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# Theology, Culture, Ministry and the Mission of the Church

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**KEY WORDS:** *Hermeneutics, Christology, Trinity, love, grace, community, postmodern.*

As we set out to discuss the relationship of theology, culture, and ministry to the mission of the church, the first question to be decided is, What is 'the mission of the church'? I suggest that the mission of the church is *to catalyze the creation of new communities that worship Jesus Christ as Lord*. Achieving this mission requires the interplay of theology, culture, and ministry. This paper attempts to further define that interplay.

The aforementioned description of the mission of the church implies the three areas of discussion stated in the title of this paper. 'Ministry' relates to *catalyzing* the creation of new communities that worship Jesus Christ as Lord. 'Culture' refers to both the *new communities* that are created as well as the adjacent 'old' communities. 'Theology' expands upon the confession that *Jesus Christ is Lord*.

In this paper I will explain the dynamic relationship that exists between theology, culture, and min-

istry. I use the term 'dynamic', in contrast to 'static', because theology, culture, and ministry are always in flux. The fact that they are ever changing indicates their vitality and the need to continually give each of them fresh attention.

The interplay between theology, culture, and ministry is so dynamic that it is impossible to determine whether one precedes the other. Do we start with theology, culture, or ministry? My fundamentalist upbringing, my training in presuppositionalism, and my Enlightenment approach to theology all beckon me to say that we must start with theology. Formerly, another way of saying it would have been that *good ministry flows out of good theology that has evaluated existing culture and developed a new culture with a biblical standard*. On the surface this sounds correct and evangelical. However, the relationship between theology, culture, and ministry is actually more complicated than it first appears to be. Recent discussions in hermeneutics and the influence of postmodernism challenge us to think dynamically about the interplay of theology, culture, and mission.

## The Relationship of Theology to the Mission of the Church

Of course, good theology should at least be theology that affirms what the Bible teaches about God. However, theology goes beyond that. Theology '... explores the world-constructing, knowledge-forming, identity-forming, "language" of the Christian community'.<sup>1</sup> Theology is faith, seeking understanding.

We have become more aware in postmodern times that no one understands theology and expresses theology as a neutral interpreter. We interpret through lenses that have been culturally formed so that our theological affirmations reflect the influence of our culture. This is not to say that there is no theology apart from my cultural understanding of it, but that the only theology I know and can express is theology that is seen through my cultural lenses.

My cultural lens may be highly personal and individualized, leading to a 'private' affirmation of theology. Also, my cultural lens may be the secular culture that dominates my particular society, leading to theology held captive by secular culture. Additionally, my cultural lens may be the Christian community that, though it may serve as a checkpoint against personalized and secularized theology, yet reflects the culture of my particular Christian community.

In reality, all theological affirmations reflect a combination of the above influences. Our desire in developing

theology, however, is to be self-conscious of these influences and to work back and forth between the text, culture, and ministry, refining our theological affirmations along the way.

In my understanding, the primary theological affirmation of the church is that 'Jesus Christ is Lord' (Mt. 16:16; Acts 2:36; 1 Cor. 3:11). If the mission of the church is to worship Jesus Christ as Lord and if the heart of theology is the affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord, then faith should pursue the understanding of that affirmation.

This pursuit of understanding that Jesus Christ is Lord requires our interaction with Scripture, culture, and ministry. As we look at Scripture we must consider how that affirmation is understood through Jesus Christ's relationship within the Trinity. Our cultural perspective helps us to appreciate the community that exists within the Trinity. Our ministry focus encourages us to present Jesus Christ as Lord in way that highlights his rule of love.

Christ's relationship within the Triune God is characterized by love, not dominance. Though we speak of something like an 'economic Trinity', in which coheres a degree of hierarchy, we also understand that love, not dominance, governs that relationship.

Perhaps a good way to understand Christ's relationship within the Trinity is to listen to his Father's words to him in Mark 1:10-11:

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

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1 Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 53.

In these words the Father declares that Christ is his son, that he loves Christ, and that he is well pleased with Christ. These words to Jesus touch on three questions that people are asking in the 21st century—Who am I? Does any one care about me? Does my work matter? These questions relate to the human quest for identity, community, and significance.

