

GOSPEL-PROCLAMATION IN MISSIONS: A PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY

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In contemporary evangelicalism, there has been a surge (or a “resurgence” as it has been popularly called) of culturally-engaging and doctrinally-minded church planters in the United States and around the world. The term, “gospel-centered”, has become a watchword for many who identify with the values and pathos of this movement. In any movement, sometimes there is a danger to use common vocabulary and jargon without first defining the meaning behind such terms. In missions there can be widely-used verbiage that can just become relative. There is the endless debate as to the difference between “mission” and “missions.”

However, less commonly, the biblical command to proclaim the gospel is discussed. Sometimes it is mentioned, but only in a generic sense to describe overall mission activity, whether it be mercy ministry, education, relational evangelism, administration, etc. Because of the fading of terminological boundaries in our gospel-centered ministries and gospel proclamation, there needs to be a discussion about the philosophy and methodology of gospel-proclamation in missions. To be sure, there are other very good ministries and

strategies that fit well under the larger category of mission; but for the sake of narrowly outlining a gospel-proclamation orientation in missions, those other helpful ministries do not need to be discussed here.

Gospel-Proclamation and the Church's Mission

The impulse behind an orientation toward gospel-proclamation in missions is a *passion to rouse religious affections for the lordship of Christ through missions by proclaiming the gospel-centered Word*. This statement is subservient to the church's overall mission statement of the Great Commission, which Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, considering all the Great Commission texts, have masterfully encapsulated:

The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.¹

For a gospel-proclamation philosophy and methodology of missions, the *philosophy* is that sinners are saved and believers are sanctified through the Word of Christ, and the *method* is proclamation; the *message* is the gospel-centered Word; the *center of the message* is the lordship of Christ; the *effect* is aroused religious affections for Christ the Lord; and the *means* are missions (to the unevangelized and undisciplined).

To say it more succinctly: this gospel-proclamation philosophy of missions combines reaching the unevangelized with the gospel and teaching the undisciplined to obey the gospel; and, this particular methodology of missions employs proclaiming the Christ-centered Word in such a way that arouses religious affections for Christ the Lord among the church and the unreached.

¹Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2011), 62.

Ministry Context

In every ministry context, this will look different. If a minister is engaging in first-contact evangelism among unreached peoples, the idea of gospel-proclamation should not be a foreign notion. Many who are seeking to reach the unreached esteem gospel-proclamation highly. For many, the philosophy of gospel-proclamation is a natural part of evangelism. However, the ministry context in which gospel-proclamation is not widely considered to be necessary is in theological training and discipleship of indigenous pastors and missionaries. Indeed, for many Christian leaders around the world, there is a high value placed upon credentialed theological education.

Theological education is not only essential for pastoral preparation, it provides a degree—and many national churches and their leaders desire this credentialing of graduates. One missionary to East Asia reported that the most common request he has received from the Chinese church leaders is for formal education that leads to credentials. This repeated request is heard the world over.... Theological education provides a cadre of pastors who have a respected seminary's seal of approval.... A basic and necessary function of a theological seminary or Bible college is to train pastors for the churches today as well as to equip the trainers of pastors for the churches of the future.²

Whether a missionary trains believers through discipleship and theological education or whether the missionary endeavors to evangelize and plant churches in unreached areas, gospel-proclamation philosophies and methodologies of evangelism in missions or of discipleship in missions are fundamentally the same, though they may be applied uniquely in each ministry context. The culture and the occasion set the context, but they never principally change the philosophy and methodology of gospel-proclamation.

Why Preaching?

Numerous missions-oriented strategies use the biblical phrase, “preach the gospel”, and it seems that there is no universal definition of “preaching/proclaiming” assumed by all.

²M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* 2010, 153.

Stephen Neill said, “if everything is mission, nothing is mission.”³ Similarly, if in missions everything is preaching or proclaiming the gospel, then nothing is preaching or proclaiming the gospel. Missions debates and discussions rarely deal with the biblical understanding of preaching, and we defer that discussion to professional pulpiteers or homileticians.

