Toward a Theology of Public Presence

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> **"The current church culture in NA is on life support. It is living off the work, money and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty five and older) or when the remaining three fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both..."**
> **"A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost their faith. They are leaving to preserve their faith."[1]**

When the Titanic hit an iceberg on April 15, 1912 she was the largest floating object ever built. She represented the state of the art in ocean liners... she was fast, luxurious, and unsinkable. It was the latter claim that would be severely tested on that cold, clear night.

Similarly, western Christendom has been sailing along under full steam for most of the last century, and has made some remarkable progress. In the late sixties signs of stress began to appear. It seemed relatively easy to make course corrections, and it wasn't long before large ministries were booming, following the model of the most successful seeker-sensitive ministries like Saddleback and Willow Creek.

Unfortunately, the western church hit the iceberg, and the lifeboats, far too few, are being launched. Since 1991 the population in the United States has grown by 15%. During that same period of time the number of adults who do not attend church has grown from 38 million to 75 million... a 92% increase![2] This in spite of the fact that nearly 4 out of 5 evangelical pastors identify discipleship and evangelism as their top priorities.[3] We are seeing a new *diaspora* and facing incredible challenges of translation. Our models are no longer working, but perhaps the Lord is engineering a reconnect with culture and we need to find ways to join Him in His work.

"Christianity started out in Palestine as a fellowship. Then it moved to Greece and became a philosophy, then it went to Rome and became an institution, and then it went to Europe and became a government. Finally it came to America where we made it an enterprise." [4]

What kind of presence in the world is a redemptive presence? How do God's Presence and His immanence relate to our existence as a community of believers? Do we even need a theology of presence?

How did we come to choose an attractional model over an incarnational one? Is it true, as Winston Churchill opined, that "we create our buildings then our buildings create us?" What are the implications of that statement in terms of the future viability of the Christian movement?

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[1] Reggie McNeal. *The Present Future* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003) 1

[2] The Barna Group, *The Barna Update*, May, 2004. www.barna.org Barna defines people as unchurched if they have not attended a Christian church service during the past six months, other than for special events such as weddings or funerals.

[3] Barna, State of the Church 2005

[4] Richard Halverson, while he was US Senate Chaplain. Source Unknown.

These questions arise for me for a variety of reasons. In September a friend mailed me a copy of an article penned by Andrew at OpenSourceTheology.net. That article was "Toward a Theology of Public Presence." I liked Andrew's direction very much. Because our own small community is moving in this direction outside of the walls of the fortress church, I decided to expand on his thoughts, and then invite others into a conversation around the subject.

First, why do we need such a theology? Because for the most part, in Christendom we abandoned our role to carry the gospel to the world. Yes, we taught the word in our churches and lived something like a Christ life with one another, but mostly our light was hid under a lamp stand in our buildings and meetings. We chose an attractional model over an incarnational one. We chose invitation over infiltration and justified that model theologically.

The problem is so serious that Reggie McNeal writes, "all the effort to fix the church misses the point. You can build the perfect church--and they still won't come. People are not looking for a great church… The age in which institutional religion holds appeal is passing away."[5]

Is a non-institutional form of church possible?[6] What would it mean to be the church without buildings? Or perhaps we need to ask "what kind of spaces can serve God's purpose?" How can we create spaces that are neutral and invitational? How do we rediscover a missional center, and connect with and serve our neighborhoods? How do we get the church into the world? What does it mean to follow Jesus example of emptying Himself and living among the people? Brian McLaren writes,

> **One of the greatest enemies of evangelism is the church as social club; it sucks Christians out of their neighborhoods, clubs, workplaces, schools, and other social networks and isolates them in a religious ghetto.[7]**

Second, granted the need of such reflection, what is the biblical anchor? Does one begin with Genesis and "the Spirit of God hover[ing] over the water," or in the book of Exodus where the Lord says to Moses, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you shalom" (33:14). Or maybe we start in the New Testament, with the eternal Presence of the Word, who then takes flesh and dwells (literally, "tabernacles") among us? The foundation of the incarnation may be more familiar, but the image used in John 1 hearkens back to the Old Testament and the presence of God in the tent of meeting.

