

Response

Redefining “Us” and “Them”:
Missiology as Embodied Christian Community
by
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Bryan Stone has carefully and credibly drawn our attention to understanding mission as fundamentally rooted in the “worshipping, reconciling, forgiving, nonviolent, compassionate, just, and inclusive community” that we call the Church. I applaud Stone’s deconstruction of the stale debate over whether we should prioritize “personal evangelism” or “compassionate ministries,” as if we were still navigating awkwardly between the Scarybdis of Rauschenbush and the social gospel and the Scylla of fundamentalism and its atomistic, solipsistic tendencies. The Church is Christ embodied. The Church is Christ’s witness in the world. As the people who identify ourselves as Nazarenes, we are part of this Church. Our task is to determine how more consistently and comprehensibly to be faithful to God, to be this embodied witness. To this end, I would like to raise a few questions about what this “embodied locus of holiness” might or might not look like.

While academics, cultural theorists and theologians in particular, are quick to publish modernity’s eulogy, I am not as confident that modernity is waning. Rather, modernity’s power as a dominant ideology and organizing metaphor has never been stronger. The current political climate in the post-“September 11” world, with its identification of God’s providence with U.S. nationalism and the increasing solidarity of the Global North, is only the most obvious sign. Even in the Church, our structures and relationships are heavily conditioned by the language and forms of liberalism, late capitalism and, specifically, market style exchange relationships.

Although over half of our church’s membership lies outside the United States, our ecclesial structures and culture are still heavily rooted in North American images and practices that are themselves a product of the modern liberal experiment.¹ With the growth of our church as an institution, have we created a board of General Superintendents that looks and functions like a typical U.S. corporate board of administrators rather than drawn from among our global ranks to build a council of elders (the wise) that lead us in theological insight and vision? In our rush to “expand our territories,”² have we asked our District Superintendents to be middle managers, primarily responsible for managing district budgets, labor recruitment, and dispute resolution rather than to be the pastor of pastors? With our democratic elections, have we *hired* our pastors to be managers of local franchises with all the latest skills in “church management,” requiring district reports that primarily reward them for increases in the statistical and fiduciary bottom line rather than *call* them to lead in a catechesis that enculturates us into “ecclesial holiness,” this “new social reality”?

Church growth priorities privilege sociologically informed macro-social engineering over a theologically grounded ecclesiology. My fellow anthropologists, for example, have shown how effective the application of the homogeneous unit principle can be to increasing church

attendance. But in our attempt to be culturally relevant, who is asking if the church really should look like carefully marketed, efficiently conscripted consumer niches? In our attempt to be culturally sensitive, who is asking if we really should set up apartheid-style, culturally segregated districts and leadership teams? We cannot be the visible Body of Christ if we continue to design “mission strategies” that are based on marketing techniques that package people into carefully reconstructed and reified cultural boxes, boxes held together with a neo-colonial notion of the radically distinct “other.” Loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves requires us to reexamine carefully our categories of “us” and “them.”

It is difficult to develop a catechesis that leads us to “subvert an existing unjust order,” if we are trying really hard to look like it. The Church should be a prophetic witness to what God makes possible. Kathleen Norris notes that “a prophet’s task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day.”³ The Church should embody the voices and lives of the prophets as they call for justice and reconciliation. If the Church is to be a place where “present social orderings are turned upside down and inside out,” we must find ways to live out God’s justice and call to reconciliation. We can begin by walking with those on the margins. To do justice is not making sure that everyone gets exactly what he or she deserves based on law or the assumption of merit. God’s call to do justice means to practice grace and mercy towards all, particularly those who have no power to secure it for themselves. As God revealed through the prophet Micah, “He has told you, created one, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”⁴

¹ Read D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000).

² Note the current “Prayer of Jabez” fad in the U.S.

³ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 34.

⁴ Micah 6:8