

SESSION THREE: EXTREME MAKEOVER—A KINGDOM APPROACH TO MISSION

by Phil Grotenhuis

Surrounding Brokenness

BROTHERS, IT'S GOOD to be back with you again and talk with you about church planting. I'd like to begin this second presentation by directing your attention to an "epiphanal" moment I experienced recently. There was a time a few months ago when the brokenness around me really bothered me—a brokenness that I perceived in the church I pastor, in the evangelical churches around me, and in the secular culture.

I mentioned some instances of brokenness in our church in my last presentation and so I won't repeat it here. But in addition to the brokenness of my church I saw the brokenness of the evangelical churches around me.

The brokenness came in the form of a multiplicity of divorces, doctrinal ignorance, autonomous attitudes clothed in religious platitudes, non-existent ecclesiology, and silly phrases that betrayed a massive disconnect between doctrine and life. Perhaps you've heard such phrases as "It's a God thing" or "Let God flow through you" or "Lord, we just invite you into this room right now." Sloppy theology clothed in cheesy slogans.

The final straw was a brochure from a local evangelical church touting its latest sermon series on marriage and family. Such "relevant" and "real" and "life-changing" messages included "Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman" (marriage), "They Came from Outer Space" (children), and, "Creature From the Cash Lagoon" (finances).

All I could think was, "This isn't grace against nature. This certainly isn't grace transforming nature. No, this is grace *alongside of* and *in addition to* nature. It's grace *baptizing* nature. Call it a superficial face-lift, and it's rife in evangelicalism, whether it relates to sermon series, worship, music, or tacky slogans.

Is it any wonder why there is the contention, according to a recent op-ed in the Dallas Morning News, that the recent evangelical resurgence in America is all show and no substance? According to this article, twenty-five percent of Americans refer to themselves as evangelicals and yet only seven percent embrace the fundamental tenets of the Apostles'

Creed. Ninety-three percent fail to worship regularly. The Southern Baptist convention, according to another survey, sees eighty-eight percent of its children leave the church after high school. Not good news.

These facts are quite a contrast to a recent interview I had with a local Assemblies of God seminary professor who claimed that the increasing demise of the evangelical church is overblown. "I'm constantly amazed at the continuing vibrancy of evangelicalism," was his reply.

But it wasn't just the prevailing evangelical atmosphere that bothered me. It was the prevailing secular culture. I saw brokenness all around me in rundown homes, mediocrity in appearance and attitude, an increasing, incremental, and open affection between members of the same sex, and the persistent reports on local TV concerning everything from meth busts to child sodomy.

The needs (and the cries) of the culture seemed overwhelming.

Rome Revisited

There's a fascinating book written by Peter Jones called "Capturing the Pagan Mind." Jones draws some very interesting parallels between our modern secular culture and the Roman Empire much like Edward Gibbons does in his book "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" and Francis Schaeffer in his book, "How Then Should We Live?"

Jones draws some interesting parallels between the Roman Empire and modern society in a number of important areas. He notes a desensitization to gore and violence, a devotion to entertainment, a promotion of feminism and an increasingly effeminate culture, the acceptance of homo-eroticism, pedophilia, freakishness in the arts, a breakdown in the family, a drop in birth rate, and other things.

Whether Chicago or New York or Springfield, the Roman beast is consuming its victims. And so, I pondered the brokenness around me and I remember feeling very *lonely*. Being a discerning Christian is hard enough. Being a *Reformed* Christian is harder still.

Rome: A Holistic Remedy

And so, I began to think about the solution to this ecclesiastical and cultural mess.

News columnist Rod Dreher strikes a defeatist note in this regard. He says that in an increasingly sensate culture the best we can do is "hole up." Dreher asserts, "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new Dark Ages which are already upon us."

Dreher hit me as rather retreatist and defeatist—especially in light of the Scripture's emphasis on God's sovereignty in his person (Psalm 2), his proclamation (Isaiah 55:8-11), and his plan (Matthew 16:18).

As far as the church's mission is concerned, the Bible provides a more *holistic* remedy to the ecclesiastical and cultural challenges of our day. And it's found in a *kingdom approach to church planting*.

