

Core Value No. 2

Our dependence on God: We acknowledge our dependence on the Word and Spirit of God in all our endeavors. Thus we commit ourselves to the Word of God and Prayer.

The Word of God

The “Word of God” in Christian usage is a bit tricky to “get” because it’s a kind of code language that can have more than one meaning. St. John, in his Gospel, refers to Jesus as “the Word”, for example. **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** John 1: 1-3,14. So, in our opinion, the primary use of the expression “Word of God” refers to a person, and that person is Jesus.

A MAIN POINT:

The primary use of the expression “Word of God” refers to a person, and that person is Jesus.

The secondary use of the expression “Word of God” refers to the Holy Scriptures (the Bible) that were inspired by the Holy Spirit and written by rather ordinary people.

The Spirit of God

To say that we depend on the Word of God, then, is first of all, a statement about a relationship between persons rather than about a set of instructions or a collection of words, teachings or sayings. It means that the risen Christ Jesus is present to us and able to communicate directly with us. The most common way that he seems to do this is in the context of prayer and by means of the Holy Spirit. But who or what is the Holy Spirit? Paul’s letter to the Romans can be of help. Take a look at Romans 8: 9-11.

“You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but are in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus

from the dead is living in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.”

Paul later adds, **“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. By him we cry, “Abba, Father”. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”** Verses 14-16.

Theologians have written, debated and tried to explain the idea of the Trinity for centuries and we are not going to try to figure it all out in these pages. What is interesting to us, however, is how “fluid” Paul’s use of the word “Spirit” seems to be. In Romans 8: 9-11, Paul does not seem to be too concerned about carefully defining some sort of divisions between the persons of the Trinity. It does not seem to be about a formula, but more about a God who is known through spiritual means. He seems to use “the Spirit”, “the Spirit of God”, “the Spirit of Christ”, “Christ in you”, “the Spirit of him who raised Christ Jesus from the dead (living in you)” and “ the Spirit you received” rather interchangeably in this text. One is struck far more by the unity of God than by some clearly delineated “persons”, however theologically correct that may be. Further down, in verses 14-16, the whole thing is described as intensely personal. Through the Spirit, we cry, “Abba, Father” and there is a kind of joining of his Spirit with our spirit to confirm that we are his children. This is a “knowledge of the heart” that can be clearly experienced and deeply understood but not easily explained.

This presents us, however, with a problem. We human beings are easily deceived, sometimes all by ourselves and sometimes by others. We are justifiably nervous about folks that take off on all kinds of hare-brained schemes based on visions, dreams or “inner impulses”. This is where the secondary meaning of “Word of God” comes in. We don’t just react to impulses; we test such things by the Bible. And we don’t do it all by ourselves. We rely on the interpretation of the biblical texts and the guidance of the whole Body of Christ, the Church. This adds an objective check and balance to our subjective impressions. It doesn’t set aside or replace the inner direction of the Spirit of Christ, but it does provide a test of validity for those impressions. The Spirit of Christ who lives in us, for example, would not urge us to do something forbidden in Scripture.

STORIES AND SUCH:

Sirhan Sirhan had just been arrested for the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. At the time, his mother was living in Pasadena, California. Public rage was so high that she refused to answer her door and was afraid to set foot outside of her house. A local pastor gathered up some gardening tools and proceeded to cut her overgrown lawn. Seeing what he had done gave her the courage to invite him in to talk with her. This gave him the opportunity to be available to her for comfort and consolation. In this story, the Living Word, Jesus, prompted him to carry out an act of kindness. The written Word that states, “Love your enemy”, validated the source of his actions.

KEY VERSE:

“...The Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed (or “inspired”, in some translations) and is useful for teaching, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:15-17.

The Bible, then, is understood as the reliable record of God’s interaction with humankind and the only trustworthy guide to faith and conduct. Christians believe that God inspired and guided its writing. They also believe that as they read it, alone and/or in the company of the faithful, God’s own Spirit gives them insight into the concrete application of its teachings to life situations.

It is absolutely amazing that millions of people around the world – and across thousands of years – have picked up a Bible and used it to guide their connection with God. This leads us to one of the most interesting and enigmatic things that Jesus said. In John 6, Jesus was commenting on his teaching, “I am the bread that came down from heaven” (verse 42). He said, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (Verse 53) The disciples did not get what Jesus was trying to say and grumbled about it (verse 61), so Jesus explained, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit.” (Verse 62) Jesus’ words are Spirit? What about Jesus’ words as reported in Scripture? Or the rest of Scripture inspired by the Spirit of Christ? We will let you mull over these things, but they at least suggest that the Bible is no ordinary book.

