

THE HOLINESS FOUNDATION OF MISSION

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In my pastoral ministry I lived with a constant weight on my shoulders that my little church needed to be doing more—that I needed to be doing more—to get into the community. We needed to get out there to evangelize the lost, to bring back our scattered members, to mentor disadvantaged children, to address the issues of hunger, poverty, and homelessness, to assist the victims of floods and tornados, to build friendships with our neighbors, to partner with the local elementary school and not-for-profit organizations, and a whole host of other needs in town. As steady as my heartbeat, there was a pulsing voice in the back of my mind: “we must go, go, go, go...”

Hardly a board meeting passed where the church leadership and I were not analyzing in some capacity who we were, what we were doing, and how we could adjust to be more effective in ministry toward others. About a year into my pastorate one of my dearest leaders (who any pastor would delight in having in their church) came to me and she said, “We feel beat up. In a five year period now we have had an extended interim pastor and two pastors come through here and analyze us and push us continually to do more, to do it differently, and to do it better. The net effect of these five years is that we are tired of feeling that we are broken and are not good enough.” As pained as I felt for my part in that, I was glad she gave voice to the feeling in the air—because, in all honesty, I was tired of living under the shadow of feeling like I and my church (the people I loved to be with and had become my family) did not measure up.

Admittedly, I was not operating at that time out of extensive research into missional theology. Much of what I lived in my ministry was self-inflicted. Yet, in many conversations with fellow pastors, many of us shared in this common experience.

In this essay, I want to talk about the mission of the church by reflecting on who God is and what God is doing. Specifically I want to visit God’s creative, redemptive, and eschatological labors. It is out of these considerations of God’s work that I will make some suggestions about the missional life of the church. I hope these reflections offer the start to a healthier framework for missions than what I took with me into my pastorate.

Let us begin with considering God’s *creative* purposes and labors. God’s *purpose* for creation is community. God’s purpose is to call into being and find a dwelling place in the fellowship of a community that God self-gifts to enjoy the love God has in God’s-self as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In creating the heavens and the earth, God is creating a temple-dwelling-place, to be with us and for us. This theme of creation itself being God’s temple runs through many of Israel’s creation stories.¹ The entirety of creation is God’s dwelling place. God’s

¹ It is well documented in biblical scholarship the many ways the Genesis creation accounts depict creation itself as God’s temple. See, for example, the work of Gordon Wendham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” in *“I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood”*: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11, edited by Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, 399-404 (Winona Lake, IN: 1994); Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987);

creation *goal* is a community in which God's triune love is expressed in every relationship.² There is sacredness to all of creation. And there is sacredness to the full spectrum of human activity therein. Adam and Eve were placed in the temple-garden to "tend and keep" it, just as the Levitical priests were to "tend and keep" the temple itself.³ Human work is priestly work. Human work and activity is all within and in service to the glorification of God in God's sanctuary.

God's purpose for creation—in creating a dwelling place and in gifting of God's love to the community—was no temporary gesture, with a limited timeframe. God began and continued to labor all through Scripture the work of bringing about his purpose. God's call upon Abraham and his descendants was to be a faithful embodiment of God's creation purpose for loving community. In Braden Anderson's words, Israel was "a nation established to be a visible manifestation to the world of the reign of God on earth, and of what human community looks like under that reign."⁴

God's creation of the world and covenant with Israel was not a short term venture. God meant to accomplish what God set out to do from the beginning. God has never given up on creation. Time and again in Scripture, God may have cast judgment and taken disciplinary action, but a remnant always remained; God has always worked in continuity with God's original seed of creation (with Noah and the flood, with Israel and Exile, with the Incarnation into Adam's race, and with the promised New Creation). If anything, with the Incarnation God has continued to make God's-self all the more at home in God's creation. The Incarnation was God's

William P. Brown, *Structure, Role, and Ideology in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Genesis 1:1—2:3*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 132 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). For example, in many ancient Near Eastern creation narratives, they conclude with a temple-home being built for the creator-deity in which that god can have a resting place and where others can go to pay tribute to that god. The Genesis 1 account tells of God creating the heavens and the earth and it concludes with God resting. The missing component is a special temple-home being built where God would rest and where people could visit God. The work of days one through six was the work of temple construction. Creation itself is that temple.

² "...in John's epistle we read of the *Word of life* that is also a *commandment* that we have *heard from the beginning*. From the very heart of God, a Word has issued forth from eternity to us that *we should love one another*. Because God is love, it figures that God's deepest goal and intention for creation should be that *God's love is received and shared*. In Jesus' sacrificial laying down of His life for us, that love is revealed and given content: *we know love by this, and we ought so to love one another*. In fact, if we love one another, then God's love is *perfected*—God's love finds its fulfillment, God's love accomplishes its purpose—in or among us (4:12)" (Thomas Jay Oord and Michael Lodahl, *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love* [Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2005], 114).

