

Ministry Among: The Power of Blessing

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The notion of “North America as a mission field” is a breath-taking idea after we have for so long thought we “took” the gospel to the “benighted” elsewhere. Now we are talking about a mission to those close at hand, those near to us, those among us who are most like us. This little essay considers one biblical resource for such a shift of perspective, a shift that among other things perhaps entails a refocus in the Bible itself.

I.

In his argument for the gospel among the Gentiles, Paul writes:

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared *the gospel beforehand* to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed (Gal. 3:8-9).

Paul here quotes Gen. 12:3b, part of God’s initial mandate to Abraham. Oddly, Paul terms this formulation “the gospel beforehand,” (*proeuangellion*), the good news of God’s governance that has been known and uttered in Israel from the outset. What Paul knows is that the gospel, from the outset, has been concerned for a defining and transformative relationship between *the called community of Yahweh* and *all the others* among whom the faithful live. The formulation of Gen. 12:3, Gal. 3:8 focuses upon “be blessed.” I purpose that our rethinking of “mission among” may be understood as a mission of blessing, a way of speaking and thinking and acting that is very different from our usual missional rhetoric.

We may understand God’s final promise to Abraham in 12:3 as the culmination of a “theory of Israel” that shapes the book of Genesis and the entire Torah:¹

1. Blessing theology is creation theology.² That is, the creation texts of the Old Testament affirm that God has blessed, ordained fruitfulness and well-being, bestowed on the processes of creation the capacity for well-being and fulfillment of its true destiny of abundance:

God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth” (Gen. 1:22).³

The “force for life” has been implanted by the creator into all of creation. It is this “force for life” that constitutes the substance of blessing.

2. On its own terms and without any dogmatic imposition of a notion of “the fall,” the Genesis account of the world indicates that the defining blessing of God for the world has been resisted and distorted (perhaps nullified?) by the recalcitrance of the creation. As Gerhard von Rad and many others have seen, the sequence of narratives about Adam and Eve (Gen. 2-3), Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), the flood (Gen. 6-9), and the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) constitutes an inventory of the recalcitrance and resistance that marks the world of the nations.⁴ The outcome of these narratives is that

the blessing of God for creation has been thwarted; the world is now defined by curse...perhaps curse as the direct assertion of divine threat or perhaps simply as an outcropping of consequences of choices without any divine intrusion.⁵ Either way, the “force for life” generously given by Yahweh is ineffective and the world is beset by *alienation, anxiety, and brutality*.

3. And then, abruptly, comes “the gospel beforehand” to father Abraham and the communities derivative from Abraham (Jews, Christians, Muslims). “The families of the earth” to whom Abraham is to be a blessing, as Hans Walter Wolff has seen, are all those in Genesis 3-11 who have dropped out of the power of Yahweh’s blessing, who by dropping out “became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened” (Rom. 1:21; see 8:20, Eph. 4:17).⁷ As the story stands, however, the “families of the earth” are more specifically and concretely those other ethnic, social, and territorial communities with whom the ancestors—Abraham and his family—must deal on a daily basis. That is, the reference to the nations has a two-fold reference, one more intensely theological, the other quite practical as “living among” without all of the dark theological rhetoric that is familiar to us from Paul. In this latter sense, the “families of the earth” are not some symbolic cipher to serve theology, but they are real people who dispute with Israel about land, water rights, and all the inevitable disputes of social existence.

The formula of Gen. 12:3, “the gospel beforehand,” occurs as a fixed formula five times in the ancestral narratives, clearly a quite intentional, programmatic utterance that gives shape to the disparate narratives:

In 12:3, the formula is given no specificity. Except that in 12:6 we are told, “at that time the Canaanites were in the land” (see 13:7). Of course, that is why it is called “land of Canaan” (vv. 5-6). Whether he likes it or not, Abraham is placed among Canaanites by the God who makes promises.⁸

The formula is repeated to Abraham in 18:18. The verse is followed by the odd phrasing of v. 19:

I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

This remarkable verse is the only usage in Genesis of the Mosaic-prophetic word pair “justice and righteousness.” The couplet imports into the ancestral narrative the large social vision of Israel at its prophetic best. The nations are “blessed” when the people of Abraham practice righteousness and justice, that is, when they order social power in community-generating ways.