N T Wright makes the connection for us in a sermon titled, "New Law, New Temple, New World." Wright notes that the story Luke relates in Acts 2 is a very Jewish story, connected to Israel's history and worship of Yahweh. Pentecost is a fulfillment of the Law. More significant for our purpose here, Pentecost pictures the Lord coming back to fill the Temple. Wright relates,

> **The Temple seemed a place of memory and imagination rather than the vivid reality spoken of by the prophets.**
>
> **But now Luke, telling the story of the day of Pentecost, tells it in terms that would awaken these old stories of God filling the Temple with his glorious presence. .. And Luke, writing the story, wants us to think: this is the glory of the Lord coming back to**

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[5] Op Cit., p.10

[6] See this related post on my blog.

[7] Brian McLaren. "The Strategy We Pursue." A Paper presented to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association for the 2004 roundtable. Online http://bgc.gospelcom.net/ise/RT2004/ 14.

> **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! . . .**
>
> **For the early Christian, Torah and Temple had come together in Jesus himself, as the gospels tell us in a hundred different ways; and now, by the Spirit, they came together, under the sovereignty of the ascended Jesus, in the persons and community of the surprised early Christians themselves. What Luke is saying, so big a point that we might indeed miss it as we play around with different types of religious experience, is that with Pentecost the one true and living God, the creator of heaven and earth, has come to live in and amongst those who believe in Jesus, constituting them, together and even individually, as living Temples, as people on whose hearts the Law has now been inscribed.[8]**

So perhaps it's not unwise to begin a consideration of public presence in the Gospels and in Acts itself, the story of Jesus earthly life dwelling among His people, and then the continuing story as the first disciples of Yahweh begin to walk out the implications of Jesus life, death and resurrection and the in-breaking of the new age of the Spirit. What we will pursue is a kingdom theology and an incarnational praxis. As we begin I recall the questions Andrew raised in his original presentation.

> **On what basis can the church, which in many respects has found itself to be *persona non grata* in the brave, new post-Christian world, expect to reconnect with society, make friends again, win respect, gain a hearing? How should we exist, where do we position ourselves, what mode of being community should we adopt in order to be effective as the people of God in the world? And as we dig through these issues, we come to another layer: What do we mean by 'salvation'? What is it for the world to be 'blessed'?[9]**

The Gospel of the Kingdom

> ***Hospitality is not part of the Gospel; hospitality IS the Gospel.*** **Henri Nouwen[10]**

What is the good news? Jesus IS the good news, and He came preaching "the kingdom of God." We hear little of that theology from most pulpits, but we hear much about the church and its programs. References to the Gospel are often reductionistic, as though the Gospel can be compressed into three or four points, or Gnostic, as though personal salvation can be separated from the advent of God's healing reign in the world.[11] 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*[12], and thus point to a different kind of relationship between God's people and His reign. 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**

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[8] N T Wright, A sermon at the Eucharist on the Feast of Pentecost, June 8 2003

[9] Andrew at http://www.opensourcetheology.net Jan 30, 2004.

[10] Henri Nouwen. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1975)

[11] See Bellah, Robert. *Habits of the Heart* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992)

[12] Darrel L Guder, Ed. *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 93-94

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."[13]

Moreover, the church has sometimes been too closely identified with God's reign, equated with the kingdom of God, 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 an *effect* of God's kingdom, a sign and a foretaste of it, and an agent and instrument of God's reign.[14]

Sadly, our concept of salvation has narrowed from the center of a plan that is cosmic in scope to mean life insurance. The Greek word for salvation is *sodzo*, meaning both "to heal" and "to save." The Hebrew word was *shalom.* Shalom means good health, happiness and peace, justice and right relationships. It means eating the fruit of one's own vine in safety and health. It means caring for one's neighbor. It encompasses the individual, the community, God and creation. It is much, much more than life insurance and a remedy for guilt.

Similarly, the Cross is much more than atonement, it is identification. And the Cross is much more than an ending, it is the beginning of a new kingdom and a new community. Norman Kraus argues 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. The Spirit empowered God's people to love, both inwardly in community and outward, into mission. The Good News brings forth a new people living together in a new way under God's reign. The most incisive definition of the kingdom of God is "creation healed," all creation reconnected to the life of God, restored to relationship with Him in wholeness and truth.

Above all, the Gospel is for the marginalized. Jesus definitive statement about His ministry (Luke 4) is that He is anointed "to bring good news to the poor; to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives…"

Two Mandates, or One?