The Kingdom and the Great Commission

The kingdom was not a foreign concept to me. It was taught here at this seminary. I also grew up with the term "kingdom" because my father taught at a Christian college that promoted a kingdom approach to all of culture and life. Abraham Kuyper loomed large. His *Pro Rege* legacy is captured in his own words, "There's not one square inch of all of created reality where Christ does not say, 'Mine. It belongs to me.'"

But the kingdom (as far as I remember) was not applied to the *great commission*. I heard a lot about the kingdom and the need to redeem culture, but I never heard about the kingdom as it related to mission. To put it another way, the kingdom was applied to the church's *cultural mandate* but not to its *mission mandate*.

Al Wolters has commented on this in an article he wrote four years ago. He noted:

I believe that in some important ways the work of missiologists like Leslie Newbinger, with his emphasis on the gospel as public truth can provide welcome support as well as a needed corrective to the neo-Calvinist tradition, at least as it has developed in the last generation or so. Integral to such a missiological approach is also the affirmation of the exclusive claims of Jesus as Savior, and the reminder that suffering is part of being a follower of Jesus Christ, that the gospel provokes opposition and ridicule.

As soon as we lose sight of the missional dimension of the Christian life, and become engaged in a drive for cultural transformation that lacks a vital connection with the person and cross of Jesus Christ, our talk of the "kingdom perspective" loses *authenticity, depth, and power*.

I think he's right and with this being said, I'd like to focus on what Wolters calls "the missional dimension of the Christian life," and in particular I'd like to focus on a *kingdom approach to mission*.

A Kingdom Approach to Mission

On a very basic level, when we talk about the kingdom we are talking about the rule of God over all of created reality (the kingdom of power—*regnum potentiae*) and especially the rule of God in the hearts of his people (the kingdom of grace—*regnum gratiae*). It has been said that the rule of God is not so much a place as a *power*—the power of God through his Word and Spirit to transform people and transfer them from the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of his light.

With this being said, the design of the kingdom is not simply to "save souls" but to transform people (make them new creatures in Christ), incorporate them into the church, equip and empower them through the

church's ministry to bear witness to the kingdom, and give them a fore-taste of heaven.

This "new existence" is intended to be *radical* and *holistic*.

Jesus gives us a taste of this in his hometown sermon in Luke 4. The content of this sermon is clearly demonstrated in his ministry. The blind see, the poor hear the gospel, the demonized are liberated, and people are put into their right minds. The kingdom rule of Christ impacts all of life—physically, spiritually, mentally, relationally.

The church is to model the kingdom and bear witness to the kingdom in its ministry. More specifically, the church is to model the kingdom and bear witness to the kingdom in both *Word* and *deed*.

The Message of the Kingdom

The New Testament is very clear about the calling of the church to preach the gospel of the kingdom as a key to the kingdom.

John the Baptist preached, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 3:2) Jesus preached, "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). Jesus said to his disciples, "I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities for I was sent for this purpose" (Mark 1:38). Jesus gave this commission to the disciples, "Go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of God is at hand'" (Matthew 10:7).

The Bible says that Philip went to Samaria to preach the good news of the kingdom (Acts 8:12). Paul entered synagogues and persuaded them about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8). The book of Acts ends with these words, "And he (Paul) stayed two years in rented quarters and preached the kingdom of God to all who came to him" (Acts 28:30,31).

Jesus is clear: the calling of the church is to preach the kingdom. We are to preach Jesus' birth as the arrival of the kingdom. We are to preach Jesus' ministry as the demonstration of the kingdom. We are to preach Jesus' death as the victory of the kingdom. We are to preach Jesus' resurrection as the guarantee of the kingdom. And we are to preach Pentecost as the empowerment of the kingdom.

In addition to this, the church is also to be the custodian of the kingdom through the faithful exercise of its offices and the proper administration of church discipline (Matthew 16:18, 19; & HC, Q & A 85).

The Life of the Kingdom

But the church is not only to bear witness to the kingdom in its preaching and be a custodian of the kingdom in its discipline, but it is also to be a compelling model of the kingdom in its *life*.

I cannot tell you how important the church's life is to its witness. By the church's life I'm talking about its relationships, its character, its compassion, its warmth, and its hospitality.