The third articulation to Abraham, 22:18, at the end of the narrative of sacrifice, suggests that Abraham’s way with the “nations” is one of radical obedience to God that entails deep, costly, risky sacrifice. The odd calculus of this paragraph is that Abraham, in obedience to God, risks all; the result is that the force of generative creation (blessing) is offered for all the others. (The ecclesial implication is one of deep discipline).

The declaration of “the gospel beforehand” to Isaac in 26:4-5 reiterates the claim of obedience in 22:18. Again it is the radical obedience of Abraham that counts for the nations. It is noteworthy that the promise made to Isaac appeals yet again to the

obedience of his father, thus making unmistakable that the ministry of blessing” is intergenerational. That is, the blessing of Abraham for the nations is extended “into the third and fourth generations.” Isaac is invited to share in the alternative world of blessing, even though he is given no direct command to obey.

The reiteration of the formula to Jacob (28:14) is in the context of many other, more personal promises to Jacob. While the formulation itself adds nothing new, in the narrative that follows even the cunning Laban can deduce that Jacob is a source of blessing in his life:

If you will allow me to say so, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you (30:27).

These five formulations are a quite intentional theological shaping of the ancestral narrative. These ancestors are presented—and inside the narrative understand themselves—as a center of blessing, a concentrated locus of the “life force” of Yahweh in the world.

II.

It is important that we should be clear about this matter of blessing, for it is not a common point in our theology, leave alone in our notion of mission. Blessing is first to be understood in these narratives as a *material* process of new life that is *intrinsic* to creation that arises when the generative powers of creation function as God has intended and decreed them. It is important that in the notion of blessing, the emblem of the *generative powers of creation* is in the birth of children, more specifically in a patriarchal society, the birth of sons. Thus the ancestral narratives are endlessly preoccupied with the question of arrival of the next generation, and as we have seen, in the Jacob narrative even the production of valuable animals. The blessing arises in the midst of the processes of daily life when all works well. This same celebration of generativity (expressed in quite male language) is voiced in the Psalms:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them.
he shall not be put to shame when he speaks
with his enemies in the gate (Psalm 127:3-5).
Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,
who walks in his ways...
Your life will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots around your table
thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.
The Lord bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
May you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel (Psalm 128).⁹

The second facet of blessing important to understand is this: while blessing as life-force that produces generative, productive material prosperity is intrinsic to life-processes themselves, blessing can be *bestowed*, *transferred* from one party to another in an almost palpable way. Here we move into a mystery of life that does not admit of scientific or technical explanation. We are closer to a sacramental dimension of reality, whereby those who possess God's life-force in abundance can share and distribute it among others who may be deficient in what is needed for life.

We can readily identify two primary centers for the power of blessing:

1. The family is the primal matrix of blessing that stretches intergenerationally. In Gen. 49, the old man Jacob still is master of the life-force as he had been when he was a blessing to Laban. Indeed, all through the narrative, Jacob drips with the power to enhance life. In chapter 49, the old man assembles his sons; he speaks a blessing over each of them, empowering them to appropriate the future that is peculiarly theirs:

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, blessing each one of them with a suitable blessing (v. 28; see also Deut. 33).

More contentiously and with less equanimity, this same Jacob, though younger, is the key player in chapter 27 where the brothers dispute the blessing. Jacob "steals" the blessing from Esau to whom it rightly belongs. Deceived Isaac blesses deceiving Jacob, giving him access to power for the future (vv. 27-29; note that the last phrasing of v. 29 echoes the words addressed to Abraham in Gen. 12:3). By the time Isaac finishes speaking, the blessing is assigned. It has been transmitted and cannot be recalled. This in turn produces the pathos of Esau:

Bless me, me also father!"...Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"...Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" And Esau lifted up his voice and wept (vv. 34-38).