Church people think about how to bring the world into the church.
Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. [15]

The first mandate is the creation mandate, given in Genesis 1:26-28. Men and women are stewards of the creation, and as such are called to "tend the garden," to care for the world God has created. We are also called to work in God's creation, to become sub-creators under Christ and to provide for our families and for the needy. Work itself is good and Christians must accept God's proclamation of the creation as "very good." (The Incarnation is God's ultimate "Yes" to creation and the physical world.)

After the first mandate came the fall: people were alienated from God, from their fellow creatures, from themselves and from the creation. Instead of harmony there was violence; instead of love, manipulation and domination. Failure to keep the first commandment resulted in God's plan for restoration through the New Creation mandate, commonly called the Great Commission*. What we commonly misunderstand is that the intention of the second mandate is to restore the first*.

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[13] Dallas Willard. From an interview in Relevant Magazine. www.relevantmagazine.com 2004.
[14] George Hunsberger, "Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in Guder, Op Cit. 98-101
[15] Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1983)

Evangelism has as its goal the reconciliation of the whole person to God, to neighbor and to the environment. Rather than intending to create religious people, God's intention is to make us fully human.

> ***We are not human beings having a spiritual experience;.***
> ***We are spiritual beings having a human experience.*** [16]

The Good News announces that what is impossible without God is possible in Christ. Walking with God we can participate joyfully in His life in the world. We can fulfill our calling to "make disciples, teaching them ALL . . . " (Mtt.28:20). To obey ALL is much more than merely sharing the good news. The context of this command is that all authority has been given to Jesus, the King, Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. In discovering how He uses His power we can determine how His followers ought to act.

The first chapter of Ephesians outlines God's plan, which is cosmic in scope. Ephesians 1:10 states that His view is to "an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth."

The word for administration is *oikonomia*, found in our modern English word "economy." The Greek word is composed of two roots, *oikos* for house and *nomos*, for law or order. In the ancient world a steward was an *oikonomos,* one who planned and executed the administration of his master's household.

In the Old Testament God's house is wherever He chooses to make Himself known. (The word for "house" in Hebrew is "beth." "Bethel" is "temple" or "God's house.") 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 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**

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[16] Attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

> **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.** [17]

God's future is among God's people. As a people we are commissioned, 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.*** [18]

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.

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.[19] 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.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus means living on the edge. He doesn't seem to have spent much time in meetings. 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).** [20]

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." [21] **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

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[17] Alan Roxburgh, "What Do I Mean by Leadership?" Online http://www.allelon.org
[18] Jim Wallis, *Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982)
[19] Howard Synder, *Decoding the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002)
[20] Ibid. 21
[21] McNeal, Op Cit., 115

pray, "Thy church come." The kingdom is the destination. In its institutional existence the church abandoned its real identity and reason for existence.[22]

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.**
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> **"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.**
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> **"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).[23]**

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, as Walter Brueggemann has expressed it, 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. [24]**

Key Narratives for Public Presence

There are many Scripture passages which should anchor a theology of public presence. The passages I choose are Exodus 33, John 1, John 4, Philippians 2, Matthew 5:13-16.

> **Exodus 33: 13-16 "Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in your sight, show me your way, that I may know you and that I may find grace in your sight. And consider that this nation is your people."**
>
> **"And He said, My Presence will go with you, and I will give you peace."**
>
> **"Then he said to Him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. For how will it be known that your people and I have found grace in your sight, except you go with us."**

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[22] Ibid., 70
[23] James V. Brownson. *The God Who Sent Jesus.* Online http://www.gocn.org
[24] Guder, "The Particular Community," Op Cit., 240

This passage tells the story of Moses meeting with God. It is God's Presence that will define Israel's identity. Israel will be defined by their God, and God in turn will make Himself known through His people.

What is peculiar about the story is that Moses asks for full revelation, but receives only partial revelation. God's face remains hidden. Much earlier in the story we saw a similar situation, where Moses asked for God's name, but was given only a promise of Presence: "I AM WHO I AM" or "I will be there as who I am."

