

# Ministry reflection paper



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In the sixth chapter of his book entitled, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, Walter Brueggemann expresses a theological motif of evangelism and discipleship. Three main points buttress Brueggemann's motif. In brief, he affirms the God of the Biblical faith intends for the world, under His effective rule, to be free from evil powers. As God seeks to rebuild His kingdom through obedient servants it requires the subversion of these evil powers. God calling and sending His people throughout the world to bring about restoration on earth accomplishes this mission. According to Brueggemann, the Western cultural context that the mission takes place is a context of technological-therapeutic-consumerism.

More specifically, the first main argument of Brueggemann's motif is the calling of God's people. The creator God Himself calls man to intentionally follow Him by a characteristic life of discipleship. This call sets His disciple on the trajectory of a whole new reality, which is in stark contrast to the dominant and destructive realities of the world. For the disciple to be apprenticed to the Master, he must engage in new disciplines and practices for the purpose of unweaving the old detrimental habits. This reorientation places those who intentionally follow onto a path of obedience and participation in God's mission and truly sets humanity free from the dehumanizing dominant powers.

Brueggemann's second argument relates to God sending His people. The God of the Biblical faith also sends those whom He calls for His overarching missional enterprise on earth. As Governor of the cosmos, God exercises His authority and sends His followers on the mission of emancipation to establish peace on earth. This sending is certainly a human mission according to

Brueggemann, as the sending God takes a supportive role. The human missionary role is one of bold confidence and proclamation of an alternative reality among a dominant world system, which is contrary to the rule of God. This paradigm of proclamation for Christian mission is the mandate to talk. The second mandate for Christian mission is to walk. To walk essentially relates to restorative and redemptive action of God's disciples toward others and against dominant powers on earth, thus mending the world so that the world might fulfill its rightful intention.

Brueggemann's final argument relates to his assessment of modern Western culture. Brueggemann categorizes our contemporary society as a culture of technological-therapeutic-consumerism. This ideological system is counter to a system of a restored creative order. Nevertheless, it is the missional context for God's disciplined disciple. In sum, as God's alternative community engages the world through evangelism, this engagement takes place in the same fundamental way as God has always mandated His followers on the mission.

Positive and Negative Critique In respect to a critical appraisal of Brueggemann's thoughts and ideas there are both positive and negative elements worth underscoring. I begin with the positive assessment. Brueggemann's most salient point is found in his critique of the "old assumption" of mission. The assumption is based on the idea that the Gospel is sent to the mission field, while at home it is secure. Brueggemann rightly states: The sending means to be dispatched as alternative in every place where anti-creation powers rule, dispatched there to talk the talk and to walk the walk, to talk and walk the truth that the legitimate power of governance

belongs to the One who authorizes restoration of what belongs rightly-at the outset and at the finish-only to God in any case. That is, the sending is to be understood as alternative community in the midst of conventional communities. [1]

I believe Brueggemann astutely addresses this fundamental misconception of contemporary Western Christianity in that the enterprise of mission for the church is located “oversees” instead of one’s own community, neighborhood, or home. It is vital for the church to recalibrate its view. This is not to say “foreign mission” as we know it is not a “mission field,” it is, but it is not the “mission field.” The primary missional context is whatever community or communities the effective rule of God is not embodied or aligned with God’s redemptive purposes.

The second positive thought Brueggemann brings to light is in regards to his theme of discipleship. In particular, Brueggemann narrows the call of God essentially to a call of discipleship. He describes the call of God as taking part in following, “God’s presence and purpose and promise with the disciplines necessary to the project.”[2] I believe if the follower of Christ is to experience the overarching reality of the kingdom of God, he or she must be intentionally on the path of obedient discipleship. It seems to me the contemporary church in North America is largely negligent in developing disciples who embody an ethos and worldview that is in accord with being an apprentice of Jesus Christ. This may be the primary reason for a spiritual malaise among many Christians today. I appreciate Brueggemann’s clear emphasis on the fundamental call to a life of discipleship and for the believer to participate in God’s missional endeavor on earth.

In terms of a negative assessment of his chapter, I would like to highlight two impressions. Although Brueggemann sets a clear theme of discipleship, he fails to articulate the new disciplines, habits, and practices that the Christ-follower must adopt. The question arises, “ What are the necessary disciplines or habits of discipleship?” Brueggemann first mentions the disciplines as “ practices of praise and promise,” but does not develop this idea further. No less than a dozen times does Brueggemann mention the disciple being under discipline and in each occasion he does not express what the ethos of these disciplines actually is. At one point in the chapter he states, “ Enactment of alternative community requires intentionality sustained by carefully embraced and regularly practiced disciplines, so that discipleship is a sine qua non for mission.”[3] I agree discipleship is absolutely indispensable for mission, but it must be explained further. In another section he asserts:

Making disciples means to bring others under the disciplines that mark the followers of Jesus. It is assumed in such an enterprise that the primal core of disciples is indeed under discipline themselves, so that they can instruct new recruits into the practices and habits that will sustain life and mission in the counter community.[4]

Again, Brueggemann establishes disciplines as essential, but the lack of a brief explanation and description of such embodied disciplines by the disciple is a concern. I am curious to succinctly know, according to Brueggemann, what are the disciplines that mark the follower of Christ?