Families are arenas for blessing (and curse). Parents do bestow blessing on children (and withhold), by gesture, word, touch, and in all kinds of subtle, less direct ways. Every family has a member(s) who is more powerful and who can generate futures for others. And most every family has people who are left out, like Esau.

2. A second arena of blessing is the priestly function when the power of blessing is known to be concentrated in a sacred place.¹⁰ Indeed, people come there precisely for a blessing, to have transmitted to them in sacral ways the power for life to choose a future. The best known example, still echoed by us, is the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, whereby Aaron and his sons bestow upon Israel a future of grace and peace. (It is too bad, in my judgment, that in much of the church the priestly authority to bless has been trivialized, likely because the priests themselves are embarrassed by such power or do not believe in it, and so the benediction becomes, all too often, nothing more than a signing off with "good luck.")

The ancestral narrative, playing upon the claims of *family* and *priests*, makes the claim that the power of blessing is concentrated in this community of faith. That power of blessing concentrated in Israel is no property for Israel. It is "by you" that the power of blessing shall be transmitted to and for the others who have, since their embrace of

curse, been deficient in the power to choose a prosperous future.

III.

Insofar as this line of interpretation is useful, it needs to be understood that I am urging a quite different notion of "ministry among." It is to be observed that Abraham and his kin never directly confront the nations with their faith, never seek to recruit or convert. Rather the power of blessing is a free gift offered to the nations, as it has been a free entrustment to Israel. The purpose of blessing is not to enhance Israel nor even, we may believe, to accent the importance of Yahweh. It is rather that the community should "work," as more and more people are included in the power of blessing and so freed of the dread, deathly force of curse. I do not imagine that this is all that can be said about "ministry among," but it is an important motif that may stop well short of a desperate triumphalism that understands mission as imposition.

Thus I propose that "ministry among" consists, as it did for the ancestors, in being visibly available with the life-force of a viable future of shalom that will energize and evoke participation by others who still hold to other ideological loyalties. This changed perception on mission may be illumined by observing two thematic contrasts. First, it is observed by many scholars, especially Jewish scholars, that the theological mind-set and perspective of Genesis is very different from the Moses-Joshua materials that follow. Those latter are conflictual, wreaking of violence, and aimed domination.¹¹ It is plausible that in the long run, the dominant missional rhetoric of the church is derived from this very old, very conflictual tradition that aims at victory. By contrast, the ancestral narratives in Genesis are largely absent of such conflict and therefore do not aim at triumph or engage in violence. What text we read makes a huge difference about the model of mission we embrace!

A second thematic contrast suggests that *blessing theology* that pervades the ancestral narratives is creation theology. That is, it is concerned for the full functioning of generativity that has been ordained in creation, so that the belated fruitfulness of Israel's mothers is a continuation of the fruitfulness of creation. By contrast, *the redemption traditions* of Moses and Joshua are preoccupied with liberation, emancipation, and transformation, a much more confrontive, disruptive perspective. I understand that one cannot finally separate creation from redemption. But one can make very different accents. I suspect that to avoid the missional triumphalism that has done so much damage and that now feeds the Christian right, an accent on the generosity of creation is a way to refocus mission.

While it is beyond my competence, I suggest that the tension of Genesis/Moses-Joshua, of creation/redemption is a tension that can be seen in the Romans-Galatians axis as it stands a good distance from Colossians and Ephesians. It is well known that the latter think in terms of the mystery of creation. It surely is not unimportant that this literature is not a hotbed of doctrinal dispute or of evangelical machismo as Romans and Galatians tend to be.

IV.