Acts 2:42-27 is very telling at this point. If you read this passage, you'll see that the early church was devoted to a Word and sacrament ministry, prayer, and spiritual fellowship. Accompanying all of these em-

phases was a selfless demonstration of neighbor love. As a result, the church gained favor with its surrounding culture and many attached themselves to it. The church truly was a vibrant and compelling witness to the kingdom. It was also a vibrant and compelling alternative to the culture.

These emphases really defined the character and ministry of the church.

During the 1950s Leslie Newbinger served in India and was accustomed to visiting small villages in order to preach the gospel. He would gather a small group of Christians and have them sit on the ground. Muslims and Hindus then would stand around them and listen ... and also *watch* the Christians closely. Newbinger said this:

I have always known that my words would only carry weight if those standing around could recognize in those who were seated that this was a *new community* which represented a new kind of body in which the old divisions of caste and education and temperament were being transcended in a new form of brotherhood. If they could not see anything of the kind, it's not likely they would believe.

Missiologist Harvey Conn recognized the need for the church not only to preach the kingdom but *model* the kingdom in its life. He put it like this:

The church as a counter-culture is really like a model home in a run-down neighborhood. We're a community who embraces the rule of Christ in every area of life. Christ then invites the world into that model home to take a look inside. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting neighbors to come inside and look around. "Come in," they say. "Hear what we believe. See how we live. See how the kingdom of God operates and get a taste of what the kingdom will be like in its fullness one day."

How many of us are part of churches that self-consciously attempt to model the kingdom in this way?

The Kingdom: An Honest Evaluation

It's my opinion that we need to work on this in Reformed circles. In some sectors of the Reformed ecclesiastical community there are imbalances that result in ongoing exoduses to broadly evangelical churches. Evangelical churches scratch them where they itch.

What imbalances am I talking about? The tendency to emphasize the doctrinal at the expense of the relational. The tendency to emphasize the institutional church at the expense of the organic life of the church. The tendency to emphasize the discipling ministry of the church over the seeking and enfolding ministry of the church. In some circles, there is the tendency to cultivate ethnic and relational ties at the expense of spiritual and confessional ties.

The result is that a holistic witness of church is seriously compromised.

The Kingdom: A Healthy Balance

At the church I pastor, we try (albeit imperfectly) to maintain a healthy balance in our ministry. We especially try to cultivate relationships with people inside the church *and* outside of the church. Numerous studies have shown that our individualistic and suspicious culture does not respond well to traditional methods of outreach—door-to-door contacts, tract distribution, media advertising, and mass revival meetings.

Most of the people who were once outside of our church came into our church through pre-existing relationships.

For instance, Alisia came in through Phil. Debra came in through Janie. Dan came in through Liz. Anna came in through Charlie. Denver came in through Matt. Michele and Randy came in through Shawn. Shawn came in through Brian. Dan J. and Ben came in through Carl ... and on and it goes. You get the picture.

We begin with the closest of relationships, namely the family. We then work out from there in concentric circles. Members (especially the newest of believers) are urged to invite friends, people at work, and people with whom they have casual and periodic relationships. Once they come, we do our best to unfold them into the church and nurture ties with others who have also come through pre-existing relationships.

The point is: Word and deed must go hand in hand. There must be vibrant and confessional preaching, but there must also be vibrant and meaningful relationships.

We see, of course, a perfect balance between Word and deed in the ministry of Jesus. He preached the kingdom, but he also *modeled* the kingdom. There's a telling point in the opening verses of Luke 15 where Jesus not only spoke with sinners, but also practiced table fellowship with them. He intentionally went to the "second tier" of relationships with them.

This is what we try to do at Springfield United Reformed Church. We try to get to the second or third tier of relationships. We want to go beyond a smile and what one man in Dutch Reformed circles termed as the "honeymoon handshake." We try to establish meaningful and ongoing relationships with them as a way of modeling the kingdom.

We do this in various ways. We do this through home hospitality, monthly church dinners, small group Bible studies and prayer times, and in the time we spend together before and after worship. We also train our people in relational evangelism and how to present the gospel within existing relationships.

This must *constantly* be brought before the people as an absolutely vital element of the church's ministry.

Kingdom Prayer

There's one other matter that I want to focus on and it's absolutely crucial to a kingdom approach to ministry and it's one that the early church devoted much time to and that is *prayer*.