### Identity—You are my Son

The words *You are my Son* are best understood in light of the Old Testament background. From that background we understand two things about the identity of Christ.

#### Sonship is a declaration of Christ's deity.

Isaiah 9:6 sets forth the expectation that the Messiah would be one who is Mighty God, a child born, and a son given. Though we need the revelation of the Incarnation in the NT to explain this to us, there is a clearly an OT background for the relationship of Sonship and deity. Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, also foresaw the same event.

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2).

#### Sonship is a declaration of his sovereignty.

Consider Psalm 2:7 for a moment:

I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my

Son; today I have become your Father.'

Historically this Psalm was associated with the coronation of the king of Israel. The kings of Israel stood in a special relationship with God. In some sense the king was God's son ruling on God's behalf. The Israelite monarchy was also a theocracy over which God directly ruled through the human king.

Ultimately, Psalm 2 anticipated a Son of David who would also be God and who would rule the nations with absolute sovereignty. The words, 'this is my Son', should be understood as God's declaration that Jesus is the Son who will be Sovereign King.

In Peter's message in Acts 2, he interprets the statement—*You are my Son; today I have become your Father*. From Peter's words we understand that it is actually at the resurrection of Jesus Christ that he is invested with royalty and enters the royal privilege of Sonship, as ruler of the universe. Just as the OT Hebrew King was invested with royalty at his coronation and became in one sense 'the son of God', the resurrection was the day when Christ's humanity was invested with royal glory. On that day, he rose above the weakness and limitations of his humanity and ascended to his throne, as son of David and Son of God. The Father affirms the identity of the Son as one who is both God and Sovereign Lord.

### Community—I love you

Furthermore, in Mark 1:10-11 the Father also says to Christ, *I love you*. In these words he expresses his affection for the Son and in so doing he allows us

to see the community that exists in the Trinity.

Jesus eternally experienced the special love of the Father. We are repeatedly told in the Bible that God is love (1 John 4:8). Of course, God is more than love, but love is an attribute of God that frequently comes to the forefront in Scripture. It is from this attribute of love that God expresses himself toward others in many different ways—goodness, grace, mercy, long-suffering, kindness, and so on. Certain of those expression of love (like mercy and longsuffering), were not necessary before sin entered the world. But the love of God is so rich and pure that its capacity is never thwarted nor diminished by any situation.

Love also assumes a recipient of love. Though this is not necessarily a proof of the Trinity, we can deduce from the fact that God is love that there must have been recipients of love before creation. We do know from Scripture that there was an ‘intra-Trinitarian’ expression of love.

Jesus speaks very clearly of this ‘intra-Trinitarian’ love of eternity in John 17:20-27. Verses 23-25 clearly express the reality, eternity, and continuity of the love of the Father for his Son.

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me **and have loved them even as you have loved me**. ‘Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me **because you loved me before the creation of the world**. ‘Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they

know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order **that the love you have for me** may be in them and that I myself may be in them.’

We have the privilege of hearing through Scripture the Father say to the Son, ‘You are my beloved’. Actually this is more than just, ‘I love you’. These words indicate the special and unique relationship that the Son has with the Father. He is the ‘only begotten’ Son as the older versions say. He stands in a unique relationship. Though many will be born again into God’s family who become sons and daughters, there will always only be one who is called—*the Son of God*. Clearly, we see in the Father’s relationship to the Son, not only that identity is important, but that community is also.

### Significance—I am well pleased with you

The Father also says to Jesus, *with you I am well pleased*. These are words of approval without qualification. They declare the value and significance of the ministry and work of Jesus Christ. We can set these words about Jesus in contrast to what the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 14:2-3:

The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.

This is the way it was until Jesus walked the earth. What God saw in

Jesus and says about Jesus is what he had intended for all humanity. Jesus has just been baptized at the hand of John the Baptist. His baptism showed his humility. His baptism showed his obedience (Mt. 3:15—'to fulfil all righteousness'). His baptism showed his identity with fallen humanity. His baptism was the first public step on the road that eventually led Christ to the cross.