The two accents on *material-intrinsic* and *bestowal and transference* invite us to think about the church in North America as a place (community) in which God's life-force for a viable future is concentrated. That concentration of God's life-force may be shared with "Gentiles" outside the community who will be blessed. Early on I

suggested that the power of curse is characterized by *alienation, anxiety, and brutality*. I am not sure that those are the best words, and I did not linger long over choosing them. The reader may think of better terms by which to characterize the deep distortion that now marks the North American civil community. I have in mind the power of acquisitiveness that reduces everything to a commodity, a pursuit of commodity that is never adequate, that must be pursued by every means available, stopping at nothing to achieve “the most.” This disorder has many faces—consumerism, war on the poor, mad militarism, a fascination with technology, child and wife abuse, and championing of prison as social remedy.

Behind all of this deep social alienation, I suspect is the anxiety that there is not enough, not enough for retirement, not enough for education, not enough for medical coverage, not enough for our children, not enough for our community, not enough for our nation, not enough for our church [sic!], so we are endlessly under threat. The deeply felt scarcity all around us is a function of an atheism that denies the generosity of the creator and that doubts the abundance of creation. Our North American civic culture is cursed by a sense of scarcity in which the neighbor question evaporates and erstwhile neighbors are seen to be at best inconveniences, more likely as threats.

In the midst of that fearful, feverish pursuit of “enough” sits the church, with its news, its sacraments, its priestly power to bless. The church—the local, organized, visible church—is a *place of abundance*, precisely because in its fidelity the church continues to count on and live from the endless self-giving of God the creator. Our prayers and our hymns and our texts all attest to the goodness and inexhaustible generosity of God,

who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

This concentration (not monopoly or property) of abundance sits in the midst of the power of curse. It refuses to give in, even though deep among us the seductions of alienation, anxiety, and brutality are at work. It is the primal liturgical task of the church now, I believe, to insist that we will not give in, even though, as always, the power of curse is more compelling and more palpable than is the power of blessing.

V.

This ministry is *by you*...a blessing.

1. The evangel is *the story* of miraculous abundance. The stories we tell—perhaps even at “children’s time”—are about the history of blessing that is put together one episode at a time, that all together tells about abundance that breaks out among us inexplicably. Abraham and Sarah wondered about the power of blessing, and were left in Gen. 18:14 with the haunting question:

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

The tradition that bears the evangel asserts that nothing is beyond the creator who blesses. Nothing is impossible! Nothing is too hard! The God who permeates this counter history of blessing is a giver. So Paul taunts his detractors:

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift? (I Cor. 4:7)

It's all gift!

2. The mission insists on *gestures of charity and generosity*. That is what the church does best...modest, visible, intentional acts of neighborliness that entail some giving of self for another. We take that so for granted, and it is often more habitual than it is intentional. But we should at least notice that people caught in cycles of alienation, anxiety, and brutality can give nothing and can notice nothing of abundance. Not to be dismissed are the endless works of canned goods, and care packages, and Christmas turkeys and soup kitchens and clothing drives and tutoring and shelters, mostly done by nameless saints. All these are overt gestures that refuse to concede defining authority to the power of curse. Here and there, in face to face contact, concentrated blessing is shared, and people receive power for life.

3. The mission consists in *public actions* that create budgets, policies, and institutions that become channels of blessing. Under the cursed ideology of "privatization," our society just now is in a mood to dismantle everything it can get its hands on. The mandate to Abraham concerning "justice and righteousness," however, makes clear that the power of blessing is not an in-house, church thing to be restricted to acts of charity. Blessing has a public face, for the entire tradition of Israel understands that blessing is a public matter, too urgent to be left intimate. And so the great issues of peace, justice, health, education, housing, and jobs are all facets of blessing "by you."

VI.

It occurs to me that much of the ministry of Jesus is the enactment of abundance in contexts gone sour with deprivation. He is presented in the Gospels as a bodied person who exudes blessing. In Luke 8:44-45, the woman who had tried many failed alternatives came to him:

She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.

