

A Paradigm for Spiritual Formation

DMN 912 Spiritual Formation and Discipleship

*"Yet a time is coming and now is
when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,
for such worshipers the Father seeks."*



Leonard Hjalmarson, M.Div
214147

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In the preceding months one facet of formation has become crystal clear to me: a Christian paradigm of spiritual formation is fundamentally impossible apart from a biblical ecclesiology and practice. These in turn are intrinsically connected to Christology and the nature of the Gospel. The good news of God's kingdom, like seed falling in good soil, results in the church which is humanity renewed in Christ's image. In this paper I examine the connection between ecclesiology and spiritual formation as I work toward a biblical paradigm for spiritual formation.

Every generation has its unique challenges and opportunities. But not every generation has the same opportunity to rethink the Gospel, to rediscover its nature, and to set in place foundations for engaging ten or twelve generations to come. Augustine lived in such a time; Martin Luther lived in such a time; everyone who reads this paper lives in such a time.

Jesus did not come preaching the Church. Rather, He came preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God. That distinction must be addressed in order to set the nature of the Church in the broader context of God's plan of redemption. Robert Webber writes that, "We do not define God's mission; it defines us."¹ The church is the center, but not the circumference, of God's work in the world. Scot McKnight writes that, "the gospel comes to create the order designed by God — a kingdom order, an ecclesial order, a practicing Pentecost order. The gospel is more than the resolution of judicial bankruptcy, though it is that. It is designed to restore *Eikons* to their former and intended glory so they will be in union with God and communion with others, for the good of others and the world."²

The *telos* of formation is Christ. He is the beginning, and the end, of Christian formation. TS Eliot writes,

*What we all the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning
The end is where we start from.*³

Christ is a *body*. The goal of the Spirit of God is to create *a people formed in His image*, a new community. Christ is the new man.. the second Adam.. the first-fruits of the new creation plan of God. In Christ humanity is restored to its intended glory.

Collectively we are the body of Christ, the earthly expression, and the enfleshed carriers, of His Presence. Spirituality is about daily life in this mundane world of sails and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings. All of life is the field for spirituality.

¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

² Scot McKnight, "The Church, Embracing Grace and Racism," Sept.29, 2005. Online <http://www.jesuscreed.org>

³ T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," V. In *Four Quartets* (New York: Harpercollins, 1971)

Spiritual formation requires community and ongoing conversion. It begins and ends in Christ, who dwells eternally as the Word of God in an eternal loving relation of Father, Son and Spirit.

*"Yet a time is coming and now is
when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,
for such worshipers the Father seeks."
John 4:23*



Jesus shares these words with the Samaritan woman in response to her question. She knows that Jews don't talk to Samaritans. She also knows that Jews understand that only the Jerusalem Temple represents the presence of God among His people, and the fulfillment of His covenant with His people. Jesus, the ultimate iconoclast, responds that the heart is the place of true worship. Linking worship to a particular place or a fixed time is mere religion and idolatry.

This absolute revolution in perspective, no less that the meaning of the Temple itself, cannot be understood apart from Israel's story. It is paradigmatic. The Temple is where we must begin in order to understand God's incarnational and missional design in forming a people for Himself. Yahweh is at work in the world building a living temple for his spirit.. *forming a people..* a dwelling place for His PRESENCE.. (1 Cor. 3:16, 1 Peter 2:5) The

Spiritual formation is God's work in creating a new community – a living Temple - of His loving presence in the world.

paradigm I will work with is this:

koinonia.. liturgia, diakonia

Temple and Presence

In the Old Testament God's house is wherever He chooses to make Himself known. (The word for "house" in Hebrew is "beth." "Beth-el" is "God's house" or "temple.") The Old Testament tabernacle was ordained by God (Ex.25-26). It is a lived metaphor of God's Presence with His people in the wilderness. It pictures a pilgrim people with their God, always on the move, always flexible, always adapting to a changing environment. In his Gospel John recalls that symbol of Presence in a way his readers can understand when he says of Jesus that he dwelt (Greek: "tented") among us. In using this metaphor John points to Jesus as incarnating the divine Presence.

Where the tabernacle was God's idea, the Temple was David's idea (2 Samuel 7: 5-7). It is a picture of institutionalization (sometimes called, "hardening of the categories"). The Temple was fixed, permanent, inflexible. The Temple pictures a movement which has stopped moving.. a movement become a museum, a church buried in ritual, method, and managers. The Temple pictures isolation and insulation, fear of change and fear of cultural engagement. It's a picture of a church on the defensive, with too much at stake to be flexible and adaptable. Like the Law, the Temple is unchanging. Also like the law, it makes no one righteous. The Temple is merely a pile of stones; it needs something Living in order to accomplish its purpose.