God reveals, but remains hidden. He preserves His freedom in being and action; He is not co-opted by His people or in their power. He is defined as much by His absence as by His presence, by His transcendence as well as His immanence.[25]

> **John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish." The Message**
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> **Phil.2:5-8 "Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God, but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave: becoming human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process." [26]**

These are the classic incarnational and kenotic passages. The Word became flesh and lived among us. He emptied Himself of position, privilege, comfort and safety and closed the distance to join in solidarity with humankind. He shared our food and our experiences and offered all up to God in glory. As the church fathers declare, Jesus forever sanctified ordinary life by being an ordinary human being.

> **Matthew 5:13-16 "Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.**
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> **"Here's another way of putting it. You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light-stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven." [27]**

This passage contains the classic metaphors of salt and light. These were two of the most basic needs of human culture, if not human life, in the ancient near east, coming only after food and water. Salt is meant to be spread over food to give it flavor, but it was also used as a preservative for meat and fish. It is useless when stored in jars: its sole function is to be mixed with food to season or preserve.

In his original article Andrew wrote, "If you pour a bottle of red ink into the sea, it will become 'present' but it will also very quickly lose its distinctiveness as red ink. A theology of public presence will also need to establish some boundaries." A bit later we'll talk about bounded versus centered sets,

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[25] Classically this movement is captured by the apophatic and kataphatic traditions. A good treatment is offered in Belden Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (Oxford University, Press, 1998). See also Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God.*

[26] Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1993)

[27] Ibid.

but in the meantime this question pushes us to think a little more about the use of salt. Once we use it, it's gone, right? Let's consider the metaphor first in the context of David Bohm's "Implicate Order."

> **"In the 1960s Bohm began to take a closer look at the notion of order. One day he saw a device on a television program that immediately fired his imagination. It consisted of two concentric glass cylinders, the space between them being filled with glycerin, a highly viscous fluid. If a droplet of ink is placed in the fluid and the outer cylinder is turned, the droplet is drawn out into a thread that eventually becomes so thin that it disappears from view; the ink particles are enfolded into the glycerin. But if the cylinder is then turned in the opposite direction, the thread-form reappears and rebecomes a droplet; the droplet is enfolded again. Bohm realized that when the ink was diffused through the glycerin it was not a state of "disorder" but possessed a hidden, or nonmanifest, order. [28]**

The good news is that the salt of Presence may have more power than we thought. The bad news is that we have relied heavily on predictability, efficiency and control to plan outcomes, particularly missional ones.[29] Our structures are useless unless they are energized by God. There are too many factors, like Spirit, beyond our control. Any structures of presence that we build may be temporary. This requires fluidity and a certain level of comfort with chaos. "The wind blows where it will." Our goal is to create space for presence and for spiritual conversations – we can't build in any more effective clear outcomes. Structures may be temporary, may morph or die, while relationships are likely to last.

We serve the sovereign Lord. It is He who is in control – we are not. We are bearers of the Spirit, and God's purpose is for us to be truly with and among the lost for His sake .. bearers of good news. The thread that disappears yet retains its distinctiveness calls us to a deep ecclesiology. We have lagged in our understanding because we forgot that some of the most "real" things can't be measured.. faith, hope and love... and that the Church is first and foremost a creation of the Spirit.

So much for salt. Light, on the other hand, is something different. Light is effective when it does not draw attention to itself, but illumines something else. The two metaphors of salt and light share this in common: they are working most effectively when hardly noticed at all. Yet.. they are meant to be pervasive. .. a paradox.

> **John 4 Jesus and the woman at Jacob's well**
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> **20.. tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?"**
> **21"Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither here at this mountain nor there in Jerusalem. 22You worship guessing in the dark; we Jews worship in the clear light of day. God's way of salvation is made available through the Jews.**
> **23But the time is coming--it has, in fact, come--when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter.**
> **"It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. 24God is sheer being itself--Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration."**
> **25The woman said, "I don't know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we'll get the whole story."**
> **26"I am he," said Jesus. "You don't have to wait any longer or look any further."**

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[28] David Bohm. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 48.

[29] See especially Margaret Wheatley, "Beyond Command and Control," In *Leader to Leader*, No. 5, Summer, 1997.

