -- it was something they were *known for*. Zurich and Scotland provide good examples.

In Zurich, "as the city's religious houses quickly lost members, the civic authorities seized the property of the houses and prohibited the taking of new monastic vows. One convent was kept open for those who desired to remain in holy orders. The bulk of the property formerly controlled by these institutions was diverted to support hospitals and a new system of poor relief . . . Officers in each parish oversaw the regular distribution of relief to the deserving poor" (Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, pp. 29-30).

"Scotland had few formal mechanisms for poor relief before the Reformation, but when a series of statutes between 1574 and 1592 produced a parish-based system for the relief of poverty modeled after the English poor law of 1572, the responsibility for levying and disbursing the funds came to reside not with the still embryonic justices of the peace but with the kirk sessions. The church and the its deacons thus came to control the national system of poor relief as it developed here" (Benedict, p. 455). Of course, in this as in many areas, Geneva set a strong example. In Geneva, "Deacons responsible for the relief of the poor were the fourth

[ordained order]" (Benedict, p. 88). And the "title of deacon was bestowed upon the administrators of the city's hospital . . ." (Benedict, p. 96).

But Calvin knew that the poor were not going to be helped through envy or sentimentalism, something that many modern relief workers need to learn. "If wealth was to flow it must first be produced. Those who have done careful research on the city records give an impressive account of how the authorities, during Calvin's time in Geneva, encouraged the establishment of new business enterprises" (Wallace, pp. 89-90).

But though it was no sin to be wealthy in Calvin's view, with great privilege came great responsibility.

"First [Calvin] insisted that as a law of life, where there was lavish wealth there must also be lavish giving by the rich to the poor . . . Certainly he held that every man had a right to own property. This was so basic to his outlook that he did not seek to justify the ownership of property to anything like the same extent as did Luther and Zwingli . . . Since wealth is thus given from above it cannot but be justifiable" (Wallace, pp. 90-91). But even though the wealthy believers were to be taught to be generous, Calvin did not believe that this was sufficient by itself.

"But Calvin saw that in the developing commercial age even the utmost personal generosity could not be relied on to ensure the welfare of the poor. No private man could be expected to be able to seek them out of fully understand their need. Therefore it was the office of the deacon to keep in contact with them through visitation, to cooperate with the pastors and thus to become familiar with the actual problems of the home and to administer public welfare" (Wallace, p. 92).

When the Holy Spirit moves in remarkable ways, as He did in the Reformation, this kind of thing is something He always does. It is one of His emphases. It is His *signature*. Not only was this in evidence in the course of the Reformation, it has also been clear whenever there are outbreaks of real Calvinism. A good example would be the work of the great Scottish theologian, Thomas Chalmers.

Thomas Chalmers' "original efforts to overcome pauperism in Glasgow constitute the most effective early reaction of Christianity to the evils attendant on the Industrial Revolution" (John McNeill, *The Nature and Character of Calvinism*, p. 360).

But like Calvin, Chalmers was not a hand-wringer, complaining about how little *others* were doing on the taxpayer's dime. "Chalmers adopted the *laissez-faire* theory that Adam Smith propounded in *The Wealth of Nations* . . . For Chalmers the deliverance of the poor was not to come from

government restriction or action" (p. 422). Not at all -- mercy is to be extended in the name of Christ, and should come from the *Church*. This brings us down to the present, and, to quote Calvin again, "Do we want to show there is reformation among us?" The poor and helpless enter into how that question is answered.

Dr. C. John Collins, Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary, on the church's mission:

Jesus is on his throne, and is busy subduing the Gentiles into his empire. Believe it or not, he intends to succeed - and he honors us with a role to play in the whole thing. This is not the time to retreat from our society, not the time to cower in fear at them: it is the time to keep on pushing the boundaries wider and wider.... I want us to see that it is the same way with what Paul calls "the gospel": it is part of a Big Story that goes well beyond just getting my soul right with God; it is a story of how God does not give up on his world, and he gives us a role to play in setting the whole show to rights. . . The whole story [redemption] is headed to a point where, as Revelation puts it (7:9-10), you have "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" - all joined together in worship. The whole point of Christian discipleship is to let this future serve as the pattern for us; to let God shape us by it, so that, as much as we can, we actually begin to look like this. . .