³ Gordon J. Wendham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *"I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood": Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1—11*, edited by Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: 1994), 401.

⁴ *Chosen Nation: Scripture, Theopolitics, and the Project of National Identity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 83.

“becoming of one flesh” (if you will) with creation. Through Christ, by the Spirit, the Kingdom (or Reign) of God was and is coming to be expressed within God’s creation in greater capacity.

But, I am getting ahead of myself. In starting with creation I simply want to say that God’s goal in the world is loving community and that goal is for eternity. While *we* may be pressed for time in this age-that-we-know-will-not-last-forever, the point is about settling into our labors for the long haul—to go about the business of tending and keeping the garden-sanctuary of our Lord.

So in your little hamlet of God’s sacred creation, as brothers and sisters in the Lord, seek to order all of life unto the glory of God: that God’s self-giving love might perfectly be expressed in every relationship there (whether that relationship is with God, God’s creatures, or the earth itself). Live in God’s wondrous shalom. Unpack your suitcase; unpack the boxes and stay a while—hopefully on into God’s making new of all things and the life to come.

Let us think secondly about God’s *redeeming work* and how God goes about it. Our key Wesleyan lens for understanding God and God’s redeeming mission is *love*. This matters immensely. God is not primarily asserting God’s sovereignty in such a way as to subdue, master, or triumph over God’s creation. The theater of engagement is not riddled with fallen opponents that God triumphed over-and-against. In God’s redeeming labors, God does not work such that God’s will might stand over or replace any other competing wills. It is not about God winning and creation losing. God gives of God’s-self lavishly (the very grace of the Holy Spirit) that creation might come itself to will what is loving, good, right, and beautiful in concert with God. God is not seeking to be the only voice, the only will, the only actor, the only power, or the only anything. Ideas of sovereignty, monergism, and dictatorship must give way to ideas of love, synergism, and covenant. God takes up and identifies with creation that creation itself might be cleansed, healed, made new, and ultimately it might cooperate in loving community.

God in Christ is *for* creation, *for* us and *for* our salvation. Mission and purpose is first and foremost love poured out for the benefit of others; as Christ said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10; NRSV). From the opening verses of Genesis and on through the story of Scripture, God gives of God’s-self by God’s Spirit and Word as the possibility that *creation itself* can express itself in love of God and neighbor.

God seems to be content to take the long road for the sake of nurturing others along into the fullness of their self-expression. Creation did not happen in a flash, but over time and (more importantly) as invitation: “Let the earth put forth vegetation” (Gen. 1:11), “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures” (v. 20), and “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind” (v. 24).

God’s relationship with Israel also did not just happen abruptly and all at once. It unfolded slowly. God called Abraham and Sarah. They had to wait over twenty years for the child they were promised. Abraham was told his offspring would be a blessing to the nations. It took until the fourth generation for Joseph to be a blessing to Egypt. Again, a span of over four-hundred years passed in servitude to Egypt before the next step in God’s relationship with Abraham’s line is recorded. The Hebrew people were finally taught God’s name, the magnitude

of God's power that surpasses the largest political forces on the planet, and even a way of living for the sake of wholeness of life. Working with and for creation takes time, patience, and care.

If God were not interested in bringing creation along in cooperation and just completing the task unilaterally, Jesus could have been Eve's child. Or, God could have gotten things done much more quickly in Jesus' life had God allowed Jesus to die by the sword of King Herod's soldiers and raise him from the dead rather than spending time healing, teaching, and discipling others (after a decades-long process of growing up and experiencing firsthand what human life is like). God's care to teach, model, and disciple itself shows a concern for relationship. God does not want to exercise God's purposes on us as something that just happens to us. God is acting for us, but also with us. There is no shortcut to that. And it is okay; God's mission or purpose in the world is not about racing to get done and getting on with something else once it is complete. Living continuously in loving community is the goal, not just getting there.

In a similar manner, holiness does not just get imparted to us at one point for the duration of eternity; God grants it moment by moment by grace, both now and forevermore.⁵ God's purpose is to live in a dynamic of self-giving to the community he has been creating, a self-giving that moment-by-moment would be received and lived into. That dynamic never comes to an end. Even in glory we will walk by the light of the Lord (Rev. 21:22-24). So unpack your suitcase; unpack your boxes, and stay a while. Do not just press your agendas abruptly on people. Rather, experience the long unfolding of loving fellowship in God's creation-community.