Although the Temple wasn't ordained by God, it becomes part of the story of God's dwelling with His people. When Solomon built the Temple and dedicated it, it was filled with the cloud that veiled God's presence. The priests couldn't stand there, because God's glory filled the whole house. NT Wright comments,

One of the most famous moments in subsequent Temple history came when the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord, YHWH himself, in the Temple; the foundations of the thresholds shook and the house was filled with smoke. Ezekiel's vision of the restored

Temple climaxes in the glory of the Lord returning to the house, sweeping in from the east with the sound of many waters, illuminating all the earth with its glory.⁴

The first-century Jews continued to worship in the Jerusalem Temple, lamenting the lack of God's glorious presence. Instead of a living reality, the Temple seemed a place of mere memory. Luke retells the story of the day of Pentecost with the intent of awakening these memories of God filling the Temple with his glory. Wright continues,

The rushing of a violent wind filled the house where the apostles were sitting, and flaming tongues of fire came to rest on each of them. That phrase is so well known that we lose, perhaps, its immediate and vivid force. Imagine a dragon with a red, fiery tongue reaching out to lick you. Then imagine that the dragon is just outside the window and as its tongue reaches through it turns into a dozen tongues and everyone in the room is being licked with fire. That's the picture. And Luke, writing the story, wants us to think: this is the glory of the Lord coming back to fill the Temple! This is the pillar of cloud and fire coming to lead the people through the wilderness! This is the restoration we've all been hoping for!⁵

On this long expected day, the Lord would restore Israel's fortunes. On the day when he would renew the Temple, the nations would flock to Zion to hear the word of the Lord. God's power and grace would reach out and summon people from every nation under heaven.



Luke wants us to understand that *this is that*.. the prophesy is fulfilled. Parthians, Medes, Elamites and all the rest are coming to Jerusalem to hear God's word. Pentecost is not merely the renewal of Torah, but the fulfilling and renewing of the Temple. This fulfillment comes in a way the Jews did not expect, much as Jesus Himself arrived with His glory veiled. Wright comments that,

The apostles are constituted as the new, true Temple: not now a building of stone and timber, of bricks and mortar, but as a community of living, breathing, worshipping human beings. Just as in Judaism the Law and the Temple belong closely together, so now at Pentecost the renewed Law and the renewed Temple belong even more closely

⁴ NT Wright, *New Law, New Temple, New World*. Sermon for the feast of Pentecost. Sunday, June 20, 2003. Reprinted at <http://www.allelon.org>

⁵ NT Wright, *Ibid*.

together. Both of them speak of men, women and children whose lives are being transformed by the living presence and power of the one true God.⁶

When God's Presence comes, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Ordinary flesh is sanctified and takes on immortality. A burning bush becomes a sign and a wonder. The impossible becomes possible. God indwells mortal flesh.

There is more than one fulfillment of the Temple, however. Jesus is the embodied fulfillment of the tabernacle (Heb.8-9). He became flesh and dwelt (literally, "tented") among us (John 1: 14) and "has entered, not a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb.9:24).

When Jesus ascends to the Father it becomes possible for him to fill all things. He sends His Spirit so that the church, His body, becomes the living tabernacle. We are "God's house," (Heb.3: 6; 1 Tim.3: 15), a "holy temple," (Eph.2: 21; 1 Cor.3:16; 2 Cor.6: 16), a "dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph.2: 22; 1 Peter 2:5), a building not made with hands. We become the embodiment of God's Presence in the world.

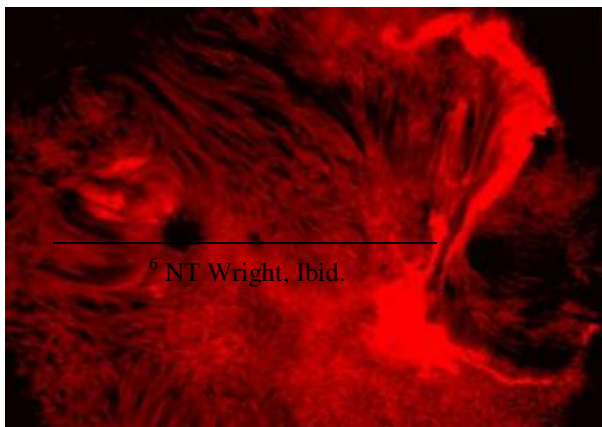
In Acts 7 Stephen is stoned when he argues that God does not live in buildings made with hands but in His people. The people of God are His dwelling place in the Spirit (Eph.2:21,22).

There is a lovely scene in John 20 where Jesus enters the room. The doors are shut, its evening, and the disciples are in hiding. Suddenly the risen Christ stands among them.

"Peace be with you."

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so send I you."

Jesus does three things in this passage. First, He speaks *shalom*. Next, he demonstrates that He is not a ghost, but the Risen and incarnate Lord of creation. Third, He commissions



⁶ NT Wright, Ibid.

them into mission and breathes the Spirit upon them. Alan Roxburgh comments,

What Jesus is doing is recapitulating the promises of God in the OT around the formation of a new creation. The breath of the Spirit re-enacts the Spirit's moving over the deep in *Genesis* to form creation. In other words, in that locked room among frightened men and women, Jesus re-constitutes God's new creation for the sake of the world. So much needs to be said about this action but the key point is that the Spirit of creation - new creation - is poured out among the ordinary men and women who comprise what we call the church. Therefore, the locus of God's purposes and actions is among the people of God.⁷

God's future is among God's people. Where we are, God is at work. As a people we are commissioned and sent out, and as a people we are to embody the presence of God in the world, living together under His reign.

