

## **Incarnational Preaching**

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A recent research project involved Assemblies of God churches that had transitioned from sustained periods of numerical and spiritual stagnancy to spiritual vitality. It revealed several poignant insights about aligning preaching with tacit Pentecostal beliefs.

The project demonstrated that realigning a local church's ministry with its theology results in spiritual vitality and numerical growth. While the focus of the research was broader than preaching, the analysis identified several commonalities among the preaching in these churches.

Unlike much of the research on turn around churches and church growth, this research purposely did not focus on techniques. Having been a pastor for 22 years, I am familiar with the shortcomings of relying on growth techniques alone. Likewise, other pastors have shared with me their frustration when mega churches, with large resources and lots of personnel, are held up as examples to inspire and fill them with creative ideas. Many left those seminars feeling more frustrated than ever.

The research project involved rural, bedroom, metro, small, middle-sized and large churches. Each had experienced a prolonged season of stagnation. These were not upstart churches. Church A was founded in 1925, Church T in 1920, Church M in 1984 and Church P was founded in 1933.

Church T's attendance presently averages over 5,000. For 66 years, the church struggled with an average attendance of less than 200. Now they baptize between 10 and 25 believers each month, nine months of the year.

Church P has gone from 22 attendees to 110 in a town of 865 people. According to the pastor, 80 percent of that growth has been people from non-churched backgrounds.

Church A's attendance has gone from 229 people to 400. The pastor told me that nine of ten newcomers are from non-churched backgrounds.

Church M is approaching its twenty-first year. For a time it vacillated between 20 and 50 members. There are some commuter adherents, but most of Church M's 530 members are local—nearly 6.5 percent of the city's population of just over 8,200.

Somehow, these churches transitioned and began to grow. They discovered, or rediscovered, something that moved them to gain spiritual and numerical momentum.

The project focused on three theological rubrics: ecclesiology, pneumatology and eschatology. It excluded a concentration on sermon modifiers and types such as *narrative, expository, textual or topical*. While there is far more to these churches' stories of successful and ongoing transition, research data

revealed several theological commonalities in their preaching. These observations are not meant to be a template for preaching; I believe no such template exists. Rather, like a relational road map that takes the form of guided query and suggestions, these observations may assist travelers in their progress toward desired destinations. They are intended to nurture spiritual formation through relational encounters among preachers, congregants, the non-churched and the Holy Spirit that will result in an incarnation of God's redemptive mission, the *missio Dei*. With that clarification, I offer five commonalities for consideration.

First, incarnational preaching is missional in nature. In these churches, mission is not optional in church activity or preaching focus. Rather, the missional focus is incarnational or, as Darrell Guder says, "the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation." That mission continues today through the church's witness as we move toward final *eschaton* ("last" or "final day").<sup>1</sup> God's ultimate redemptive plan is owned by and incarnated in preacher and congregant. Both see relationships through preaching and service as missional in nature because the preacher and congregant are missional by nature. Participants from each church consider it their God-given responsibility to relate caringly through preaching and service locally to their communities and, if opportunities afforded, regionally and globally. Pastors communicated their personal involvement by building relationships in their communities.

Second, leaders model incarnational preaching. Congregants see their pastor(s) preaching and modeling intentional relationship building within and outside the church. The message and

the messenger blend or, more accurately, fully integrate with the Spirit's ministry of shaping a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work (2 Timothy 2:21, NASB). Again, this is not a technique to motivate listeners. This is incarnational theology, what Christians do by nature. Longtime professor of preaching at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wayne McDill, emphasized that who the preacher is as a person is as important as what he or she preaches: "Christianity is such that the messenger cannot divorce himself from the message. Neither can he step aside and become invisible as he preaches the message. You cannot be one kind of person and another kind of preacher."<sup>ii</sup> Preaching in these churches places modeling at the heart of the matter. Modeling is more than a fallback methodology.<sup>iii</sup> Modeling is critical. "Our gospel," laments Dr. Henry Blackaby, "is canceled by the way we live."<sup>iv</sup> It would be good for all of us who are privileged to communicate God's message of good news to embrace the apostle Paul's admonishment to "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1, NKJV).

Third, the preaching in these churches is pure in motivation. It is truthful, supportive and caring, and these qualities are not tied to reciprocity. The preaching is supported by opportunities to grow through service. Prayer and taking time to get to know the listener's needs and his/her community context precede proclamation. Of course, there is a clear desire to inspire and influence people to encounter Christ. Nevertheless, the preaching clearly focuses on building and maintaining relationships without hinging those actions to an outcome.

According to the data, preaching in the churches involved in this project encourages godly service done with

God's strength (1 Peter 4:10ff) and unconditional love. Fellowship Bible Church, Little Rock, Arkansas, has become a model of building meaningful bridges to the community. Pastor Robert Lewis says tying our service to whatever difference it makes asks the wrong question. Lewis suggests, "We should ask, 'What stewardship has God called me to render?' Period. This is all that will mater in eternity."<sup>v</sup>

Stanley Grenz, my mentor until his recent untimely passing, alluded to the non-reciprocal nature of sacrificial ministry in the mission of the church, referencing Luke 4:18,19. Grenz connected the anointing of the Spirit upon our Lord to preach the good news with the proclamation of freedom, recovery and releasing service. Grenz asserted, "The Lord promised that his followers would carry on that work (John 14:12)."<sup>vi</sup> No where in the biblical text, nor in the data from this research, will one find that service tainted with mixed reciprocal motives.