This brings me to the third point about *eschatology*. While God's mission or purpose for creation will come to fulfillment, there is no completion of the task or end point to God's mission or purpose. It is simply God's manner of existing and operating with and for others. What God set out to do in the beginning is what God will continue to do for all eternity. God intends to live among us, forever. As John writes in Revelation: "...I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them'" (21:3). What began in Genesis as a garden-temple ends with a city in Revelation. "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb" (vv. 22-23). The Holy God is finding a dwelling place in the fellowship of a community that God self-gifts to enjoy the love God has in God's-self as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God designs and desires that God's self-giving love might shine through every relationship in the community to such a degree that, in fellowship with God and neighbor, all creation might come to an abundance and wholeness of life. God will be the light by which the nations will walk (v. 24).

What might any of this mean in practice? In my little church, it would have meant stepping away from the caricature of missional theology out of which I was operating. We were throwing ourselves into one project after another in the name of being missional. We studied the kinds of missional activities of other churches, we considered our own circumstances, and we got (hyper-)active addressing issues in our community. Because of our small numbers, we were each involved in multiple activities to minister to the needs of people and see them evangelized. Shamefully I admit, we were desperate for outsiders to cooperate with our agenda for them. We

⁵ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 25.9.

needed them to hurry up and accept our loving acts because we were running low on resources and energy. And perhaps, more than anything, I lived under the shadow of guilt about whether we had the types of quantifiable results that I could report—beyond what activities we were doing to be missional in the community.

I forgot some things about the Holy God coming to inhabit a people for the long haul. I forgot the *life* to which God had called Abraham: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1). For Abraham, Israel, and everyone God has grafted into his covenant people, their first order of business was holiness—to walk in obedient love and fear of the Lord. Covenant faithfulness always had to come first. It is in the midst of a people so shaped in the ways of the Lord, where God’s love shines forth in every expression of their life together, that every nation will come into blessed relationship with the very Lord to whom they bear witness. Apart from holiness of heart and life, apart from living faithfully in God’s mission to inhabit the life of creation, God’s people have nothing to share with the world. God’s mission is that God’s love would radiate in every facet of creation. For that reason, God calls God’s people to “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2) or “Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). In our busyness and scheming to serve the world in Christ’s name, we have nothing to offer if we do not have a community so shaped in the ways of God that we can rightly speak with any integrity the good news that the Kingdom of God is at hand.⁶ Michael Cartwright is right: “discipleship must be embodied in order to be proclaimed.”⁷

At the 2009 General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene I supported from the comfort of my living-room sofa the resolution to change the Nazarene Article of Faith on the Church to say “The mission of the Church in the world is to share in the redemptive and reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit. The church fulfills its mission by making disciples through evangelism, education, showing compassion, working for justice, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God.” At the time I was delighted by the broadened, holistic scope of *how* the church fulfills its mission. The previous statement said more simply that the church’s mission would be accomplished: “through holy living, evangelism, discipleship, and service.” Many good things were added to the new statement on how the mission would be accomplished, such as: “education, showing compassion, working for justice, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God.” Yet the new statement dropped “holy living” as the first among

⁶ N.T. Wright says in the case of Israel: “...the boast of Israel, to be the answer to the world’s problem, cannot be made good. If the mirror is cracked, it is cracked; for Israel’s commission to work, Israel would have to be perfect” (*Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], 195). The church is no different if it does not attend firstly to walking in the ways of the Lord.

⁷ “The Once & Future Church Revisited,” in *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, edited by Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 141. This approach of socially embodying holiness as God’s people is different than my enthusiastic attitude of going out and conquering the world in Jesus’ name. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon are clear about this issue: “We argue that the political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world” (*Resident Aliens* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989], 38; see Cartwright, “The Once & Future Church Revisited,” 141).

the means for the church to fulfill its missional call “to share in the redemptive and reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit.”

“Holy living” was not entirely removed from the new Article of Faith. It was moved up a paragraph to the way the Church is called to express its life in the unity and fellowship of the Spirit. This, however, creates a dangerous removal of holy living from the forefront of God’s own missional goal and God’s missional call to the Church. Holy-love-being-expressed-in-the-world is forever the most fundamental definition of God’s mission or purpose for creation. We ought to have kept God’s mission and the church’s mission more closely aligned by keeping *holy living* first in our expression about the church’s response in mission. Evangelism, discipleship, and service all come out of and hang upon holy living.

If we Wesleyan-Holiness folks have anything to say to the Church universal on the matter of the church’s mission, it is on the centrality of holiness in heart and life to our identity *and mission*—not only holiness for every individual but in our corporate life as well. This young pastor-turned-professor learned too late the brilliance of my Nazarene heritage that we are “called unto holiness” and that “Holiness unto the Lord” really ought to be “our watch-word and song.”