Peter Leithart's recent First Things article is a helpful exposition of the church's mission

(http://www.firstthings.com/on_the_square_entry.php?year=2008&month=12&title link=desert-like-a-rose):

Time was when Christian missions occurred "over there." Every now and then, the missionary would show up at church dressed like a time traveler, to show slides of exotic places and to enchant the stay-at-homes with tales about the strange diet and customs of the natives. Foreign missions still happen, but that model seems like ancient history. With the new immigration and the increased ease of travel and communication, the

mission field has moved into the neighborhood, and every church that has its eyes open is asking every day how to do “foreign missions.”

That poses a problem. Missions has always been the place where the bookish question of “Christ and culture” turns practical. Now, at the same time that missions has become a challenge “right here,” multiculturalists question the very legitimacy of missions. Since the gospel always comes clothed in culture, how, on the premises of multiculturalism, can missionary work be anything but a veiled form of cultural imperialism?

From Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to Barbara Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood Bible*, missionaries are depicted as tools of Western hegemony. But, if we’re all missionaries now, are we all cooperating in genocide? Under the regime of multiculturalism, mission efforts face a cruel dilemma. Either missionaries can preach an uncompromising gospel that will cause everything to fall apart, or they can soft pedal the gospel of God’s judgment and grace in order to permit non-Christian cultures to survive. But is the situation as dire as this? Does the Bible perhaps offer a model for re-conceiving the question in a way that avoids the unhappy choice between compromise and cultural cataclysm?

The answer, I think, is *yes*. The Bible provides a theology of missions that is neither accommodation to existing culture nor total war that leaves the existing culture in smoking ruins. Mission is more like cultivation, a process of nurturing the hidden but unforeseen potential within a culture. Mission, we might say, is like water. Tertullian said, *Nunquam sine aqua Christus*—Christ is never without water. Neither is the Church; neither is her mission.

“Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided into four rivers” (Genesis 2:10). It is the Bible’s first reference to rivers, and the first use of the number four, a number that eventually becomes associated with universality—the four corners (Isaiah 11:12), the four winds (Daniel 7:2), the four cornerstones of a house, the four horns of the altar. Genesis 2:10 is the first missionary text in Scripture, the first hint that Eden’s garden is not destination but source, the first faint suggestion that Adam is to move from the garden to bring its life to the ends of creation.

Israel’s history is about Israel becoming Eden, the spring through which God’s renewing love flows into the world. But I am getting ahead of myself, because Israel’s story begins as a story of reservoirs rather than rivers. No river rises in Israel and flows to the four corners. Instead, Israel is locked between rivers. Under the Mosaic system, Israel is not a spring. Rivers form boundaries for Israel; they are not modes of transport to the

Gentiles. This reality is architecturally and ritually embodied in the tabernacle system, that architectural Eden. There is water in the laver that stands in the court of the tabernacle, but it is closed off like Israel, closed off like the Holy Place itself.

With the rise of the monarchy, Israel's position among the nations changes rather dramatically. Solomon enters an alliance with the Tyrean king Hiram, who provides material and manpower for the temple in Jerusalem. Solomon hosts the Queen of Sheba at his palace, and receives kings who come from the four corners to hear wisdom as plentiful as the sand on the seashore.

Again, the temple—a fixed architectural Eden—depicts the enlarged place of Israel among the Gentiles. In place of the smaller laver, Solomon's temple has a monumental sea ten cubits wide and five deep, large enough to contain two thousand baths of water. Instead of sitting on the ground, as the laver is, the sea sits on the back of twelve bulls (1 Kgs. 7:23–26).

Israel has more water than ever. Plus, the water begins to flow out to the Gentiles. Solomon constructs ten water stands that resemble chariots, five on each side of the house, so that they form a gauntlet, a Red Sea, through which Israel and her priests pass as they approach the house of Yahweh. In commemorating the past, the chariots also serve a future promise. The ten chariots also symbolize an outflow from the temple, as if the sea has sprung a leak and the waters of heaven have begun to seep out into the world, a sign that the children of Abraham will be what Yahweh promised, a blessing to all the nations.

Yet, for all that, Israel still remains rather enclosed. Kings come to Solomon; he doesn't go to them. The great sea is still immobile, fixed heavily in the temple court. Israel has a temple, a king, a growing reputation in the Ancient Near East. But she is not yet a river; waters don't yet flow from Eden through the garden to the four corners.

Instead, rivers flow in. Assyrians and Babylonians flood into the garden-land, and eventually, like Adam, Israel is expelled. Now, ironically, as Jerusalem fills with foreign invaders, Israel begins for the first time to flow outward—into exile. Assyrian and Babylon ensure that Israel becomes an Eden, with a river of exiles running to the four corners. Israel flows with water when it is struck with the sword. Through the curse of exile, Israel becomes a missionary people.