The People of God and their Sent-ness

*The only way to propagate a message is to live it. That is why there is no conversion without community. Community makes conversion historically visible.*⁸

In the late 70's Mennonite author Norman Kraus⁹ argued that the defining experience of Pentecost was not tongues of fire and new languages, but the creation of a new community: the *laos* of God. While the new community was not completely disconnected from the old -- God had had a people before Pentecost -- the new community was filled with the Spirit. The Spirit empowered them both inward, in community and outward, into mission. The empowerment to be a community was immediately demonstrated in the desire to share the world's goods with those who lacked 'that there might be equality' (1 Cor.8).

At Pentecost we became together a dwelling of God in the Spirit. Pentecost is the creation of a new community on a journey together. This is the second defining feature of the Pentecost event in Acts 2: the growth and expansion of God's people in the world.

Missiology is wedded to ecclesiology. Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, I send you" (Jn. 20:21). Temples are fixed and permanent. Often they merely represent religious activity. Apostolicity -- sent-ness and the *missio Dei* -- define God's people. Where buildings have become the *de facto* definition of "church" we have greatly distorted the gospel. Our immobility, inflexibility and isolation represents much of our existence in the world.

⁷ Alan Roxburgh, "What Do I Mean by Leadership?" Online <http://www.allelon.org>

⁸ Jim Wallis, *Call to Conversion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 116.

⁹ Norman Kraus, *Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth* (Herald Press, 1973)

Temples are a witness to pride and class divisions. We decorate them as we would our homes, often better. This inevitably alienates a whole class of people who cannot feel comfortable entering the temple in their five year old clothes from the Sally Ann.

Temples are territorial. They cause us to ask questions about "who is in" and "who is out," and to worry about the other temple down the road lest they gain more adherents than us. They support competition and division in the Body. They cause us to dwell in fear and to regard people as our possessions instead of the Lord's. Our metrics of success revolve around material things: the ABC's.. attendance, buildings and cash. We count people when we should be weighing them.¹⁰

Some years ago Elizabeth O'Connor of Church of the Savior wrote,

Sometimes when the fire of faith burns low and we forget that the maker and Builder of our City is God we look at the structures of our church and become anxious. It seems that we move too fast and there are too few of us, and that we are inadequate for the task. At one of these moments someone said to Gordon, "Can't you see all the weaknesses everywhere and the possibility that these little structures we are building will all come tumbling down?"

He replied, "That which is in God cannot be shaken. If it is not of God, then let us praise Him when it collapses and move on to the next thing."¹¹

More recently Neil Cole was asked about the way we measure success. He responded..

"We don't care if our churches live a year, twenty years, or a hundred years. We care that while they live, they give birth. We may start a church that lasts a year, but while it lives, it births two daughter churches. That is a success. We think that if every church reproduces in that way, then the Kingdom of God will continue and grow.



"But if we think that every church has to last forever, we will try to do everything we can to keep it alive artificially, and that's not good. We find fruitfulness most often in the small, not the large. Growing larger does not seem to be the key. Massive attendance is not the key. Even counting churches has been something that I have to do, but I don't enjoy doing. And I don't do it very well."¹²

¹⁰ I suggest a new set of ABCs.. authenticity, belonging, cultivating Christ.

¹¹ Elizabeth O'Connor, *Call to Commitment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

¹² Neil Cole, "Organic Church." Interview at www.next-wave.org Nov. 2005, #83

In *Decoding the Church* Howard Snyder argues that the apostolic nature of the church is clearly represented in Jesus' announcement of His ministry in Luke 4. His agenda is to turn the world upside down. Jesus, the Most High Lord of all the Universe, is not interested in sitting on a distant throne and being praised, but comes to bring good news to the lowly and the poor. God is incarnate among us as one of the common people. He empties Himself of power and privilege and steps down from a place of safety to a place of chaos and risk. He gets involved in our mess. Dallas Willard writes,

So we must see from our heart that:
Blessed are the physically repulsive,
Blessed are those who smell bad,
The twisted, misshapen, deformed,
The too big, too little, too loud,
The bald, the fat, and the old-
For they are all riotously celebrated in the party of Jesus.¹³

Following in the footsteps of Jesus means living on the edge. He hung out with the despised and marginalized. God stepped down in the world.

Incarnation as a paradigm for the people of God brings us closer to praxis and to actually following in the footsteps of Jesus. Serving the poor is concrete action, not abstract concept. It is done or not done. Snyder quotes from an old Methodist author:

"Two fundamental claims about the nature of the true church are made here: First, that preaching the gospel to the poor is an identifying mark of the church -- part of its essential DNA. Second, that this mark is a test of whether the church is genuinely apostolic -- is the church walking in the steps of Jesus? Whoever ministers the good news among the poor "is in the true succession. He walks as Christ walked," Benjamin Roberts observed (1823-1893).¹⁴

In the west the missional character of God's people has been sorely neglected in favor of attractional and homogeneous models. Reggie McNeal comments that "the North American church has lost its influence at this critical juncture. It has lost its influence because it lost its identity. It lost its identity because it lost its mission."¹⁵ McNeal continues,

The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom. The church is the bride of Christ. Its union with him is designed for reproduction, the growth of the kingdom. Jesus did not teach his disciples to pray, "Thy church come." The kingdom is the destination. In its

¹³ Dallas Willard. *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: Harpercollins, 1998) 123

¹⁴ Howard Snyder, *Decoding the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002) 21

¹⁵ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002) 115

institutional existence the church abandoned its real identity and reason for existence.¹⁶

Similarly, James Brownson points out that it is our very *sent-ness* that defines our identity as the people of God.