Again, if we look at Acts 2:42 we see that the early church devoted itself to prayer. Elsewhere throughout the book of Acts we see a commitment to prayer. In fact, many significant advances in the early church were preceded by fervent and ongoing prayer—what one hymn writer called the Christian's "vital breath." The result? Mission.

Jesus, of course, calls us to pray, "Thy kingdom come." Q&A 123 of the Heidelberg Catechism notes the necessity of prayer for the preservation and increase of the church, the destruction of all powers that oppose the Word, and the ongoing advancement of the kingdom.

Prayer is a humble recognition that Christ builds his church and kingdom—not you and me. And yet, sadly ironic, isn't it, that prayer meetings are usually the least attended meetings in the church. Perhaps corporate prayer might become more thoroughly embraced if we had a self-conscious kingdom/missional approach to ministry.

I would like to add this. If you consistently bring a kingdom perspective and missional approach to the church's ministry, you *will* receive some resistance. I say this because a missional approach to ministry confronts a number of unsavory attitudes and practices such as: laziness, self-absorption, long-standing, myopic patterns of ministry, and, in some cases a long-standing preoccupation with extended family relationships. Rather than dissipating, these can actually become aggravated when the texture of the church begins to change due to the addition of newcomers.

And so, what are you to do?

You have to exercise pastoral wisdom and patience in this regard. You can't shove a missional approach down the throats of your people. People need to be loved. People need to be taught. And people need to *see* a kingdom approach to mission modeled by the leaders of the church. This takes time but it *must* be done if we are going to embody the kingdom and bear witness to the kingdom.

A Kingdom Approach to Ministry: Conclusion

Well, there's so much more that could be said, but I'd like to end with a few concluding comments.

When a church bears witness to the kingdom in Word and deed, a number of things happen.

First, there is *opposition*. Consider the ministry of Jesus. Consider the ministry of the early church. Consider any ministry today that takes the necessary risks of bearing witness to the kingdom of God. Satan never leaves such ministries alone. Never! And this shouldn't surprise us because the kingdom of light stands diametrically opposed to the kingdom of darkness.

Think of the contrasts in the gospels. Light versus darkness, joy versus sadness, freedom versus enslavement, compassion versus tyranny, pain versus healing, dissension versus communion, autonomy versus submission, agitation versus peace, perversion versus holiness.

Given such an antitheses, it is clear that we are at war, and our enemy will not go down to defeat without the most ardent of struggles.

Second, if the church bears witness to the kingdom in word and deed, there is *weariness*—both for pastor and congregation. If you are going to model Jesus' burden, preaching, prayer life, and table fellowship, you are going to regularly come into contact with messy people and messy situations and these are time-consuming and emotionally draining.

In many respects, a missional church is a hospital and if it's missional it'll receive a lot of patients who often don't give a lot back. Be prepared to see many of them come and go. If they stay, be prepared for high needs ministry. This "goes with the territory." But don't be discouraged. Bear in mind that God may use your ministry as a "stepping stone" to greater discernment and commitment down the road.

As a pastor of a newly formed church plant, I must remind myself of two core principles: first, Christ is enthroned and *he* builds his church and kingdom. Our calling is to be as faithful and obedient as possible as we bear witness to the kingdom in word and deed. Secondly, apart from periods of revival, the normal growth of the kingdom is slow and incremental and its progress is determined not only by the church's make-up but the culture which it confronts and serves. This is not to say that a church plant must not constantly be assessing itself. The church must *constantly* assess itself in order to ensure that it is not putting up any unnecessary roadblocks to its witness.

And *finally* this: If your church bears witness to the kingdom in word and deed, *it will bear fruit in God's time and in God's way*.

We have seen this in Springfield. People's lives have been transformed. Often this transformation occurs slowly and subtly. But the Grand Sculptor does his work as he chisels us into the new creatures he has destined us to be.

These kinds of changes "energize" a congregation and encourage them to not grow weary in doing good. It also gives them a vivid foretaste of the consummation of the kingdom and the marriage feast of the Lamb. The more a church devotes itself to an embodiment of and witness to the kingdom, the more it tastes of heaven, and, the more it anticipates the consummation of the kingdom. Indeed, the more it cries out, "Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!"