As pastor to my people I was pressing them to go, go, go, to do, do, do, and to serve, serve, serve. We should have sought first the Kingdom of Heaven among us as a people, as our first work as participants in God’s mission. I should have trusted that the perfect love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Spirit would have compelled us into the long-suffering work of loving our neighbor and making disciples of Christ.⁸ I should have understood that when Jesus sent out his followers to proclaim that the good news that the Kingdom of God was at hand, they were talking firsthand about what the Holy Spirit was doing *among them* under Christ’s ministry and not some message they were commanded to parrot.⁹

God did not repeatedly lose patience with Israel because they were not evangelizing. God lost patience with them because they failed to be the holy people he had called them to be and consequently they had no witness; or worse, their life as a people bore false witness about their

⁸ The piercing questions of Daniel Migliore are appropriate; “What kind of prayer is it that fails to open people to the service of God in the world? And what kind of Christian action is it that is not rooted in prayer for the hallowing of God’s name, for the forgiveness of our sins, and in all the other petitions of the Lord’s Prayer?” (*Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991, 2004], 269)

⁹ The Church should be a living testament to God’s work of salvation in the world. “‘Salvation’ is from death itself, and all that leads to it and shares its destructive character (tribulation, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, weaponry) and all the powers that use these things to oppress humans and deface God’s world. ‘Salvation’ does not mean ‘dying and going to heaven,’ as so many Western Christians have supposed for so long” (Wright, *Justification*, 235).

God.¹⁰ God's mission is the loving fellowship of a holy community. Our mission must start with *obedience* to that call unto holiness.¹¹

Holiness does not just happen. God's desire is for a community that expresses itself in love poured out for others. That kind of holiness takes intentionality, discipline, and work; our bodies must cooperate with the gracious activity of God present in our midst. Yearning, desire, and hunger for holiness is commendable, but our passion for holiness is no substitute for attending to the means of grace: works of mercy and works of piety.¹² It is in our obedience actually to walk together in the ways of the Lord that we will fulfill the first and most critical step in mission.¹³ Our churches cannot continue to be places reflecting the individualism and elective participation so prevalent in Western culture. By the very calling and grace of God, we are transferred into a people with a very different set of concrete practices; we are no longer captains of our own ship. We do not choose our membership or piecemeal participate in what this community is doing.¹⁴ We are obligated to the fellowship of a community of believers who together are working out their whole-life salvation with fear and trembling in obedience to the grace-filled call of our Lord.

God's mission from the beginning of creation on through the life to come is for love to be tangibly expressed in all relations within creation. The church must start its sharing in God's mission by living in the means of grace that will nurture the body into the communal expression of holiness. The loving fellowship of Christ's church and its work of reconciliation to the world must be held together. No church can put aside or separate out growth in holiness from activities more traditionally thought to be missional. Perfect love ultimately is the mission and the mission is no different from the sacredness of all life together we were created to express in God's creation-sanctuary. Rather than living out a partial caricature of mission, our churches should be seeking as-one the kind of holy life together under Christ's lordship that is good news for the

¹⁰ This echoes Paul's critique of Israel in his letter to the Romans. When he talks about their unfaithfulness, it has nothing to do with belief/faith; it is a matter of being "unfaithful to God's commission" (Wright, *Justification*, 198). Or as Paul viewed it: "What was lacking... was *faithfulness* on the part of Israel, not some kind of meritorious behavior through which Israel would rescue itself, but a faithfulness to God and his covenant purposes that would enable Israel to live up to its calling as the light to the dark world and so on (Romans 2:17-20)" (203).

¹¹ The church Hauerwas and Willimon propose "knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most 'effective' thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith" (*Resident Aliens*, 47). Or as they say further on: "The most creative social strategy we have to offer is the church... We serve the world by showing it something that it is not, namely, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers" (83).

¹² See Cartwright, "The Once & Future Church Revisited," 118.

¹³ In a prophetic manner, Cartwright writes: "...in twentieth-century American Protestantism the *fantasy* of holiness has been more prominent than the practice... the *language* of holiness has become so severely disordered that we use the classical catch phrases as if they designate something socially embodied, when they actually do not... We have *simulacra* (empty conceptual structures or artificial imitations of a real thing) of holiness; however, we have largely if not entirely lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of what it means to embody Christian holiness" (117; see Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 116).

¹⁴ Cartwright, "The Once & Future Church Revisited," 120-121.

world. It is in sharing in God's loving purpose for creation that the church is already participating in God's mission and its face will become transparent to God's holy mission of sharing loving fellowship in its engagements with others in creation.¹⁵ Holiness is foundational and first in missions.

¹⁵ Cf. Craig Keen, "The Human Person as Intercessory Prayer," in *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth*, edited by Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 60.