"The sending of the Son expresses something basic about God: that God wants to be known. God's mission is to know and be known. Eternal life consists in knowing God, and Jesus Christ whom God sent (17:3). It is in Christ preeminently that we discover this—that God wants to be known, and it is central to Christ's mission that the world know this about God—that God is the one who sent Jesus.

"To be fully united to God's mission is to be fully united to God. And it is this unity in mission to which the disciples are also invited.

"Jesus' union with God flows from his fulfilling the mission which God gives to him (17:4)—when Jesus is united to God's mission, he is united to God; in the same way, the union of the disciples with Jesus and with God flows from their completing the work which he gives them to do. (17:18 "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." And 20:21 "As the Father sent me, so I send you.") And that work which the disciples are to fulfill is centrally to be the new community – to love each other as Jesus loved them (13:34-35).¹⁷

If our *sent-ness* as a people expresses our unity with the Father, and our *rootedness* in culture expresses our identification with Jesus in His incarnation, then we need the empowerment of the Spirit of God to establish a redemptive presence. We need an identity which is imaginatively rooted in people, and expressed in mobility and flexibility, and not in the image of fixed and immobile buildings or temples. We need paradigms for exiles rather than for settled communities. We are a people on the move with God. As Darrel Guder put it, "We have the responsibility and the capacity, through the Holy Spirit, to shape ourselves for faithful witness. Our purpose defines our organizational structures - which means that our mission challenges us to re-form our structures so that we can be faithful in our witness."¹⁸



¹⁶ Ibid., 70

¹⁷ James V. Brownson. *The God Who Sent Jesus*. From "Gospel in Our Culture Network" www.gocn.org

¹⁸ Darrel Guder, Ed. *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998) 240

Sign, Sacrament and Symbol

*But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint--
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self surrender...*¹⁹

Jesus IS the good news, and He came preaching "the kingdom of God." References to the Gospel from many sources are reductionistic, as though the Gospel can be compressed into three or four points, or dualistic, as if personal salvation can be separated from the advent of God's healing reign in the world.²⁰ George Hunsberger comments that the verbs we use to describe God's reign, like *extend* or *build*, contrast with the New Testament verbs of *receive* and *enter*²¹, and thus point to a different kind of relationship between God's people and His reign.²² Dallas Willard represents the dualistic perspective as "the gospel of sin management." Willard comments,

"..the Gospel is not that Jesus died on the cross for your sins so you can go to heaven when you die, but that the Gospel that Jesus preached was the Gospel of the Kingdom. When you say this to people they look at you like you're insane. 'Of course the Gospel is that you can go to heaven when you die', they say. But the Gospel isn't a one-time event, it's a daily participation with Christ in the Kingdom life."²³

Moreover, the church has sometimes been identified with God's reign, thus short circuiting the *missio dei* in favor of church growth. Rather the church is *spawned by* the reign of God and directed toward it. The *ekklesia* is a sign and a foretaste of the *basiliea*, and an agent and instrument of God's reign.²⁴

The Church itself, then, is not the heart of the Gospel, and is not the good news. The good news is Jesus and Him crucified and resurrected. Jesus lives in His people. The good news has become something mysterious and relational. Perhaps this is why the images that Jesus often uses are things that work subversively.. like leaven in a lump. They are things that are necessary, but are often best when un-noticed.. like salt on food or a lamp. The point of the lamp is to enable us to see something else.

¹⁹ T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," V. *Four Quartets* (New York: Harpercollins, 1984)

²⁰ See Robert Bellah, 1992. *Habits of the Heart*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

²¹ Guder, *Ibid.*, 93-94

²² In this vein see also Jacques Ellul, *The False Presence of the Kingdom*. New York, NY: Fortress Press, 1971.

²³ Dallas Willard. 2004. "Stepping Into Community." Interview in *Relevant Magazine*.

www.relevantmagazine.com

²⁴ Guder. *Op Cit.* p.98-101

But there is more to these metaphors. Leaven collected in a jar and not applied to dough is useless. Salt must be dispersed in food in order to add savor. A lamp must be uncovered in order for its light to penetrate the darkness and illumine the world. The Church must be poured out, sprinkled liberally, must seep into the cracks and crevices of culture in order to be the Presence of God.

We have turned the original symbol on its head. Instead of people coming to a central, fixed Temple, the Presence of God goes out to the people. Instead of a symbol for an attractational gospel, we have a symbol for an incarnational gospel. We have a symbol for mystery, mobility, and cultural engagement... a symbol for Presence. We are the Temple of God and we carry His Presence in the world.