Jesus begins his public ministry with these words from his Father—*I am pleased with you*. Throughout his life and ministry God would continue to attest and confirm that he was pleased with Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's ultimate stamp of approval on the work of Christ. After Jesus died to redeem sinful humanity, his Father delivered him from the grave and exalted him as King over all. The Father declares that Jesus' life and work were significant. He is well pleased with Jesus.

These three statements in Mark 1:10-11 help us to form a structural motif for understanding Jesus Christ as Lord. His lordship flows out of a familial relationship, which provides identity (*you are my son*); out of an affectionate relationship, which offers community (*I love you*); and out of an affirmative, yet evaluative relationship, which declares significance (*I am well pleased with you*).

The lordship of Christ is not monarchical in the sense that he rules over us as a king rules his subjects. The lordship of Christ is familial. He rules over his church as an elder brother might rule over his younger brothers. His rule is a rule of love rather than simply an exercise of absolute power. He rules in the context of our community with him.

His rule does not seek personal affirmation through the display of his power, but rather is peacefully grounded in knowing that his Father affirms him. His lordship lays a foundation for our significance.

Understanding the lordship of Christ in this way coincides with Stanley Grenz's suggestion that our theological development should be post-individualistic, i.e. theology based on a communitarian approach; post-rationalistic, i.e. a theology that focuses more on the experience of Christianity; post-dualistic, i.e. a theology that integrates the mind, body, and emotions; and post-noeticentric, i.e. a theology that does not isolate the head from the heart.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, these three statements that the Father makes to the Son set the stage for understanding the relationship of human culture to the mission of the church.

## The Relationship of Culture to the Mission of the Church

In many ways human cultures give evidence of a propensity toward identity, a desire for community, and a cry for significance. One consequence of modernity was to by-pass these elements. In this regard Millard Erickson refers to Thomas Oden, who views modernity as coming to an inevitable cataclysmic end, and speaks of the four fallen idols of modernity: autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism, and absolute

<sup>2</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), pp. 93-97.

moral relativism.<sup>3</sup> These four fallen idols were in direct contrast to humanity's created need for identity, community, and significance. In many ways the 'old church' failed to catalyze a *new community* that modelled these values.

Middleton and Walsh inform us that the modern man's sense of identity was in himself.

No longer dependent on the superstitions of the past or the Bible as an external source of authoritative revelation, modern man champions his secular independence. Free from the control of ecclesiastical authority and the imposition of identity by a rigid medieval social order, the modern person is found to be a self-made subject.<sup>4</sup>

In the modern era humankind failed to achieve the identity for which it sought, as Middleton and Walsh point out.

... it is clear in a postmodern world; this autonomous self is effectively dismantled. We need to acknowledge that the autonomous self is a construct of a particular culture. Moreover, we need to admit that this way of answering the Who are we? question has proven to be a violent and oppressive disaster. And we might well join our voice with postmodernity and say good riddance to the humanist view of the self.<sup>5</sup>

The failure of modernity to satisfy the quest for identity does not negate the reality of that quest. Postmodernity continues the pursuit, only now the definition of self is de-centered. One's identity is seen now as socially constructed. There is no all-encompassing identity for humanity nor is there a stable identity for anyone in particular. One derives one's identity from the culture/community in which one is.

Though we may disagree with the view that there is no universal identity and with the possibility of an ever-changing socially constructed identity, we find more in common with postmodernism than with modernism. The quest for identity is still present. The idea that identity is established in community is more in tune with the biblical concept that identity is formed through one's relationship with God and with others.

We listen intently to and somewhat agree with the warning of Flett that

...culture has the capacity to circumscribe our thoughts and to restrict the possibility of change. In other words, our post-Christian culture has the potential to prevent Christians from thinking, and hence acting, as Christians. And the more our culture relinquishes its Christendom heritage the truer this becomes.<sup>6</sup>

However, on the other hand, we recognize that the ongoing work of God's common grace in human culture

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3 Erickson, *Postmodernizing*, pp. 51-52.