[27]Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked. They couldn't believe he was talking with that kind of a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.
[28]The woman took the hint and left. In her confusion she left her water pot. Back in the village she told the people, [29]"Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?" [30]And they went out to see for themselves.
[31]In the meantime, the disciples pressed him, "Rabbi, eat. Aren't you going to eat?"
[32]He told them, "I have food to eat you know nothing about."
[33]The disciples were puzzled. "Who could have brought him food?"
[34]Jesus said, "The food that keeps me going is that I do the will of the One who sent me, finishing the work he started. [35]As you look around right now, wouldn't you say that in about four months it will be time to harvest? Well, I'm telling you to open your eyes and take a good look at what's right in front of you. These Samaritan fields are ripe. It's harvest time!"

John 4 is perhaps one of the most striking stories in the gospels. Jesus is in a public place, breaking religious rules by talking to a woman and a Samaritan, and he is clearly declaring that worship has nothing to do with place but solely to do with an inner transaction of the spirit. He then states that this is the way of things henceforward. Worship is about life.

The question, then, is how best to illumine the darkness? How best to season life around us, and how best to preserve the good in the world? What would it mean to give up privilege or position or comfort for the sake of the gospel? How can we best embody the gospel in a way that brings light and life, that flavors our culture and preserves its best features? If we follow Jesus example, we would be doing this in very public ways, ways that might even cause our own disciples to question our example. All this because "the harvest is ripe!"

Incarnational or Attractional?

The only statistic I can ever remember is that if all the people who go to sleep in church were laid end to end they would be a lot more comfortable. —attributed to Queen Victoria

An incarnational paradigm requires public presence. Frost and Hirsch find four characteristics of the incarnation. It involved,

- **Identification**
- **locality**
- **the Beyond in-the-midst**
- **the Human image of God**

They argue that "incarnational mission implies a real and abiding presence among a group of people," and that "incarnational mission implies a sending impulse rather than an extractional one."[30] To Frost and Hirsch incarnational mission means that "people will get to experience Jesus on the inside of their culture's meaning systems."[31]

Frost and Hirsch then proceed to contrast the attractional church with the incarnational one. They use the analogy of the single fishing rod with a single hook to describe the attractional method, versus the use of nets in the middle east. The strength of the nets is key. Nets depend less on the weather or the

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[30] See also Simon Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighborhood*
[31] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub. 2003)

ability of an individual fisherman, and whatever is swimming by is caught. The chapter then moves to a discussion of Paul Hiebert's classic "centered set" versus "bounded set" using the analogy of wells versus fences.

> **"The church bids people come and hear the gospel in the holy confines of the church and its community. This seems so natural to us after seventeen centuries of Christendom, but at what price and to what avail have we allowed it to continue? If our actions imply that God is only really present in official church activities – worship, Bible studies, Christian youth meetings, ladies fellowships – then it follows that mission and evangelism simply involve inviting people to church related meetings."[32]**

A fence is "a bounded set," a mechanism to determine who is in and who is out. But a well is a centered set. Fencing the enormous expanses of the Australian outback simply isn't possible. Instead, a farmer sinks a well to create a precious supply of water. It is assumed that livestock will stray, but never wander too far from the well.

There are many implications for this conception, and the authors apply it first to evangelism. In the bounded set evangelism is seen as getting people into the religious zone. In the centered set the goal is not to just "present" Christ in one fell swoop but to get people to begin the search. The centered set approach only works when grounded in an incarnational mode.

> **The centered set ... is like the Outback ranch with the wellspring at its center. It has very strong ideology at the center but no boundaries. It is hard at the center, soft at the edges. We suggest that in the centered set lies a real clue to the structuring of missional communities in the emerging culture.**
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> **"The traditional church makes it quite difficult for people to negotiate its maze of cultural, theological, and social barriers in order to get "in.".. and by the time newcomers have scaled the fences built around the church, they are so socialized as churchgoers that they are not likely to be able to maintain their connection with the social groupings they came from...**
>
> **"We propose a better and more biblical way.. is to ... sink wells. If you sustain your connection with the water sources, you will find a whole host of people relating to Jesus from different walks of life. We allow people to come to Jesus from any direction and from any distance. The Person of Jesus stands.. at the center." [33]**

The authors propose two metaphors as a way of leading so-called "millennials," that of herding cats and leading horses to water. Cats are impossible to herd; they are rugged individualists. But put down a dish of food when they are hungry and they will come to it. It is said that you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink; the authors argue that if you first give the horse salt it will drink. Their conclusion: cultivate hunger and thirst, and provide the right kind of food.

