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Evangelism class

Biblical and Theological Frames paper

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When it comes to identifying biblical and theological resources for congregational evangelism, my starting point is a “missional theology”. That is, I talk about God in a way that emphasizes God’s continuing work in the world (God’s mission), as it was lived out by Jesus and his disciples, and as it has been lived out since through the work of the Holy Spirit. From a Biblical perspective, this missional theology draws heavily upon the gospel of Luke. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus famously quotes Isaiah 61:1-2 to establish his identity and mission (all quotes are from the New Revised Standard Edition of the Bible):

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

As the Isaiah 61 passage that Jesus identifies himself with continues, this mission does not have the goal of withdrawal from the world, but instead goes out into the world with the good news for the transformation of our world *now*:

*“...to provide for those who mourn in Zion...They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall*

*repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.” (Isaiah 61:3-4)*

When considered in the context of evangelism, these passages illustrate that God’s mission is about bringing about new life to the world right where we are. As the apostle Paul puts it:

*“...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”*  
(2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

This stands in contrast to some popular approaches to evangelism, which assume that God ultimately hates the world and wishes to destroy it. Because of this, the good news is not about freeing the oppressed, or repairing the ruined cities, or reconciling the people of the world to God. This dispensationalist theology, instead, becomes a nearly futile “rescue operation” where a few chosen people are responsible for getting others to the escape hatch before God dispenses his destructive judgment and destroys the world. As we have seen, the mission of God that we are called to participate in is the declaration of “the year of the Lord’s favor”, not the pronouncement of another Noah-like flood.

The theological insights and practical approaches that came about from the evangelism practices of the early church can serve us well, as we attempt to understand God’s enduring mission today. Christians in the first few centuries lived in a profoundly

pluralistic world, and were legitimately threatened by the powers and principalities of their time. Today, as Christendom declines in the west, it is necessary for us to reclaim the teachings of this cloud of witnesses in order to communicate the gospel in a changing world.

Michael Green's *Evangelism in the Early Church* is an excellent resource to do this. As he writes, "There can be no doubt that it was the changed lifestyle of the early Christians which made such a deep impact upon classical antiquity". Green identifies three categories of a changed lifestyle that allowed Christians to demonstrate the transformational power of God, and to have integrity as they presented the gospel. These three categories were personal transformation, corporate transformation, and the ability to suffer and die for one's convictions.

In the ancient world, a world of many beliefs and many practices, it was the Christians who had their lives powerfully altered by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Individuals changed their ways, both by choice and by the healing nature of God. Communities shared life together in unparalleled ways, as unlikely people shared the love of Christ with each other in a way not seen in the Greek world. Both individuals and communities did so as they were opposed by the very real forces of hate, criticism, and persecution.

With the confidence of the Biblical witness to God's mission of reconciliation, and the testimony of those that have gone before us, the church today has a strong foundation for which to live out the good news of the gospel in our changing world.