

Panel on “Is Jesus’ Proclamation in Luke 4 our Proclamation?”
How our Christian traditions understand evangelism
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Today, the most crucial challenge facing the Reformed Church in America, and I would think, most denominations in the United States, is how we can make the transition from being a “settled denomination” to becoming a “missional church.” The proclamation of Jesus in Luke 4 is an appropriate place to begin, for this where he announces his mission and initiates his ministry. Shortly after this he calls those who follow to join in God’s mission.

Mission is about being sent. A simple definition is this: Mission means crossing boundaries in Word and deed with the love of God known in Jesus Christ. When Jesus sent out the disciples on their first mission, his instruction was to “proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” Mission always calls the followers of Jesus to join God’s work in the world. Within this call to mission, we understand evangelism. Through Jesus Christ, the Spirit is active as the redeeming, transforming power of God. Individual lives are transformed—persons are converted—through the power of the Gospel. Communities of faith are created and empowered to bear witness to the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. And societies experience the healing, reconciling, transforming power of God’s love. Further, they are confronted with God’s intentions for the world.

Shortly after Jesus’ message in Luke 4, the disciples are sent out to other villages with the assurance that God was at work there, and they would participate in the emergence of God’s kingdom. There was a new way to live, where enemies were loved, where outcasts were embraced, where forgiveness destroyed ancient social and religious barriers, and where illness and demonic possession were healed through the active power of God. Physical healing was the tangible sign of an emerging kingdom that opened life to God’s intentions for humanity.

Mission, then, is the faithful response of those who follow Jesus to join God’s work in the world. Even more, it is the participation of God’s people in the life of the Trinity. Crucial to this task is evangelism. But this takes place, and is understood, within the broader, biblical call to mission.

This understanding, I think, gets us beyond the awkward dichotomy between evangelism and social action, and the discussion of how they relate and which takes priority. A more helpful starting point, and I would argue a more biblical one, how we are being sent by God to follow Christ in mission. So the Spirit empowers and shapes the church “to be the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world,” to use words that come from the RCA’s Statement of Mission and Vision.

The early church, it seems to me, knew and lived out of this missional identity. In an alien culture its very life was a testimony to what God’s power could do. People were transformed through the power demonstrated and then experienced in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they were called into the community that lived as his body. They gathered, they were centered spiritually in their new identity, and they were sent. To Antioch, to Ephesus, to Rome, to the utter most parts of the earth.

A new social reality was being created, overcoming the racial, cultural, gender, and economic divisions of that society. The church, those called by God, was intentionally, and continually, crossing boundaries in Word and deed to share the love of God known in Jesus Christ. Mission defined the church’s identity.

It is this missional identity that the church must recover today to anchor its life, to empower its evangelism, and to seek its future.

Like other denominations, we're in the midst of this journey. It's hard because so much draws the focus of congregations and denominational structures inward, rather than outward. One only need read MarthaGay Reese's recent and insightful study of evangelism in mainline denominational churches to see the challenges we face. Changes not just in structure, but more fundamentally in denominational culture are required. A focus on sustaining programs has to give way to the empowerment of people. The theology, organizational patterns, values, and norms that have under girded a "settled denomination" must be challenged by what it means to be a missional church within today's diversity cultures.

For us, for instance, this has fueled a fresh and compelling focus on starting new congregations—400—since this is clearly one of the most effective ways that the gospel can touch and transform the lives of those who are spiritually homeless. But in this journey, we don't think in linear terms about how the conversion of individuals through evangelism relates to work for justice and compassion in communities and then the broader values and structures that govern society. These don't happen sequentially. In other words, we didn't wait until enough people were converted to Christ before trying to pass the civil rights law. Rather, we recognize that social change, personal transformation, and prophetic witness are all intrinsic to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and intricately related to one another, in a complex, divine web of God's love and grace, active through the Spirit in our lives, in the church and in the world.

And when you listen to it, that's what Jesus' message in Luke 4 sounds like. Making Jesus' proclamation our own would enliven the work of evangelism in our call to move from living as a settled denomination to becoming a missional church.