The second pejorative concept in Brueggemann's chapter relates to his premise that the missional task is a human task, while God takes a supportive role. In writing about Moses' exploits in Egypt, Brueggemann states, " It cannot be overstressed that the mission is, indeed, a human mission, with YHWH cast in a crucial, but supporting role. There is here an offer of God's transformation of the slave economy, but only in and through direct, risky human engagement." [5] God certainly is seeking to rebuild His kingdom through obedient servants for the purpose of world redemption. However man is not the central figure or agent, it is God Himself. The efficacy of God's Spirit is paramount to God's present task on earth. It is in and through His Spirit that man has the ability to serve God in such a capacity for transformation on earth. This is not to say man is passive, rather I believe man must be active, but man's acting comes from direct empowerment and illumination by the Spirit of God. Any proclivity, motivation, or action of human engagement in the kingdom of God comes from God Himself. Mission is ultimately the work of God.

Personal Ministry Context As I reflect on my personal ministry context in terms of Brueggemann's sixth chapter, I would like to bring into focus two reflections that come to mind. The first reflection relates to my ministry among Christian college students and North American culture. I am in earnest agreement with Brueggemann's characterization of our contemporary culture and have a serious concern with its ideological climate. When one takes a sweeping look at the dominant worldview of North American society and the contours of this culture, it will be painfully obvious

that our Western ideological horizons have indeed influenced the church and contributed to the domestication of Christianity.

In writing about his ministry experience, Lesslie Newbigin illuminates the idea of the Gospel being domesticated. He relevantly comments: It was only slowly, through many experiences, that I began to see that something of this domestication had taken place in my own Christianity, that I too had been more ready to seek a “reasonable Christianity,” a Christianity that could be defended on the terms of my whole intellectual formation as a twentieth-century Englishman, rather than something which placed my whole intellectual formation under a new and critical light. I, too, had been guilty of domesticating the gospel.[6]

On the college campus which I guide students, I urge them, in light of the reigning culture, to take a critical look at their assumptions about God and His kingdom. I direct students to entertain the ways in which their view of the historic Christian faith and their view of God have been domesticated by our culture. The primary area of domestication that often comes to the surface is a consumerist approach to daily living and reducing the Gospel to a gospel of individual personal salvation. While our personal salvation is intensely important, our narrow view of God’s larger kingdom purpose is often an addendum instead of God’s great meta-narrative of redemption for all mankind. Life has been reduced to personally “getting into heaven,” instead of God’s intention for His kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In examining Brueggemann's ideas and its future impact on the college campus where I minister, I intend to invite students to critically consider the dominant worldview of our culture as they are learning to discover a Biblical worldview. I also envision myself leading students to capture the reality of the Biblical story as an overarching narrative from which to view the world. Thus, I desire to mentor students in realizing and embodying the Biblical story as not something we look at or consume, but rather the lens in which we look through as we live our lives.

The second reflection I would like to bring into focus is Brueggemann's sound emphasis on discipleship. I minister amid the body of New Heart Community Church as a discipleship coordinator. In this capacity I have valued a posture of active listening and directing others in the dynamics of the spiritual life. It is in this context that Brueggemann's words ring true: Inescapably, the ones called and sent are always yet again deciding for this one who calls and sends. This endless process of deciding again is accomplished in freedom from all other calling gods and all other sending loyalties. That endless deciding, moreover, requires great passion, imagination, and intentionality.

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The ongoing process of "deciding" is the way of the kingdom. As Dallas Willard points out, "The secret of the easy yoke is simple, actually. It is the intelligent, informed, unyielding resolve to live as Jesus lived in all aspects of his life, not just in the moment of specific choice or action." [8] Perhaps the most important element to highlight is the ongoing pursuit and unyielding resolve to be a student of Jesus and embody a life-long interactive relationship with God. This is the bedrock of my ministry passion and my own

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spiritual transformation. Having the opportunity to minister through teaching, shepherding, and directing others in their spiritual journey and Christian discipleship is central to my calling. I believe Brueggemann's ideas on discipleship and evangelism have certainly help shape my current and future approach to ministry by establishing a renaissance of discipleship as core to being a custodian of the gospel.