In exile, Israel develops an expansive, world-watering view of her mission. Ezekiel envisions a post-exilic temple in which the great sea has become a spring. Water flows from “under the threshold of the house toward the east . . . from south of the altar” (Ezekiel 47:1). As the river

flows, it becomes deeper—first ankle-deep, then knee-deep, then waist-deep, and finally too deep to ford (Ezekiel 47:3–5). It flows into the Dead Sea so that the “waters of the sea become fresh” and “every living creature, which swarms in every place where the river goes, will live” (Ezekiel 47:8–9). Ezekiel envisions an Israel that has finally become an Eden, a source of living water.

But then there comes the day when the audacious Galilean prophet stands up on the last, greatest day of the Feast of Booths and claims to offer living water from Himself (John 7:37–38). He becomes that Rock and that Temple on the cross: “one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). Jesus is the Rock in the wilderness, commemorated at Booths, flowing with living water for thirsty Israel. He makes Golgotha the new Eden, the new garden from which rivers flow to the four corners of the earth.

When the rain comes to the African grasslands, seeds dormant and apparently dead spring to life. Without the flow of water, the desert would remain a blasted wasteland, but the vegetation that comes to life is native to the ecosystem. Just so, when the water from the temple flows through a new land, what grows is recognizably part of the original landscape. Greek Christians still speak Greek; Romans still speak Latin and think in legal categories. Watered by the gospel, those languages and categories spring up with surprising, fresh growth.

In its first centuries, the Church was mainly preoccupied with evangelizing Greco-Roman culture, a process that Robert Jenson has identified as the “evangelization of metaphysics.” Despite liberal accusations that the Church fell prey to “acute Hellenization,” the reality was almost the opposite. Cultural and intellectual life was transformed from within as Christians fit a gospel of a crucified and risen Redeemer into Greco-Roman clothes. The clothes were never the same again. Greek conceptions of “being” and “substance” remained, and even found their way into Christian creeds, but they were now used of a Tri-Personal God. Greeks believed in an absolute, but Christians confessed that the absolute entered the temporal world as a man. After Constantine’s conversion, the impressively efficient Roman institutions and legal instruments remained but were, sometimes imperceptibly and over centuries, turned toward compassion.

Similarly, even the Christians most hostile to modernity don’t want to abandon the gains of the modern age. Mission to the modern world would humble, but preserve, science. It would retain the modern emphasis on the dignity of the person, and give it a surer foundation than secularism

could. To the mission field next door, it comes not as a destroying flood but as an irrigating river, preserving a difference as robust as anything in multiculturalism, without letting difference collapse into the sameness of indifference.

For the modern world as for the ancient, mission is like water. What grows when the gospel comes is native to the landscape, but what grows would never grow but for the river. When the water flows from the stricken Rock, the land comes to life; and the fish, floating lifeless on the surface the Sea, live again.

More quotes—

George MacLeod on Christian mission:

We are to be to others what Christ has become for us.

C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen on real church growth:

We should be less concerned about making churches full of people and more concerned about making people full of God.

Justo L. Gonzalez on church unity and mission:

The church must be one because a fragmented church is not much help to a fragmented world.

Gerhard Lohfink on God acting in and through Jesus and the church:

God is active in the world at all times—but God acts through people. In Jesus, his Messiah, God acted with finality, and this messianic action of God continues in the church. The church is the place where the messianic renewal of the world, which God began irreversibly in Jesus, must go forward. That is the essence of the church. That is its calling.

Howard A. Snyder on the gospel:

THE GOSPEL is global good news. Thinking globally, God acted locally. The gospel is good news about personal, social, ecological, and cosmic healing and reconciliation. It is good news to the whole creation—to the whole earth and in fact to the cosmos.

John V. Taylor on the Spirit and the mission of the church:

THE CHIEF ACTOR in the historic mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit. He is the director of the whole enterprise. The mission consists of things that he is doing in the world. In a special way it consists of the light that he is focusing upon Jesus Christ.

Pop Benedict XVI on the gift of the kingdom:

Certainly we cannot 'build' the Kingdom of God by our own efforts— what we build will always be the kingdom of man with all the limitations proper to our human nature. The Kingdom of God is a gift, and precisely because of this, it is great and beautiful, and constitutes the response to our hope. And we cannot—to use the classical expression— 'merit' Heaven through our works. Heaven is always more than we could merit, just as being loved is never something 'merited,' but always a gift. However ... it will always be true that our behavior is not indifferent before God and therefore not indifferent to the unfolding of history.