Missionary proclamation is never ‘effective’ in the sense that it produces the conditions in which conversions occur, let alone the event of conversion itself. Missionaries, evangelists and teachers who have understood both the scandal of the cross and the irreplaceable and foundational significance of the news of Jesus the crucified and risen Messiah and Savior will not rely on strategies, models, methods or techniques. They rely on the presence of God when they proclaim Jesus Christ, and on the effective power of the Holy Spirit. This dependence on God rather than on methods liberates them from following every new fad, from using only one particular method, from using always the same techniques, and from copying methods and techniques from others whose ministry is deemed successful. Preachers of the gospel... are authentically flexible because they are motivated not by the pressure of demonstrating the ‘effectiveness’ of their methods or the ‘success’ of their ministry but by their commitment to God and by their commitment to the people they seek to reach with the news of Jesus.⁴

Gospel preaching is our Pauline legacy; we must not surrender our apostolic craft. Often, and with good reason, discussions of missions strategies deal with degrees of contextualization, cultural relevance, sociological research, intercultural communication, and dynamic equivalence, which are all very valuable issues; yet, if such discussions *assume* gospel proclamation, the core method of our missionary calling is in danger of being eclipsed altogether. The methodology of missions is never neutral. When our message and our method are inconsistent, the message is lost.

Just as there is a danger of not biblically defining mission, which can lead to viewing every Christian activity as mission, there is a similar danger of not biblically defining preaching. The famous social justice maxim, “go into the world and preach the gospel, and if

³Quoted in DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 2011:15.

⁴Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* 2008, 404.

necessary, use words,”⁵ reveals our woeful ignorance of the biblically prescribed act of preaching the gospel, which is indispensable to both evangelism and discipleship. David Hesselgrave’s definition of the mission of the church helpfully combines evangelism and discipleship with the chief action being proclamation: “The primary mission of the church, and, therefore, of the churches is to proclaim the gospel of Christ and gather believers into local churches where they can be built up in the faith and made effective in service”

(2000:17). Also, the argument of DeYoung and Gilbert is quite simple:

Essentially, the mission of the church is summarized in the Great Commission passages—the climactic marching orders Jesus issues at the ends of the Gospels and at the beginning of Acts. We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling (2011:63).

That preaching is fundamental for both evangelism *and* discipleship, reaching *and* teaching, is made clear by the bookends of Paul’s stated ministry philosophy in Romans, which is essentially a missionary support letter that must be read both theologically and missiologically. In the first bookend of Romans, Paul says,

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, *called to be an apostle*, set apart for the *gospel* of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received *grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ....* For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift *to strengthen you*—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

⁵Though Francis of Assisi is commonly credited with saying this, it is just a legend. Francis was actually a powerful street preacher. The closest statement to this comes from his Rule of 1221, Chapter XII on how the Franciscans should practice their preaching: “No brother should preach contrary to the form and regulations of the holy Church nor unless he has been permitted by his minister....All the Friars...should preach by their deeds.” See: Joe Carter, “Factchecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi.”

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom 1:1-6, 11-16, emphasis added).

Paul is under obligation to preach the gospel in every context. Period. So he preaches it *evangelistically* to unbelieving Greeks, barbarians, wise, and foolish; likewise, he is under obligation to preach it *evangelically* as a means of sanctifying and building the faith of the Christians.

At the end of Romans, in the second bookend, Paul restates the same idea as Romans 1:11-16 to form a missiological-theological inclusio. In his doxology he says,

Now to him who is able to *strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ*, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been *made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith*—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom 16:25-27, emphasis added).

From the bookends of this letter written by the missionary-theologian extraordinaire, clearly Paul's philosophy and methodology of missions includes preaching the gospel of Christ for the evangelism of the nations *and* the discipleship of the church. "Paul's description of his missionary task focuses on the preaching of the gospel as the primary goal....Paul understood his primary task as an apostle who has been called and sent by God to preach the gospel" (Schnabel, 2008:210).

What is Gospel-Proclamation?

For the sake of clarifying this Pauline missionary methodology, a biblical definition of "preaching/proclamation" is in order.⁶ In the New Testament, preaching is the

⁶These convictions of preaching have been inspired and influenced by Dr. Arturo Azurdia, "Preparing & Preaching Expository Sermons" and "Thinking Theologically about Ministry" (Western Seminary, 2009).

predominant (though not exclusive) method of communicating the gospel.⁷ In 1 Corinthians Paul defends both the centrality of the gospel and the centrality of preaching the gospel to believers and unbelievers alike:

1. ‘for Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel’ (1:17)—εὐαγγελίζω: to announce good news... proclaim, to preach.⁸
2. ‘it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe’ (1:21)—κηρύσσω: to proclaim aloud, to publicly announce... an authoritative and public announcement that demands compliance.⁹
3. ‘I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom’ (2:1)—καταγγελλω: to announce, with focus upon the extent to which the announcement or proclamation extends.¹⁰
4. ‘my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom’ (2:4)—κηρυγμα: proclamation, preaching... the phenomena of a call which goes out and makes a claim upon its hearers.¹¹

It is helpful to differentiate between preaching and other good missionary methodologies. Preaching includes teaching; moreover, it includes text-based application and urgent appeals to repentance, faith, and obedience. Teaching, however, is not always preaching. Teaching is the communication of truth in a clear, reasonable way, which informs and reminds. Preaching takes what is taught and applies it in a convicting, comforting, and challenging way, imploring for a response. Teaching asks about the text, “what did this mean in its original historical and literary context, and what was the author’s intention?”

Preaching asks this and more. It moreover asks about the text, “what was the Holy Spirit’s

⁷See the pervasive use of “preach” and “proclaim” in Matthew 3:1; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 10:7, 27; 11:1, 5; 12:18, 41; 23:3; 24:14; 26:13, and in Mark 1:4, 7, 14, 38-39, 45; 2:2; 3:14; 5:20; 6:12; 7:36; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15, 20.

⁸Walter Bauer et al., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. “εὐαγγελίζω.”

⁹Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), s.v. “κηρύσσω.”

¹⁰J.P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Louw-Nida Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains, Vol. 1*, 2nd ed. (United Bible Societies, 1999), s.v. “καταγγελλω.”

¹¹Gerhard Friedrich and Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol.3*, 10th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), s.v. “κηρυγμα.”

purpose in inspiring this and what was he saying? How is the Holy Spirit using this truth to lay claim on me and those disciples entrusted to me?”

God summons all men everywhere to repent and believe (Acts 17:30), and once they have done so, they are to live a life of continual repentance and belief. Preaching is the method that the *evangel* demands. Proclamation essentially seeks to elicit a response of repentance and belief. Pauline-type proclamation is adequate because of the nature of the gospel call: it is a Divine command, not a pious suggestion or a religious opinion.

In missions, our evangelistic preaching (evangelism) and evangelical preaching (discipleship) must not be more culturally relevant than God. If a Jew, Muslim, or Buddhist were to hear our moral or theocentric communication and agree with everything we say without conviction, we have not communicated the *evangel* and have thus failed to distinctly call attention to Christ. Paul says there are three possible responses to the gospel when it is proclaimed faithfully, communicated clearly, and understood truly: it is foolishness, offensive, or the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:23-25).

Gospel-proclamation is verbal, oral communication characterized by the following: It is Christ-centered in its interpretation of Scripture; it is biblical truth mediated by the Spirit through the missionary in the God-created cultural/linguistic context; its immediate purpose is to draw out appropriate human responses; and its ultimate purpose is to glorify God. Preaching the gospel does not consist of merely sharing a story, using trendy communication techniques, engaging in an open-ended religious conversation, or doing acts of kindness; preaching is declaring in such a way that directly, clearly, and urgently demonstrates the burning Word of the Lord, and essentially brings God to people in each cultural/linguistic context. The central means of God’s self-revelation in the Bible is his speech. Preaching is re-speaking God’s speech.

Gospel-Proclamation in Diverse Contexts

In the contemporary American Christian worldview, preaching is almost always associated with a minister standing in a pulpit, teaching topically or expositionally, in a church, and to a Christianized audience. There is a cultural reality to this indeed, but the biblical understanding of preaching is not limited to a professional minister standing up in a pulpit, addressing educated and literate people, with a sound system, in a church building, on Sunday, and in a country that was founded upon principles of religious freedom. The form and style of the preaching act can vary depending on the audience, occasion, time period, nationality, and culture; but the substance and pathos of the preaching act is biblically prescribed and transcultural, and indeed it is the apostolic philosophy that drives apostolic methodology.

The apostles would go to homes and preach Christ both to unbelievers and new converts; the apostle Paul would stand up in the public square or Jewish synagogue and contend for the gospel with unbelievers, and he would also disciple leaders in house churches through more personal forms of preaching. Whether he was in a home sitting at table with unbelievers or young believers, whether he was equipping local elders, or whether he was standing up in a public theater or square, he would proclaim the gospel from all corners of the Bible, demanding the same response to all—faith in the resurrected Lord and repentance of sins.¹²

How Does the Bible Prescribe Preaching for Missions?