The Presence we carry is a sacramental Presence. The paradox of Presence is that it is rarely as it appears to be. The outward signs we typically associate with the *ekklesia* have nothing whatever to do with it. Buildings are a cultural expression that have little to do with life. Sunday events cannot represent the power or significance of Presence, and God may show up in spite of us. The paradox of Presence is captured best in Jesus Himself.. His true nature was veiled in flesh. He walked among us as a servant, in weakness and hiddenness.



He had no office, no title, and it would seem, no earthly possessions. Even those closest to Him were confused by the obscurity of His being (recall the Baptist's question as to his identity).

"Come." Original artwork by Rik Berry

The Westminster Confession of faith defines a sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. With the rise of the Enlightenment and Queen Reason, the possibility of a trans-empirical epistemology became increasingly absent; the world was distanced from God, and transcendence and immanence grew further apart. The world was desacralized.. and split into realms of sacred (heaven, the angels and the numinous) and the secular (the world of earth and humankind). Creation became mere nature: the realm where we work and play, not the realm of God's caring and immanent providence.

This split empowered the industrial age and the abuse of God's world. We lost more than the arts.. we lost our soul. We forgot that we participate in redemption in this world of sails and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings. We forgot that getting down in the muck and getting dirty in real life was the very stuff of creation.. God scooping out a handful of dust and breathing life into it. Later it was the stuff of redemption.. Jesus born in a cave, squalling in straw amidst the smells of mold and cow manure, then working thirty years as a carpenter in a dusty country at the edge of the civilized world. We lost the ability to perceive God at work in culture... we lost the ability to see and hear Him at work in ordinary ways around us.

Annie Dillard, on being asked to write a paragraph for Life magazine on, of all things, 'the meaning of life', came up with this: "We are here to abet Creation and to witness it, to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed . . . so that Creation need not play to an empty house." (source unknown).

*A man may look on glass --
On it may stay his eye --
Or, if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.* George Herbert

Could it be that the grace of God comes to us in ordinary and surprising ways? Could God speak in the smile of a child, the song of a bird? The recovery of this way of seeing may hold more promise than we know. It may offer a way out of the polarized debate over the inspiration of Scripture.. it may offer a way to embrace a new wholeness in our living, and new possibilities for cultural engagement. Ultimately, it may offer us a more whole way of knowing ourselves, God, and our world.

We carry the Presence in a mystery. We are not what we were; what we shall be is not yet obvious. The Presence shines through cracked pots. At times it seems to shine *because* the pots are cracked, as Leonard Cohen expressed:

*Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering,
There's a crack in everything..
That's how the light gets in..* *Anthem, 1992*

Or out...

A Corporate Identity

Furthermore, this Presence is a corporate reality. How is that possible?

After writing yesterday on *ekklesia*, I found myself remembering the nature of the [hologram](#).

"To make a hologram, the object to be photographed is first bathed in the light of a laser beam. Then a second laser beam is bounced off the reflected light of the first and the resulting interference pattern (the area where the two laser beams co-mingle) is captured on film. When the film is developed, it looks like a meaningless swirl of light and dark lines. But as soon as the developed film is illuminated by another laser beam, a three-dimensional image of the original object appears.

"The three-dimensionality of such images is not the only remarkable characteristic of holograms. If a hologram of a rose is cut in half and then illuminated by a laser, each half will still be found to contain the entire image of the rose. Indeed, even if the halves are divided again, each snippet of film will always be found to contain a smaller but intact version of the original image. Unlike normal photographs, every part of a hologram contains all the information possessed by the whole."²⁵

While the complete image can be found in the individual parts, only the entire image contains depth. Place one image component of the hologram under a microscope and there is the whole image.. but no longer 3d, now it is flat. It no longer exists in three dimensional space. Similarly, together we make up the body of Christ. Separately, we represent Jesus.. but not in His fullness. To extend the metaphor, we also need the broader community.. historical, and worldwide.. to perceive clearly. What we have in many nations and in individual groups is limited, often akin to group-think. In order to recover the gospel we need to hear from Nigeria, Brazil, Romania, France.. from Methodists, Pentecostals, Baptists, Catholics, Orthodox.. from believers past and present.

Spiritual formation is God's work in creating a new community – a living Temple - of His loving presence in the world.

Place

"I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them, under the wind-rent clouds, upstream and down.

²⁵ Michael Talbot, "The Universe as a Hologram," Online <http://twm.co.nz/hologram.html>

Simone Weil says simply, 'Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love.'²⁶

How does "place" relate to Presence? We face a possible paradox as we consider God's mighty acts among His people in the Old Testament, and the transition to a dispersed and fleshly Presence in the New Testament. Why did God choose to dwell in a fixed location in Jerusalem? Why the elaborate instructions for tabernacle furnishings and Temple worship in the Old Testament?

Place is important. Eugene Peterson writes,

The first account of creation opens with "In the beginning... God created the heavens and the earth." The second account reverses the pairing, putting earth first in place; all the action takes place in a single location on earth, a garden.

