

Becoming Missiologically Minded

By Robert Hunt

Jesus told his disciples a story about the difference between a house built on rock and a house built on sand. You all know it, and remember the point. If we don't build our life and work on a solid foundation then finally it gets swept away. This is as true of the mission of the church as it is of any other aspect of our life together. What I want to do this morning is try and get us started thinking about mission on a really solid foundation - knowing that you all, as Volunteers in Mission, will finally be responsible for building the house - not just a physical house, but hopefully a spiritual community as well.

So let's begin with the basics. The church, that's us, is the Body of Christ. It carries out the mission of Christ. And the beginning of *missiology*, the study of mission, is asking, "What is the mission of Christ?" The answer to this question is found most directly and simply in the Gospel of Mark. We read in Mk 1:14 - 15: "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

These verses really aren't difficult to understand. Jesus comes to preach the good news, the gospel. That good news is that God's Kingdom, God's Reign, is near. Where we need to fill out some details is in understanding just what God's Reign is and how it will affect the lives of those it touches. You know, I'm sure, of the many parables of Jesus that speak about God's Reign. We won't study them all today. There is, however, one scripture passage in which Jesus makes it very clear just what God's Reign looks like. That passage is Luke 4:18 - 19. Jesus gets up in the synagogue and reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah. In that passage we find both a reference to "good news" and to the "Kingdom of God."

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

After Jesus reads this he says: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." This gives us a pretty good understanding of what the good news of God's Reign meant to Jesus. It meant an end to poverty, freedom, healing, and an end to oppression. Of course this isn't all that can be said about God's Reign. But it's a good start for missiology.

So that is the mission of Jesus. He proclaims the Good News that God's Reign is near, and that this reign means at the very least freedom, healing, reconciliation, and deliverance from poverty. But of course there is something else we find in the gospels. Jesus didn't just talk about the Reign of God. He did the reign of God. He didn't just talk about freedom, he set people free. He didn't just talk about healing, he healed people. He didn't just talk about reconciliation and deliverance, he reconciled and delivered people. No wonder the disciples of Jesus pretty quickly realized that Jesus didn't just preach the Good News. He *was* the Good News. When he was near, the Reign of God was near. That's why we read in Paul calls the Gospel the "Gospel of Christ" and when Peter preaches at the Temple in Acts chapter II he preaches a sermon about Jesus and how through Jesus people are saved. The good news about Jesus isn't different from the good news about the Reign of God. Jesus Christ is good news because in him the Reign of God becomes present for us as human beings. In him we are saved

Now what does that mean for us as missionaries? Well Jesus commanded his disciples - in Matthew 28 for example - to "go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Doing this is the way that the followers of Jesus carry on his work. He made disciples. Now the disciples need to make disciples. But what is a disciple? Let me put it to you simply. A disciple is one who takes up the task of Jesus proclaiming and living out the gospel. The disciple is one who does the work of the master. In all the gospels we find Jesus, even before his death and resurrection, sending out the disciples to preach what he preached and do what he did.

So we can come at mission from two directions, but we reach the same conclusion. As the church, the Body of Christ, we do the work of Christ. As disciples, as followers of Jesus, we do the work of Jesus. In both cases we must both proclaim the good news of God's Reign present in Jesus Christ and live out God's Reign through works of healing, reconciliation, freedom, and deliverance.

My fear is that at this point you all doing "duh!" As Volunteers in Mission this is what you signed up for, right? But it is a little more complicated - and that is why we all need to be engaged in some serious Bible study and theological reflection on mission.

Our specific problem, as Americans or generally as those who come from a European Christian background, is this idea of the Reign of God. By about 1200 years after Jesus Europe as a whole had converted to Christianity, and gradually the idea developed that Europe was "Christendom." It was the place where *in* the Church and *under* Christian political leaders God's Reign was being made manifest. The good news was that if you got close to Europe you were getting closer to the Reign of God. Five hundred years later Europe would become more outward looking, and would begin exporting its version of the Reign of God, bringing European civilization and religion to the rest of the world. Having thought of themselves for hundreds of years as "Christendom" it was pretty hard for European missionaries to distinguish between the Reign of God and their own churches and culture.

In America there was, of course, something a little different. In the New England area, all the way down to Rhode Island, America was being colonized by people who believed that Europe had become hopelessly corrupt from a religious point of view. So they were going to make a new start. They were going to build a New Jerusalem, a light to the nations, a city on the hill. Deep in our background as Americans is the ideal that America would somehow be a sign of God's Reign. It would be a nation of peace, justice, healing, reconciliation, and deliverance. Even if we have often failed to live up to that ideal, the idealism itself is deeply part of us as Americans. And that sometimes makes it hard for us to distinguish between the Reign of God and the reign of American culture and society.

And that is where missiological reflection comes in. As missionaries we must always be returning to scripture and studying the nature of this thing called the Reign of God. We need to constantly disentangle it from our own culture and lifestyle. We are free, but it is possible that not all our freedoms are the freedom that God offers in God's Reign. We have healing. But the healing that takes place in our hospitals doesn't fully represent the healing that God offers in God's Reign. We live in peace, yet that peace doesn't fully live up to the promise of God's *shalom*, God's peace that comes only with true justice. We are rich, but our riches are not always good news to the poor. So we need to know the difference. We need to know the difference between our nation and the Reign of God. Idealistic as we are, we need to constantly return to our ideals. We need to return to scripture, to the teaching of Jesus, to the life of Jesus, to learn what our ideals should be. We need to learn again what it means to be disciples. We need to read and study again all those parables of Jesus about the Reign of God. We need to know the difference between being a sheep and goat at the final judgment. Most of all, perhaps, *we need to free our understanding of God's Reign from our own wealth and power*, so that we can understand how Christians in many other lands can also

proclaim the Good News - and live it out. We need to grasp theologically how they, despite their poverty, are partners, and equal partners in the work of mission. For we must remember that when the first apostles walked down the streets of Jerusalem they were part of a deeply persecuted minority in an unjust land oppressed by foreign armies. They had none of our freedom, wealth, or power. They carried nothing more than the bright presence of the Spirit of Christ in their lives, yet they knew the gospel. They knew the power of God's Reign. And they could say what we are often powerless to say: "in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk."

Why should we be engaged in missiological reflection. *Because missiology is understanding how that is possible.*