This leads us, then, to a really good book about the central message of the Bible. Its title is Announcing the Kingdom; the Story of God’s Mission in the Bible by Arthur F. Glasser. Baker Academic, 2003. The book is actually the written form of a course taught by Dr. Glasser over many years in Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of World Mission, where he served as Dean. I took that course some years ago and it really helped me to pull a lot of loose strands together. Obviously, I would prefer that you skip this part and just read the book for yourself. But, short of that, I can at least give you a sense of what it is about.

The main point to the book is stated in the title for and the first sentence of Chapter One.

“The Whole Bible is a Missionary Book

The whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a missionary book, the revelation of God’s purpose and action in mission in human history.” (Page 17)

The rest of the book is an exposition and defense of this thesis. Glasser's book is arranged in a way that might remind you of systematic theology texts except that it is basically chronological rather than simply thematic and works straight through the whole Bible. One reviewer, Tom Steffen from Biola University put it well when he wrote, "Arthur Glasser's Announcing the Kingdom tackles three deficiencies in Christendom: the role of the Kingdom of God, the missional nature of Scripture and the integrative character of the sacred storybook from Genesis to Revelation." (Frontispiece) It's the "integrative character" that really strikes our attention. The Bible is all over the map with literary genre and rhetorical devices, but it all hangs together, and Glasser does a good job at showing us how. Ordinarily, we would never just copy out part of a table of contents, but the main headings clearly demonstrate how Glasser will show the integrated thematic structure of the 66 books.

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Part 6 God's Mission Extends to the End of Time

Here's what Paul Hiebert, the late and probably greatest missionary anthropologist of our day had to say in the introduction.

"... Arthur Glasser draws together the many strands of Scripture and gives us again a great vision of the unity of all history. He examines the themes of king and kingdom as these run through Scripture. He shows that all of Scripture points to the fact that God is a missionary God, that the church is to be a missionary community, and that God's people are to be missionary people. He shows us that mission is at the center of God's great plan, not only of redemption but also of creation. He reminds us that this mission is God's mission, that it is much bigger than the little worlds in which we minister, and that it includes not only the salvation of individuals and the redemption of the church but also the reestablishment of God's Kingdom of righteousness, peace and justice in a new heaven and a new earth. If we as God's people truly meet God, we cannot *not* be a missionary people, and the church cannot exist apart from mission. Our

ministries take on meaning not because they are deeds of witness and service, as important as these are, but because they are part of the great mission of God.

Glasser provides a coherent view of the Kingdom running through all of Scripture. In doing so, he brings together Old Testament and New Testament, Jew and Gentile, theology and mission. He shows how God's people, Israel, are important in God's mission plan, but that the Kingdom includes all people.

...In missions and in the larger church, we live in a time of fragmentation – of substituting theologically founded mission with aimless activism. We need to pause and take stock of where we are going. We need to recapture the vision of mission that runs through Scripture, and use that as the basis for the motivation and methods we use in mission outreach.” (Page 8)

The Bible, then, is not simply for comfort or consolation or even just for our personal salvation, although it includes all of these. It is about purpose, direction and “marching orders”. It informs our view of the world, tells us who we (and all humankind) are, where history is going, what to do, and what not to do and how to do and how not to do.

Even a casual glimpse at the teachings of Jesus shows us something far beyond “ways to live a better life”. Jesus calls us to behavior that demonstrates the presence of the Kingdom of God, even on enemy turf; “When you stand praying, forgive...” do not resist an evil person, give alms in secret, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, proclaim the Good News, don't worry, heal the sick, take up the cause of the widow, the orphan the poor and the oppressed, love your enemy, show compassion, be still and wait for the Lord, consider, reflect, worship, pray, announce the Kingdom boldly, be the servant of all, take up your cross, follow me... These are a life-defining set of “marching orders” that simply do not make sense apart from a clear vision that history is going somewhere, carried forward inexorably by its Creator and Redeemer. The world does not end “with a whimper” (as in T.S. Elliott's famous poem) but with the triumphal return of the King and the revelation before all creation of the children of God (Romans 8: 19). We wait for it, we participate in it, but we do not “make it happen”. God himself is working his purposes out.