The place is defined as a garden as opposed to a wilderness. A garden implies limitations and boundaries and intention. It is not a limitless "everywhere" or "anywhere"; it is local: "The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the East" (Gen. 2:8).

Everything that the Creator God does in forming us humans is done in place. It follows from this that since we are his creatures and can hardly escape the conditions of our making, for us everything that has to do with God is also in place. All living is local: this land, this neighborhood, these trees and streets and houses, this work, these people."²⁷

Place is important because in the Creator's world we always encounter God in a context. Place is itself part of the *means* of the Gospel; a channel through which can flow living water. And place is part of the *message* of the Gospel; we encounter the truth most deeply when words and symbols connect. But symbolic language is always rooted. We only understand symbols within a particular cultural milieu. So Jesus comes to Jews as a Jew, and a first century male Jew at that. He acts in powerful symbolic ways: he cleanses the temple, sits down to teach, speaks with a woman at a well. He tells stories that

But any given culture, like any given symbol, only contains some of the truth. No earthly culture can hold all there is of God. No theological vocabulary can express all the truth. John Franke writes that, "Reformed theology is always reforming according to the word of God in order to bear witness to the eternal truth of the gospel in the context of an ever-changing world characterized by a variety of cultural settings: *theologia reformata et semper reformanda*." Similarly Karl Barth (Evangelical Theology) argues that we must always begin

²⁶ Annie Dillard, from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974)

²⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005) 71.

anew. All our discourse, like language itself, is relativized in view of the overwhelming reality of God.

The problem arises when we get stuck in one place: whether a given theology, or a given means of expressing our understanding of the Gospel. We begin to think we alone possess the truth, and the truth we know is expressed like this (we have always done it this way!) We forget that we do not hold the truth: rather, we are upheld by it. The Truth holds us.

This is why mobility is important. God always has more to say, more of Himself to reveal. He bids us follow Him into the future. The cloud begins to move. The forms that best communicate the Gospel in our generation will not be the forms that worked in the last generation. Moreover, the last generation didn't get it all right. The old culture both informed.. and formed.. the Gospel. The new generation must do theological work in order to sift truth from error, and then revise their practice accordingly. We must always begin anew.

Place, it now becomes obvious, is not just a physical setting. Place is both physical, and mental and cultural. Place is important, even critical, but always relative.

Implications



If I am correct that spiritual formation is about community and Presence, a human and fleshly presence of shaped, living and broken stones that become the Presence of God, then much of what has passed for discipleship and spiritual formation has only been a pale reflection of God's design. But if spiritual formation has not been spiritual formation, then it has been founded on a limited ecclesiology and a truncated

Christology. The implications I want to consider are these:

- * *there is a gospel that is not the gospel*
- * *leadership is first a contemplative movement*
- * *The paradox of God in Christ -- both untamed -- and vulnerable*
- * *the way we use physical spaces*

1. The Gospel that is not the Gospel

Scot McKnight writes that, "the gospel comes to create the order designed by God — a kingdom order, an ecclesial order, a practicing Pentecost order. The gospel is more than the

resolution of judicial bankruptcy, though it is that. It is designed to restore *Eikons* to their former and intended glory so they will be in union with God and communion with others, for the good of others and the world." ([Jesus Creed](#))

Having just read James Fowler "[Union with Christ](#)," I was struck by that quote this morning. We have so spiritualized the concept of union that we have almost completely obliterated its original meaning. Fowler does some fine work in unpacking our history of language and interpretation around the phrase.

If what we see around us is congregations rather than communities.. if we see organizations which mostly limit the earthly expression of the movement Jesus died to birth... then we are witnessing the natural outcome of a gospel that is not the Gospel.

The true Gospel produces what God intended - authentic and faithful communities of Jesus apprentices who are impacting their world. If what we see around us is not that.. then it is an expression of a gospel that is not the Gospel. We have McChurch because we have been eating McGospel.. the low nutrition, high fat version for popular consumption.

2. Leadership as a Contemplative Movement

We tend to associate leadership with visibility, and activity. In yesterdays world this was particularly true.. to lead is to influence, to move and to cause movement, to facilitate change.

But in the new world that won't cut it. Too much activity, particularly that on the part of leaders, was shaped because there was a drive to succeed.. a need to be successful.. a hunger to be seen as effective, to feed the ego. But the biggest egos are usually fed at the expense of others. In the new world that kind of oppression is seen for what it is.. self-serving, manipulative, oppressive. As we clearly see that kind of activity as the antithesis of Christ's kingdom, we are waiting for a new kind of leadership.. one that is essentially spiritual.



Tonight I watched as my wife sat down on the couch. Within minutes of her resting her body there, one of our cats came and curled up on

her lap. There is something irresistibly hospitable about a warm and restful person.

When I intentionally seek quiet and restful space, I encounter the Spirit of God. When we separate ourselves from busyness and distraction, He comes to brood over us. In that place of shared rest I have nothing to prove, no one to influence, no way to "succeed" except to be loved. Restful people become a welcoming place for the Spirit of God, and in turn can offer peace and rest to others.