We must contend for preaching Christ because it is the indisputably predominant method prescribed in Scripture worthy of communicating the gospel to both unbelievers and

¹²For a further study of the Apostolic message and method of preaching, see: Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8; 5:2; 8:5, 35; 9:20; 10:40-42; 11:20; 13:26-39; 15:35-36; 17:1-3, 16-18; 18:5; 19:13; 20:18-21; 26:19-23; Rom 1:15; 10:14; 1 Cor 1:17, 23; 9:14-18; 15:12, 12-14; 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 1:8-9; Eph 3:8; Col 1:24-25, 28.

believers, for reaching and teaching, evangelizing and disciple-making. Of course there are many models of doing acts of kindness described in Scripture, but they are not chiefly prescribed. We must be careful not only to contend for the biblically-articulated gospel in missions, but to also contend for the biblically-prescribed means and method of communicating that message of the gospel in missions.

First, one very succinct statement of Paul's missionary philosophy and methodology is: "We proclaim him, warning and teaching you with all wisdom" (Col 1:28). Since all Scripture (including the Old Testament) is able to make one wise unto salvation in Christ (2 Tim 3:15), all Scripture is sufficient to equip the man of God to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). This is done primarily through preaching the Christ-centered Word (2 Tim 4:2).¹³

Second, Christ demonstrated that preaching was paramount in his ministry. He preached repentance and the gospel (Matt 4:17, 23)¹⁴. As Isaiah 61:1-2 prophesied, Jesus was anointed to preach the good news, liberty, and the year of the Lord's favor (cf. Luke 4:18-19). Throughout his ministry, Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom.

Third, it is the missionary's holy duty to preach Christ because he commands it. Jesus commanded his disciples to go into the entire world and proclaim the gospel (Mark 16:15). The apostles were compelled by the fact that Christ "commanded us to preach to the people" (Acts 10:42). When Jesus sent out the twelve apostles, he commanded them to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt 10:7).

¹³ Roland Allen perceptively comments on why laboring to disciple new converts using the Old Testament seems so archaic and disconcerting: "St Paul taught his converts to read the Old Testament and to read it in a mystic sense as applying to Gentile Christians. That does not seem to us easy. We do not as a rule find it easy to teach heathen converts to use the Old Testament properly even when they have the whole New Testament with which to illuminate it. It does not seem to us the most convenient of text-books to put into the hands of new converts.... St Paul plainly lectured using the Old Testament as his text-book" (1962, 88-89).

¹⁴ See Footnote 6.

Fourth, preaching the gospel is the principal model of apostolic methodology. The apostles were relentless in their commitment to preach Christ every day, from house to house (Acts 5:42). Besides John, Paul, and Peter, many Christians went about preaching the Word (Acts 8:4-5). Paul often went first to the synagogues to preach Christ (Acts 9:20; 13:4; 17:1-3). They insisted that their primary mandate, even above ministries of service and mercy, was to preach the Word to both the lost and the church (Acts 6:2-4). Those who labored in preaching (and teaching) were worthy of double honor (1 Tim 5:17). Paul's life was marked by preaching the gospel (Acts 19:23; 20:18-20), and in preaching the gospel the apostles were to earn their living (1 Cor 9:14-18).

Fifth, when the gospel is preached, God speaks. When the Christ-centered Word is preached, God speaks with authority and urgency. Jesus says, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16). Paul says,

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:19-20).

Jesus' ministry was one of imploring men to be reconciled to God. He was earnest in his pleading and preaching. When Jesus preached, he commanded attention because it was God appealing through him (Matt 7:28-29). Now we are his ambassadors, and God makes his appeal through us when we implore men to be reconciled to him.

Furthermore, this truth is seen even more clearly in Romans 10:14 when Paul says, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in him, whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" (cf. NASB, ASV)? When the missionary preaches, people *hear God*. When the missionary proclaims

from the Word, God speaks. If believers and unbelievers alike are to believe in the gospel of God and obey it, they need to hear God speak to them. They will grow in their faith as disciples when they hear God speak, and they will hear when the missionary declares the Word of Christ (Rom 10:17). The main barriers to conversion and discipleship are not ultimately sociological or cultural; they are theological.