Jesus of course noticed:

Who touched me?...Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.

She is immediately healed, because she had come into contact with his futuring power; she is restored to fullness of life. He does not recruit her or even invite her in. He only blesses her.

In the preceding chapter, John wonders about Jesus' identity (Luke 7:20). Jesus' answer to John is void of explicit theological claim:

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me (vv. 22-23).

The power to bless exudes from his body and makes all things new. John does not get a neat theological formula; but he now knows everything he needs to know.

We are the people who trail behind Jesus in the history of blessing. What a claim for the church, to be known as the people of limitless resources shared with no restraint, limitless because the abundance of the creator is so trusted that we are persuaded out of our calculating fearfulness!¹² The amazing thing is that when “power goes out,” it is more than replenished by the creator who continues to bless.

We are fond of saying it is “God’s mission,” not ours. The purpose is the healing of the Gentiles. The long history is that where there has been that kind of generosity, “loaves abound”...as well as members!

Notes

¹ Gerhard von Rad, “The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch,” *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 1-78. On the linkage of Gen. 1-11 and the ancestral narratives, von Rad 65, writes:

Thus the opening words of the story of redemption provide the answer to the problem posed by the early history of the world, that of the relationship of God to the nations as whole. The beginning of the story of redemption in Gen. XII.1-3, however, not only brings to an end the early history, as Budde rightly saw, but actually provides the key to it.

Von Rad’s insight has been elaborated by many scholars.

² The most helpful and accessible study of blessing is by Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978). See also his little book, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

³ The derivative blessing of humanity is in 1:28; that blessing is clearly subordinate as the man and the woman are a subset of creation. Attention should be paid to Ex. 1:7. In that text it is Israel who “multiplies,” thus embodying the blessings meant for creation. On the reiteration of the terms, see Walter Brueggemann, “The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers,” *ZAW* 84 (1972), 397-413.

⁴ See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962) 154-60.

⁵ Klaus Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” *Theodicy in the Old Testament* ed. by James L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 57-87, has argued powerfully for consequences rather than divine intrusion.

⁶ See below on these terms. My intent is to specify the meaning of “curse” that is reflected in 3:14, 17; 4:11, 9:25 and differently 8:21. The terms I have used here suggest what I take to be contemporary dimensions of the power of the curse.

⁷ Hans Walter Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwists,” *Interpretation XX* (1966), 131-58. Much of my argument here is derivative from Wolff.

⁸ The term “Canaanite” undoubtedly is not an ethnic term. It is rather a sociological, ideological term. Thus the Canaanites and the Israelites who polemicize against the Canaanites are in every respect exactly alike, except the theological, ideological loyalties that distinguish them. The Canaanites are “neighbors” who are close at hand, but who confess different loyalties and so organize socio-economic, political power differently.

⁹ Psalm 128 uses two different terms for “blessing.” The term “happy” speaks of a more material, secular notion of blessing, whereas “blessed” in the latter verse is a more theological term. The two, however, are used together, thus bringing close together the practical matter of material prosperity and the acknowledgement of Yahweh as the God who blesses with prosperity.

I should acknowledge that the valuing of children (sons) in the contemporary world is not directly and fully taken over from that ancient world, given the industrial revolution and the lesser economic need for children. While acknowledging that fact, one may still notice a) in a nursing home the presence of a baby to touch and smell is indeed taken as a foundational sign of hope, b) given all we know about birthing processes, it is still noteworthy that many couples desiring children go to great lengths, medically and economically, to secure children. The issues are not the same as in the ancient world. But they are not, in many cases, very different. A child is still in many ways the quintessential gift of the creator.

See Westermann, "Creation and History in the Old Testament," *The Gospel and Human Destiny* ed. by Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis; Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), 11-38, and *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* (Sprunt Lectures; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979).

¹¹ On the violence endemic in the text, see Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

¹² I am going to end this discussion, because I sense a stewardship sermon coming on!