***Missional* Matters**

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**Church as *Sign* of the Reign of God**

by Roland G. Kuhl

Jesus in John’s Gospel sends out his disciples with this word: “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20: 21-22). All that Jesus was sent to be and do by God the Father, now is being passed onto his disciples (and those who come to faith through them – cf. John 17:20ff). Forgiving or not forgiving has to do with binding and loosing (cf. Matthew 16: 19) – binding that which binds humanity in brokenness, in sin and death, and loosing or liberating humanity into new life. This is the work of the kingdom or reign of God among humanity.

Jesus, in Luke 4:18-19, expressed that he was anointed by the Spirit of God to embody the liberating presence of God’s reign through his life and ministry – and now Jesus’ breathing the Spirit upon his disciples sends them (and through them the church) to continue embodying the same liberating presence of God in the world.

This new reality is expressed by Lesslie Newbigin, who frames an understanding of the church as being the sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God. He states, “the church represents the presence of the reign of God in the life of the world, not in the triumphalist sense . . . and not in the moralistic sense . . . , but in the sense that it is the place where the mystery of the kingdom present in the dying and rising of Jesus is made present here and now so that all people, righteous and unrighteous, are enabled to taste and share the love of God before whom all are unrighteous and all are accepted as righteous. It is the place where the glory of God . . . actually abides among us so that the love of God is available to sin-burdened men and women (John 17: 22-23). It is the place where the power of God is manifested in a community of sinners. It is the place where the promise of Jesus is fulfilled: ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself’ (John 12:32). It is the place where the reign of God is present as love shared among the unlovely” (Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 54).

Craig Van Gelder, in *The Essence of the Church*, also relates that “the church is a people shaped by the redemptive reign of God. The church is not an end in itself. It has a distinct calling – to demonstrate the reality of God’s redemptive power in the world. It has a unique nature – to live as a fellowship that demonstrates kingdom values and expresses kingdom power. It has a distinct purpose of carrying out a ministry of participating fully in the redemptive work of God in the world” (p. 89).

In this way, the church is a *sign* of God’s present and coming reign. It is a sign because it points not to itself, but points to the God’s reign being present in the world. The church as sign represents something other than itself. Though the church is not the kingdom of God, the church is a sign of God’s reign being present revealing that the will of God is active in this world – God’s will being done on earth, in the midst of brokenness and injustice, just as it is in heaven.

Yet, as a sign of God’s reign, we know that at our best we are “a flawed witness to the reign of God,” an “incomplete expression” of what God is actively engaged in doing by bringing about redemption and reconciliation in our world (Barrett et al., *Treasure in Clay Jars*, 171). As a community pointing to the reign of God, we realize we are also a community in need of God’s transforming work in our lives. May we be open to being transformed by God’s Spirit.

Next week: Church as *Instrument* of the Reign of God

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