Frost and Hirsch also relate a number of examples of incarnational efforts. One of their examples comes by way of the movie *Chocolat*. Here is their take on the movie.

> **The film is set in a small French village completely dominated by an austere, overbearing form of Catholicism as championed by the intimidating mayor, the Comte de Reynaud (Alfred Molina). The Comte is a controlling and frightening character, and the whole town lives tinder a blanket of fear and uncertainty.**

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[32] Ibid. 41
[33] Ibid. 208

Into this austere, gray community comes a woman called Vianne.. It is her foolhardy intention to open a chocolaterie in this sad town.. and just as the season of Lent is beginning. The townsfolk are to deny themselves certain pleasures as an act of contrition and devotion to Christ. Her store is soon stocked with the most decadent and exotic chocolate creations ever seen. She and the Comte are headed for a showdown over the souls of the village people. We see the Comte and the stone Catholic church that stands in the middle of the town square as symbolizing the Christendom-attractional mode. It has positioned itself in the center of things and demands allegiance and attendance. Vianne and the chocolaterie, on the other hand, represent the missional-incarnational church. She is positioned at the edge of the community in an old disused patisserie. Instead of worrying about soiling her chocolates, she sets about building friendships with the community. She creates what resembles the web or net of friendships. She has an astonishing knack for guessing each potential customer's favorite chocolate. And she prescribes certain chocolate remedies to mend the townfolk's ills.

Vianne's chocolaterie is our vision of an incarnational church. She is warm, non-judgmental and compassionate, offering grace and peace to the troubled community. Her shop is a haven, but she doesn't simply wait for people to enter. *She* engages the lives and troubles other community and offers practical help as well as space for honesty and truth telling to happen. She celebrates life, good food, loud laughter, love, romance, storytelling, fantasy, and imagination. Like Jesus, Vianne has collected the outcasts, the misfits, and created a veritable feast in their honor. In a telling moment of truth the parish priest, Father Henri, admits that the town has "measured goodness by who we exclude."[34]

Physical examples of public presence efforts include Ecclesiax in Ottawa (www.ecclesiax.com) and ALLELON in Eagle, Idaho (www.allelon.org) . Neither are these efforts divorced from the real world of economics and oppression. Joseph in Ottawa writes,

"We are partnering with Fair Trade Coffee networks so people in third world countries make a fair wage, their HQ is moving into our building now. The Ottawa school of drama asked if they could use our facility to help kids learn poetry and gain confidence on stage during the weekdays when building used to be pretty much empty…I am saying yes to their request (358 students from my community involved in that). We have the highest population of fine artists in Ottawa within 7 minutes walk of our building. No brainer…we gutted a large chunk of it and turned it into an art gallery. Artists are coming in and saying there is no way you guys are a church because churches have treated me like crap… We tell them yup, we are a church and we are sorry for the way you have been treated. Welcome, use our space. We launch our first major art show this November with Canadian scupltor Bruce Garner.

One other thing we have started to do is run arts empowerment programs for kids… The kids we are really trying to bring in are the ones who are forgotten on the other side of the tracks. … the poor kids whose single parents don't have the time or money to enroll them in anything. This building belongs to them too." [35]

Immanence and Transcendence: the Cadences of Presence

Public presence suggests immanence. In reality, we will need a profound awareness of God's transcendence.

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[34] Ibid. 61
[35] Private correspondence, February, 2004.

Immanence and transcendence find their meeting point in Jesus, true God incarnate and walking among us. Isaiah 40 and 41 both picture the comfort and tenderness of God as they reflect immediately on His sovereign power and transcendence. It is *because* God is transcendent, free and powerful that He can be present with us.

Walter Brueggemann remarks that what we see in our western culture is a religion of immanence, always a feature of a civil and static religion. The other two features are the economics of affluence and the politics of oppression. [36]

He finds these features in the transition of Israel from a theocracy to a monarchy, and in particular in the transition from David's rule to Solomon's, where God and the temple become a part of the royal landscape, in which the sovereignty of God is fully subordinated to the purpose of the king. From this point forward God is "on call" and access to him is controlled by the royal court. Brueggemann sees this as the final and deadly state of affairs after a long slide downward from the radical Mosaic vision of freedom and justice.[37]

The social purpose of a really transcendent God is "to have a court of appeal against the highest courts and orders of society around us..." A second implication is the rebirth of hope for the future. Royal reality overpowers the dimension of hope and the place of imagination. When a nation (or a church) establishes a comfortable and static rule, the last thing they want is people with new ideas to shake things up. And in terms of the economics of affluence, you don't want people delaying gratification in favor of some future hope, you want them seeking pleasure in the eternal now.