The only way forward to a new kind of church is to become people of restfulness and contemplation. So long as we are driven to bring change, driven to be effective, we will only recreate the driven, oppressive, addictive and compulsive systems we have always known.

The greatest hope of influencing change is not our compulsive activity to shape a world different than the one we know, but to become the change we seek. That means becoming still.. risking the quiet and empty spaces... It means facing our own fears that there will be no one to offer approval.. no voice in the silence.. no one to clap us on the backs to say "well done." I doubt if there is any greater challenge for an active people, any greater challenge for those who are passionate to see change, any greater challenge for those called to lead. But the only way we will see lasting change is if we become the answer we seek.

Furthermore, we need leaders who take the life of Jesus seriously. He was willing to be hidden and obscure, willing to embrace insecurity and step down in the world. As Mark Strom put it,

Paul would not allow any human system or convention to hedge the communities against the risks of working out what it meant to live by the dying and rising of Christ. Such security would only throw the community back on their own resources and reinforce individual and communal boasting.... Paul urged leaders to imitate his personal example of how the message of Jesus inverted status... He refused to show favoritism towards individuals or *ekklesiai*. The gospel offered him rights, but he refused them.²⁸

Similarly, Richard Quebedeaux writes that, "Because the very foundations of American society, including the family, are crumbling, we MUST seek and find strong leaders. But we need a new kind of leader - beyond the celebrity, beyond the pragmatist - to show us the

²⁸ Mark Strom. *Reframing Our Conversation with Paul* (Colorado Springs, CO: IVP, 2000.)

way to the abundant life, the good life that God originally intended for his children and still longs for us to have." He continues,

"No medium or method of conveying the Christian gospel can meet people's basic needs for recognition, involvement, worthiness, growth, and indeed salvation itself without the loving give and take of person-to-person interaction over a long period of time. This is what community really means, and this is exactly where popular religion and its leaders are not successful.

"In a secular society, in a world where homelessness is the norm, the only way religion can really be "successful" is to provide a home for the homeless -- a family that includes not just my kind of people, but God's kind of people, who love him with everything they have, and who love their neighbor as much as they love themselves. The church does need to become God's ideal family, both in word and in deed."²⁹

3. The Untamed and Vulnerable Presence

*Do not trust in deceptive words, saying,
 "This is the Temple of the Lord; the Temple of the Lord!"
 But if you will truly amend your deeds,
 If you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor,
 If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow,
 And do not shed innocent blood, nor walk after other gods.."* Jeremiah 7: 4-6



We must be cautious not to equate forms with divine approval and divine Presence. We can worship all day on Sunday and still not be the people God desires. Even a gathering of believers does not equate to Presence *ex opera operato*. There is no formula that can bring God among us. We have to get on our knees and confess that *we are not in control of Him. It is His kingdom and He remains completely sovereign and free*. Moreover, he connects the promise of His Presence repeatedly to justice and mercy. Annie Dillard asks,

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."³⁰

²⁹ Richard Quebedeaux. *By What Authority: the Rise of Personality Cults in American Christianity* (HarperCollins, 1982) 182-183.

³⁰ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1985)

Step One: I am powerless to bring the Presence of God. He is God and I am not.

In our fallen humanity we continually seek for a system of control, or a place of complete security. We want to know that we are okay. This need has led to a truncated "health and wealth" gospel of sin management, just as it has supported a new clericalism and Temple based worship. This fundamental failure of faith arises because we run from our weakness and become addicted to control, and forget that each day we must submit anew to the Lord. As Jacques Ellul put it,

Our God is a God of beginnings. There is in him no redundancy or circularity. Thus, if his church wants to be faithful to his revelation, it will be completely mobile, fluid, renascent, bubbling, creative, inventive, adventurous, and imaginative.³¹

Similarly, Scott Peck writes,

Many people are either unwilling or unable to suffer the pain of giving up the outgrown which needs to be forsaken. Consequently they cling, often forever, to their old patterns of thinking and behaving, thus failing to negotiate any crisis, to truly grow up and to experience the joyful sense of rebirth that accompanies the successful transition into greater maturity.³²

The challenge is to break our addiction to the culture, even our addiction to cultural forms. The recovery movement has taught us how to break free from addiction. We need supportive communities, friends who will hold our feet to the fire, love and encourage us as we seek to live out the disciplines of a crucified life. Gordon Cosby of the Church of the Savior, remarks:

"Most of us are living, to some degree, as addicted persons, striving anxiously after power and money and prestige and relevance, trapped in the turbulence of wanting more. These addictions are so subtle for most of us that we have the illusion of being free people when in actuality we are immersed in society's expectations.... We forget that Jesus, 'though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.'³³

Imagine the change that Jesus knew in emptying Himself of power, position and privilege. Imagine His real descent from glory and light into the world of darkness and dust. Talk about culture shock! David's world was not so neat and tidy as our own. In Ps. 44 he writes,

³¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967)

³² Scott Peck, source unknown.

³³ Gordon Cosby. Interview in *Cutting Edge Magazine*, Jeff Bailey. Vol.6, No.2, Spring, 2002.