So here is the radical conclusion of this chapter. We are arguing that mission is not something that some Christians do whether it's a denominational department or a group that goes for a week to, say, Bolivia on a “mission trip”. To be People of the Word means that all Christians in all places and times are first reconciled to God in Christ Jesus as the result of his mission and second commanded to participate in that mission with passion, energy and sacrifice. To demonstrate and proclaim God's love in Christ Jesus to the world is the purpose of our existence. Certainly, not every one will be directly engaged in God's mission by crossing the borders of nations, languages and cultures. But this should in no way distract our attention from the fact that God's mission, and our

mission, is all of a piece. It's character, goals, motivation and means remain the same regardless of the presence or absence of borders.

We are uncomfortable, then, when someone talks about "having done mission" by going on a mission trip when they don't "get" their place in God's mission every day "back home".

We are equally uncomfortable when someone talks about "our church's missionaries" if they don't "get" that their entire local church "exists by mission as fire exists by burning" (Emil Brunner).

Jargon and Hot Debates

Both Church and mission leaders have a problem with language. Whatever they say tends to morph into all kinds of things in popular usage. Take the words “mission” and “missionary”, for example. Some years ago a Presbyterian pastor expressed his frustration like this. “We wanted to focus attention on *missio Dei*, so we said that “mission,” described God’s central goal and activity to reconcile humanity with himself. By extension, we said that mission was the central task of the Church. Before we knew it, everything the Church did became “our mission” in popular language. It started as “our local mission budget” and “our foreign mission budget” but “local” and “foreign” soon dropped off. So, in the church where I am the pastor, the purchase of new robes for the choir is now listed under our “mission budget”.

Facing a similar use of language in his church over 30 years ago, Mennonite Brethren missionary Leslie Mark suggested renaming their mission organization as “International Christian Service”. Other organizations came up with “world servants”, “cross-cultural evangelism”, “international church planters” and a lot more. Acknowledging that mission was about the central task of both God and his Church, produced the unintended consequence that practically everything done by the Church was defined as mission. In this way, the word “mission” was expanded and diluted in popular use.

The same thing happened to the word “missionary”. Originally meant to describe people sent for a long period of time across great distances to proclaim the Good News in other lands, cultures and languages, it has come to mean anyone sent for any amount of time, anywhere (“our missionary to the Boy Scouts”) to do almost anything at all – good things, to be sure, but undifferentiated. Beyond that, different groups use the word to mean different things. In some of the Pentecostal movements in Latin America, for example, “missionary” is a term used to refer to a kind of apprentice – a person who may be called to be a pastor someday. Such a person seeks confirmation of his or her calling by quitting their jobs and “living by faith” (having their material needs met miraculously), by planting a church and by showing obedience to the leaders of their movement.

Some folks have tried using the word “apostle” (with a lower case “a” to distinguish them from the 12 Apostles of the Bible) since both the word “apostle” and “missionary” are rooted in “one who is sent with a message”. This has broken down because some other groups have begun to use the term “apostle” as an ecclesiastical title referring to leaders who have, in their view, a similar role of authority in the Church as that of the original 12.

Is this confusing or what?

Anyway, in this material, we do argue that “mission” truly is “the big picture” of God’s loving action toward humankind - beginning before creation, definitively made known in and by Jesus Christ and culminating in a New Heaven and New Earth at the end of time. As such, it should define an essential activity of the Church. For practical purposes, however, we are focusing on that part of God’s mission carried out by the Church as it crosses borders; cultural, linguistic, national and geographic. We are also focusing on the Church’s role in making known, by words and deeds, the love of God in Christ Jesus in the reconciliation and redemption of humankind.

We have tried to argue that the Word is a Person whose story and message are written in a book. That book is what gives us “the big picture”, the underlying principles and concrete examples of what it means to live out of the character of a reordered heart – a heart in which the Living Word dwells.

Prayer

Because prayer is a process of communication with God, it is complex rather than simple. We pray as individuals and we pray as a community. God speaks to us through his Word, by his Spirit and through the fellowship of believers. Sometimes, prayer is as simple as asking and receiving. Psalm 50: 15 says,

**“Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor
Me.”**

At other times it is not simple at all and we do not even know how to pray. Paul wrote in Romans 8: 26,

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

This core value also emphasizes our belief in corporate prayer. While private or personal prayer is important, it does not have its origin in “I”, but in “we”. Furthermore, as Eugene Peterson puts it, “prayer is answering speech” which acknowledges that God has spoken first. Everything we say in prayer is essentially a reply to God’s Word of grace to us. We pray together because we are One Body in Christ and also because we are eminently distractible. I can be obsessive about my latest grand idea. All sorts of volatile emotions can easily sway me. To submit my prayer to the corrective of my brothers and sisters can keep me “on track” and create in me the kind of godly humility that is so elusive to human beings.