The result of all that pleasure is that, "in place of passion comes satiation." Brueggemann argues that one of the reasons we lose passion is precisely due to our success at achieving comfort and security. He states that, "Passion as the capacity and readiness to care and suffer, to die and to feel, is the enemy of imperial reality."

We are in the same royal tradition, which Brueggemann summarizes in three points:

- **Economics of affluence in which we are so well off that our pain is not noticed**
- **Politics of oppression in which the cries of the marginal are not heard or are dismissed as the noises of kooks or traitors**
- **Religion of immanence and accessibility in which God is so present that his abrasiveness and absence are not noticed but are reduced to psychology**

How bizarre that the founder of our movement was crucified because he was a threat to the establishment, and then his movement itself became the means that anchored and protected that same establishment!

While the hegemony of Christendom left us with this legacy, our withdrawal into enclaves has occasioned a similar loss. Whatever it was we preserved in our safe fortresses, we lost our immersion

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[36] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001) 30.

[37] Some of the evidence Brueggemann gives in favor of this perspective on an oppressive rule by Solomon is the presence of a harem, the establishment of tax districts, an elaborate bureaucracy, a standing army, a fascination with wisdom, and conscripted labor.

in God and His redemptive purposes. As a result, we lost our identity as God's sent people. Like Israel, we became comfortable in the land and surrendered to idolatry. But salt that is stored up is useless..

Transcendence and immanence find their unity in the *missio Dei*. Paulo Suess offers,

> **The *missio Dei* model is for Christians initially about the presence and, at the same time, the transcendence of God. No creature has ever seen God (John 5:37; 6:46). Jesus' mission is precisely due to his own seeing, his authoritative testimony (John 3:11). The tension between God's transcendence, on the one hand, and God's presence in the world, on the other, draws our attention to the question of the mediating divine presence. *Missio Dei* is the theological concept that allows us to speak of both - the presence and transcendence of God.[38]**

Our rediscovery and renewed partnership with God through public presence may allow us to recover transcendence even as we incarnate the Gospel.

Perhaps we have lacked an overt confidence in the Spirit of God that is truly a missional confidence. Perhaps we have not risked immersion in our culture because our identity in Christ was not clearly appropriated. Perhaps we were not moved by compassion for the marginalized. Perhaps we lacked a missional spirituality because we weren't very spiritual in the first place.

It will help to rediscover a biblical understanding of sanctity rooted in the everyday life. Frost and Hirsch recount some of the work done by Jewish thinkers Heschel and Buber:

> **.. there are effectively only two realities in the world: the holy And the not-yet-holy, and that the missional task of God's people is to make the not-yet-holy into that which is holy. This is done by the directing of the deed toward God (and not away from Him) and by the level of intentionality and holiness with which we perform our daily tasks. It is important to note that any and every deed, no matter how seemingly profane or trivial, can become a place of holiness when performed with the right intention and with the appropriate holy direction.**

And while we are on the path of discovery, we need to recover a practical theology of the Holy Spirit, who empowers our journey into the world.[39] Transcendence, after all, is a facet of divinity. The One who is "wholly other" is the One who became incarnate in our world and ascended to the right hand of the Father, from where "He gave gifts to men" (Eph. 4). It is our deep hope that our presence will mediate His Presence, that He may "draw all men to Himself."

Missional Spirituality

My generation, those of us in our late forties and fifties, was raised in the Temple with Temple spirituality. At the center of our collective lives was a building: settled, immobile, and with predictable

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[38] Paulo Suess. *Missio Dei and the Project of Jesus. A* Paper presented for the Willingen Consultation, WCC 1999. Could a sacramental lens help us hold the immanence and transcendence of God together, and give us both a concrete symbol and a concrete practice to anchor our spirituality in the real world? Could it be that the loss of a sacramental perspective has only reinforced a dualistic worldview which has further enforced privatism and individualistic praxis? Robert Bellah makes this case in his article "Religion and the Shape of National Culture." In *America*. New York: Jul 31-Aug 7, 1999.Vol.181, Issue 3.