Fourth, churches involved in this research evidence an understanding of ecclesiology that issues from God's redemptive mission. The preaching casts a vision for adherents to clothe themselves with their communities. Understanding the nature of the Church as missional living is not a foreign idea. Referring to the local congregation's missional commitment, Leslie Newbigin said, "I believe that the major impact of such congregations on the life of society as a whole is through the daily work of the members in their secular vocations and not through the official pronouncements of ecclesiastical bodies."<sup>vii</sup>

In all four congregations, preaching exhorts congregants to live out the life of Christ in a way that intentionally

develops relationships inside and outside the church. The research data strongly supports what Newbigin was emphasizing. To be like Christ is more than one's congregational identity or personal piety. It is redemption and personal sanctification, personified in a believing community whose nature is to care for and relate to people in the immediate community and beyond. Simply put, the purpose of the churches in this study is to become more Christlike, and the preaching has aligned itself with that purpose. Participants understand that the replication of Christ is more than an individual experience. It is linked intrinsically to relationships outside the church and to God's ultimate redemptive plan, *missio Dei*, as revealed in the Scriptures.<sup>viii</sup>

Recognizing this "realness" of the church, preaching resists a natural tendency to "individualize the faith."<sup>ix</sup> Preaching in these churches prodded listeners to consider becoming intentionally relational at a core level.

Finally, all four churches indicate a bond between the preaching and the Spirit's enabling power in building edifying relationships within and outside the church. To the participants, Pentecostal power is about more than a style of "having church." It is about being an intentional, caring, Spirit-gifted and Spirit-enabled friend. One's empowerment by the Spirit is related to "witness" (Acts 1:8), and being a Spirit-filled believer is enmeshed with, not isolated from, one's outward expression of the Spirit's inward work.

In addition to the Spirit-enabling, edifying relationships, there is an eschatological element to the Spirit's ministry through the preacher. Like their Assemblies of God predecessors, the participants in this project believe they

are living in the season leading up to Christ's return, and that conviction infuses their commitment to Christ and ministry with a sense of urgency. Preaching supports the belief that the Spirit's enabling power to communicate, participate in and accomplish *missio Dei* reflects God's redemptive nature and that plan is moving toward final consummation. This is Spirit-enabled preaching issuing from a preacher who starts the message where the people are because he/she is Spirit-engaged where the people are and, positionally in Christ, will be.<sup>x</sup> That sense of urgency predominately energizes a renewed focus on relationship building, which brings us full circle to the first commonality: incarnational preaching is missional in nature.

Like a guitarist with only one string, the data from the research continues to support a central truth. Nevertheless, these commonalities are not to be construed as technique. They demonstrate what it means to be theologically incarnational and to press beyond preaching programs to incarnational proclamation. In his book, *The Pentecostal Priority*, Charles Crabtree echoed similar convictions concerning the Church's evangelistic nature. He said, "If there is one thing the Early Church should teach us, it is that

evangelism is not done by formula. You cannot find it in speech or method. The Early Church was extremely mobile and flexible. The essentials were to *be* [italics mine] witnesses, to preach, to make disciples...but only one ultimate goal: to make Jesus known to a dying world."<sup>xi</sup>

This project peered deeply into the journey of four Assemblies of God churches. Each has transitioned from sustained patterns of spiritual and numerical stagnancy to renewed spiritual vitality and impressive success in leading non-churched people into a life-changing relationship with Christ and his redeemed community.

After analyzing the narratives of these churches, I concluded that the secret to their transformation was not a set of adopted church growth techniques. Rather, discipline and coordination of various parts were essential to taking steps forward and sustaining that progress. In these churches, the transitions were made possible through the coordination and alignment of their ministry practice with their theology. The preaching was incarnational at its core. I believe these commonalities are worthy of contemplation for any church that earnestly desires to experience renewed spiritual vitality.

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<sup>i</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 4.

<sup>ii</sup> Wayne V. McDill, *The Moment of Truth: A Guide to Effective Sermon Delivery* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 24.

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 24.

<sup>iv</sup> Dr. Henry Blackaby, quoted in a speech at the Billy Graham Training Center, May 22, 1999 (Leesburg, Va.: Intercessors for America).

<sup>v</sup> Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 107.

<sup>vi</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 225.

<sup>vii</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing Company, 1989), 56.

<sup>viii</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 3.

<sup>ix</sup> Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 56.

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<sup>x</sup> Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first-Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2001), 152.

<sup>xi</sup> Charles Crabtree, *The Pentecostal Reality* (Springfield, Mo.: Decade of Harvest Publication, 1993), 29.