4 Richard J. Middleton, and Brian T. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995), p. 49.

5 Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, p. 51.

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6 John Flett, *Unpacking Gospel and Culture, Collision Crossroads* (Auckland: The Deep Sight Trust, 1998), pp. 8-14.

makes it possible that culture may challenge us to think more biblically. This is one effect of postmodernism. As we observe the quest for identity in community, we are challenged to be that *new community* that can help others find their identity in the love of God and the love of those who worship Jesus Christ as Lord.

Additionally, our culture seeks a sense of significance. Though the idea of a metanarrative is rejected, the desire for being part of a 'story of life' yet persists. 'Where do I fit?' and 'does my life matter?' are still questions being asked, even though Postmoderns have lost trust in totalizing stories. Humans give evidence of their need of story as they continue to ask questions regarding the existence of evil and suffering. These questions cause us to contextualize our theological expressions and to share the biblical metanarrative in such a way that postmoderns see that Scripture '... contains the resources to shatter totalizing readings, to convert the reader, to align us with God's purposes of shalom, compassion, and justice'.<sup>7</sup>

## The Relationship of Ministry to the Mission of the Church

Ministry is an outworking of theology and culture as much as it is an impetus for the developing of theology and culture. One key to doing ministry in a postmodern world is creating *new communities* that communicate the biblical metanarrative in terms that affirm the

human quest for identify, community, and significance. Perhaps this is best accomplished through a ministry that is well-grounded in biblical theology<sup>8</sup> and that remains informed about contemporary culture. This means that we will be able to see the truth and goodness in postmodernism which includes, as McLaren points out, an appropriate humility, a healthy scepticism, a thirst for spirituality, an openness to faith, a congenial tolerance, and a limited relativism.<sup>9</sup>

Another key would be developing *new communities* that focus more on the communal understanding of worshipping Jesus Christ as Lord. This begins with something as simple as how we read Scripture. As Rodney Klapp comments: 'To read the Bible apart from community amounts to no less than each reader aspiring to his or her own religion.'<sup>10</sup> This also includes an understanding of '... life in the church as a kind of resocialization, an enculturation according to the standards of the kingdom of God rather than the world'.<sup>11</sup>

Another key to ministry will be the humility and teachability of the new community. Because the New World in

<sup>8</sup> 'Biblical Theology is the branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.' Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1996), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 173-175.

<sup>10</sup> Rodney Klapp, *A Peculiar People* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Klapp, *A Peculiar People*, p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*, p. 107.



which we live is suspicious about claims to certainty and objective truth, a greater degree of humility is needed in communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. Brian McLaren insightfully describes this necessary disposition.

As we move to the other side, our greatest enemy will not be our ignorance; it will be our unteachability. It won't be what we don't know that threatens us; it will be what we do know. We know too much—so much that we can't learn how much we need to learn.<sup>12</sup>

Ministry in a postmodern world requires more humility about our theological certainties. Humility does not entail the diminishing of theological affirmation, but removes the arrogance and unteachability that are often associated with Christians. Along with this will come the practice of fairness where, as McLaren suggests: 'We need to be more careful about applying a degree of scrutiny to others ... that we cannot ourselves withstand.'<sup>13</sup>

## The New Community

At the outset of this discussion I commented that the mission of the church is to catalyze the creation of new communities that worship Jesus Christ as Lord and that achieving this mission requires the interplay of theology, culture, and ministry. The mission of the church requires this interplay because we 'witness to the truth of Christ in a culture that has lost sight of its foundations'.<sup>14</sup> I conclude with these challenging words from John Flett:

We may feel tempted to cling on to what is left of Christendom but this can only lead to the continuing irrelevance of Christian truth. Instead we must face the stark reality of our current social situation and realize that we live in a New World, one that has certain challenges we must face but also great opportunity. [Our] ...apostolate is to help establish the truth of God's Kingdom within the social reality of modern Western culture....<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>13</sup> McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> John Flett, *Unpacking Gospel and Culture*, pp. 8-14.

<sup>15</sup> Flett, *Unpacking Gospel and Culture*, pp. 8-14.

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