*Get up, God! Are you going to sleep all day?
Wake up! Don't you care what happens to us?
Why do you bury your face in the pillow?
Why pretend things are just fine with us?
And here we are – flat on our faces in the dirt,
held down with a boot on our necks.
Get up and come to our rescue..
If you love us so much, Help us! (The Message)*

So Walter Brueggemann responds, in *The Message of the Psalms*,

It is no wonder that the church has avoided these Psalms. They lead us into dangerous acknowledgement of how life really is. They lead us into the unthinkable presence of God where everything is not polite and civil. They cause us to think unthinkable thoughts and utter unutterable words. Perhaps worst, they lead us away from the comfortable religious claims of modernity in which everything is managed and controlled.³⁴

The role of leadership, as always, is critical. We need a new kind of leader, unconcerned about issues of marketing and structural maintenance and focused instead on discipleship and transformation, faithfulness, brotherhood and authenticity. We need leaders who are willing to admit they lack certainty, but who trust in God's fidelity. Walter Brueggemann comments that,

"We all have a hunger for certitude, and the problem is that the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity... fidelity is a relational category and certitude is a flat, mechanical category. So we have to acknowledge our thirst for certitude and then recognize that if you had all the certitudes in the world it would not make the quality of your life any better because what we must have is fidelity."³⁵

If we can admit that we are not in control, we might be willing to allow God His freedom. Having taken this first step, we may find ourselves on the path to a deeper experience of God in His grace. According to Bill Buker epistemological shift involves three critical dimensions: ³⁶

- * an ability to embrace paradox;
- * an inner quality of humility leading to surrender;
- * the willingness to grieve the loss of the previous world and previous identity

³⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1984)

³⁵ Walter Brueggemann, quoted at the Emergent Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, September 16, 2004.

³⁶ Bill Buker, "Spirituality and the Epistemology of Systems Theory." *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 2003. Vol.31, No.2, 143-153

According to Paul true strength is found in weakness. Much of civil religion, the religion of the Empire, is militaristic because we do not really trust that God is in control. Consequently, we are more ready to embrace a gospel of prosperity, a triumphal gospel, and neglect a gospel of the Cross. We are less likely to see the humility and poverty of Jesus.

But if we do not know Jesus as a humble servant, neither will we become His apprentices in the world. The triumphal church and the crucified body are typically separated, and the ordinary, day by day living that makes us apprentices in ordinary, humble ways is neglected in favor of a comfortable Gnosticism.

4. The Way we use physical spaces

Denying the importance of physical space is mere Docetism, another false spirituality that neglects the meaning of the incarnation. The question, therefore, is not whether we need physical spaces or not, but for what purpose? How are they best employed, and what kind of spaces do we need?

If we begin with God's purposes in the world, then buildings must fall somewhere under a Kingdom agenda. Buildings should further the purposes of God in His reconciling and redeeming purpose, to reconcile all things to Himself through Christ. How can buildings serve Kingdom purposes?

Again context becomes important, and "the medium is the message."³⁷ What medium best conveys the essence of the gospel of redemption and transformation? How does the particular culture relate to the sacred? Are lights and texture important? Does beauty count? Is diversity important? What kinds of music will express our understanding of God's kingdom?

If the spiritual life is a rhythm of inward movement and outward movement, then our physical spaces should acknowledge that rhythm. We should be less interested in building club houses and more interested in shared space. Can a building even symbolize mobility rather than entrenchment? There are many writers documenting the use of public or shared

³⁷ Frost and Hirsch, Op Cit., 146ff.

space for *ekklesial* mission and expression: Gibbs and Bolger,³⁸ Robert Webber, Frost and Hirsch and others.

Buildings easily become a distraction and a snare. Many faith communities can attest to the transition from rented space to large buildings, the loss of a dynamic of spirit-shaped life, the increased investment of power and authority in a smaller number of people, the disenfranchisement of the people and the loss of missional focus. Mortgages and buildings come with their own set of requirements and a community concerned with Presence church will carefully consider the cost in more than dollars.

Conclusion

A few weeks ago I was visiting with a friend, walking in an old apple orchard in the fading winter light. As we talked, he quoted parts of John 17 from memory.

"As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.

The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me." John 17: 18-23

Ekklesia is the Presence of Jesus in the world, and we are the carriers of the Presence; bearers of the Incarnation. United to Him, we carry the living Presence of Christ.

A working description of the church includes for me this mystery -- that we are united with God in love. Where we are present in Him, and attending to the Holy Spirit, God is Present.

What does it mean to be fully present to another? How are we present to God and at the same time present to another? What does it mean to live with this duality of attention? How

³⁸ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002); Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) see also "Mission Shaped Church," (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

do we carry an inner conversation into the living dynamic of every external conversation?
This is a Trinitarian call that requires a life time of living to understand.

Where Jesus is sent, we are sent. In the way Jesus was sent, we are sent. James Brownson writes, "To be fully united to God's mission is to be fully united to God. And it is this unity in mission to which the disciples are also invited."³⁹ Where the Body is, the new future is already breaking into the world. The Presence of the age to come is manifest in the power of the Holy Spirit.. the force that moves us to mission in the first place.

³⁹ Brownson, Ibid.

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