[39] See in particular the work of Amos Yong, "Discerning the Spirit(s) in the World of Religions." Yong argues convincingly that must move from a consideration of Christology and the soteriological question to a Spirit-Christology and consideration of the ontological question. How is the Spirit active and present in surrounding culture? In Stackhouse, No *Other Gods Before Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

forms. It was a spirituality of the center, where religious life was influential and expected. It was a spirituality for the familiar places, well-traveled paths and a way of life that was not strongly in contrast to the dominant culture. It had an established priesthood, mostly well trained professionals who did the spiritual work for us. The priests dominated the action.

Our own spirituality, formed in part in passivity as large audiences, was primarily personal and inward, and its outward expression was secondary. Furthermore, with buildings as "sacred spaces," we lived in a dualistic world. Sunday was the holy day, and the physical world was less real than the spiritual one.

When Christianity moves from the center to the margins we have moved from temple to text, says Walter Brueggemann[40]. Those who recognize the irrelevance of Temple spirituality recognize at the same time the increased relevance of Scripture, and the increased need for a strong spiritual life. They have discovered that the Temple priests don't have the answers. As a result, exiles stop looking outside themselves, and dig deeper within. They learn a new dependence on the Spirit and the Word.

For all this change we need a spirituality of the road, a missional spirituality[41]. This is a spirituality that is self-authorizing, decentralized, sacramental, personal, creative and incarnational. It is a spirituality for the road.

A number of years ago I discovered Jean Vanier. Jean is the founder of the l'Arche communities, places of hospitality and safety where mentally challenged people live in community with others who have "normal" abilities. The purpose of these communities is simply to love "the least of these" as if they were Jesus. Vanier has written much about community and growth, but of all his writings this passage communicates the heart of his message:

> **The mission of a community is to give life to others, that is to say, to transmit new hope and new meaning to them. Mission is revealing to others their fundamental beauty, value and importance in the universe, their capacity to love, to grow and to do beautiful things and to meet God. Mission is transmitting to people a new inner freedom and hope; it is unlocking the doors of their being so that new energies can flow; it is taking away from their shoulders the terrible yoke of guilt and fear. To give life to people is to reveal to them that they are loved just as they are by God, with the mixture of good and evil, light and darkness that is in them; that the stone in front of their tomb in which all the dirt of their lives has been hidden can be rolled away. They are forgiven; they can live in freedom. [42]**

This passage presents a heady ideal. Yet the vision is sound, and comes from someone who has lived it. Jesus never said that the path to the kingdom would be easy; He simply promised us His Presence along the way: "I will be with you always," an echo of Yahweh's words to Moses.

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[40] Walter Brueggemann. *Cadences of Home* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1997) 108. Brueggemann writes, "While we may find wilderness-exile models less congenial, there is no biblical evidence that the God of the Bible cringes at the prospect of this community being one of wilderness and exile. Indeed this God resisted the temple in any case (cf. 2 Sam. 7:4-7). In the end, it is God and not the Babylonians who terminated the temple project. In the face of that possible eventuality in our own time and circumstances, the ways for the survival of an alternative imagination in an alternative community call for new strategies."

[41] See my longer treatment of this subject under "Articles" at http://www.nextreformation.com .

[42] Jean Vanier. *Community and Growth* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1989)

There is a second author whose writings about love and transformation are profoundly significant for incarnational efforts: Henri Nouwen. His most pertinent works are *Reaching Out, The Way of the Heart*, and *Lifesigns*. In *Reaching Out*, Nouwen writes about hospitality in these words:

> **The mystery of love is that it protects and respects the aloneness of the other and creates the free space where he can convert his loneliness into a solitude that can be shared. In this solitude we can strengthen each other by mutual respect, by careful consideration of each other's individuality, by an obedient distance from each other's privacy and by a reverent understanding of the sacredness of the human heart. In this solitude we encourage each other to enter into the silence of our innermost being and discover there the voice that calls us beyond the limits of human togetherness to a new communion. In this solitude we can slowly become aware of a presence of him who embraces friends and lovers and offers us the freedom to love each other, because he first loved us.[43]**

May the public spaces we create be so filled with the Presence of Christ in our presence that they become places of such communion. Amen!

[43] Nouwen, Op Cit. 30