A Personal Example of Gospel-Proclamation in Missions

Serving in Thailand, the focus of my missionary labor is primarily discipleship—training pastors and Christian leaders from Southeast Asia. It is a specialized ministry that focuses mainly on training already-existing pastors and missionaries through theological education. The courses are one-week intensives so that the pastors and missionaries can remain in their ministry roles. An “advantage of a short training course is that there is less danger of overloading the student with knowledge beyond his spiritual capacity. Training should keep pace with spiritual development.”¹⁵ It seems that if church-planting were like designing and building a car at a manufacturing plant, then theological education would be like fine-tuning and repairing a worn-down car at an automotive shop. My missionary role is more like a mechanic than an engineer. Because of the specialized context of my ministry with already-existing pastors, my philosophy and methodology is nuanced and applied differently than if I were pioneering and church-planting. My method and philosophy of gospel-proclamation through the seminary where I teach seek to accomplish for Asian pastors/missionaries what Hesselgrave recommends: “We must find ways of bringing the church and the school closer together by providing training where churches exist and where they are yet to be established” (2000:107).

¹⁵Melvin Hodges, *On the Mission Field: The Indigenous Church* 1953, 55.

As I have made the case above, preaching the gospel is necessarily my method of discipleship, though it must be adapted for the audience, culture, and occasion. In the classroom I do not preach three-point sermons as would be culturally expected of me in an American church. When I am in front of my students, essentially I train them how to understand Scripture (hermeneutics, biblical theology, canonical theology, systematic theology, historical theology); I teach them practically how to apply and obey Scripture (spirituality, ethics, pastoral theology, evangelism/discipleship, missions); and I train them how to teach/preach the Scripture (homiletics, teaching principles, etc.).

Two types of training described in Scripture can and must be distinguished. Otherwise confusion will arise as to what the Bible teaches concerning the training of missionary-evangelists. While it is popular today to obliterate the distinction between laity and clergy, Scripture maintains the distinction.... The reasons for this distinction are varied. First, the Lord taught that the disciple is not above his teacher. This indicates that the teacher must know more than does the disciple. Second, the gifts required by the various types of ministry differ. Logically, a person is trained according to one's gifts. Development of the gifts granted to the missionary-evangelist requires a training program distinct from that for a deacon. Third, the role of the missionary-evangelists and pastor-teachers is that of training laity for the work of the ministry. That is, the leaders must be trained to train others. Their purpose in the church is not so much to carry out the entire ministry as it is to equip others to minister. The training of the missionary-evangelist, then, must differ from that of the laity in profundity and intensity in accordance with the gifts which God has given (Hesselgrave 2000:105).

Consequently, the form and structure of my ministry is that of a formal professor, but the substance and pathos of my communication is that of a gospel preacher. As Paul modeled in each of his epistles, my aim is to predominantly teach gospel doctrine and accordingly proclaim its gospel application—gospel truths first, holy commands second; orthodoxy first, orthopraxy second. My ministry philosophy is proclaiming Christ, and my method of doing this in the classroom is by demonstrating reproducible hermeneutical principles in the lessons that “will teach basic hermeneutic skills implicitly, assist nationals in

analyzing and applying the Scriptures (transformed behavior), and expedite the phase-out process,”¹⁶ and by communicating Bible/theology in such a way that lays claim on my students that demands submission to Christ’s lordship and obedience to his Word. Because “any wise and effective strategy should anticipate the end goal,”¹⁷ my aim is that the pastors would be competent to proclaim the Word and likewise train their churches. My desire is that my students would learn to obey Christ’s commands (Matt 28:20), by hearing from Christ in the Christ-centered Word in order to be built up in faith (John 17:17; Rom 10:17).

Conclusion

Gospel-proclamation the predominant missionary method prescribed in Scripture, though not to the exclusion of other good ministries. Overall, the work as a gospel-proclaiming missionary is ultimately to bring glory to God in Christ by bearing fruit through preaching. This requires being immersed in prayer and the Word (Acts 6:2-4; 1 Tim 4:15) because it is Christ who powerfully works in the missionary (Col 1:28-29) to preach the gospel, reproving, rebuking, exhorting, with complete patience (2 Tim 4:2). As a missionary, there is no other means of communication that is adequate to convey the eternal urgency and the divine gravity of his gospel. For how will both believers and unbelievers alike hear God unless someone preaches the Word of Christ?

¹⁶Tom A. Steffen, *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers* 1993, 197.

¹⁷Sills, *Reaching and Teaching*, 48.

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