

why vineyard: a theological reflection

by don williams

When asked the question "Why Vineyard?" we want to be quick to say that it is not because we think the Vineyard is better than any other church or Movement. To sum it up we could say the Vineyard is unique, solid, and focussed on the Kingdom of God. There is much else that some would want to say.

This following article may help answer the question for you "Why Vineyard?"

Introduction

There are several answers to the question, "Why Vineyard?" Historically, Vineyard is the fruit of revival. It goes back to the "Jesus Movement," starting in the United States in the late 1960's. Through it over three million converts came into the church, and Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California exploded, eventually giving birth to the Vineyard. Vineyard is also the consequence of John Wimber's charismatic leadership, bringing alive not only the message of the kingdom, but also the ministry of the kingdom in "signs and wonders." Vineyard continues to grow by practicing Biblical values, offering "culturally current" worship, preaching the gospel, building community, praying for the sick, reaching to the poor, opposing injustice and planting churches internationally. It still fosters personal and corporate renewal, seeking, in John Wimber's phrase, "to love the whole church." Where Vineyard prospers it is also because of its clear, central kingdom theology.

What is Theology?

In its strictest sense, theology is the science (logos) of God. Before the Enlightenment it was defined as absolute confessional truth. Dogma was usually equated with revelation, transcending the Bible itself and infallibly interpreting it. This was the task of the authoritative tradition and teaching of the church. With the Enlightenment (18th century), however, theology was judged by reason and the laws of nature (created by nature's God and as unchanging as he is). Doctrine became relative to reason and had to be interpreted in its historical context. With the end of the Enlightenment (the Modern period) and the rise of Post-Modernism, the intellectual elite dethroned reason as absolute and asserted that there was and is no universal story (no 'meta-narrative') which offers a comprehensive picture of reality. Theology is now to be done with out the absolute foundations of either reason or revelation.

For evangelicals, however, "Theology begins with the critique of philosophy" (Karl Barth). There is no controlling philosophy, such as idealism, romanticism, existentialism, Marxism, Feminism, Post-Modernism, or any

other “ism” which establishes its presuppositions and framework. Barth holds that theology is both a humble and free science. It comes, not to dominate, but to serve the living God and the cause of his kingdom. It lives in response to the “God who speaks for himself.” It is our response to his Word and his Spirit. Since the gospel creates the church, the revelation of God creates the experience of God. The Vineyard lives in response to that revelation which has broken in upon us in Jesus Christ.

The Theological Structure of the Vineyard

The Vineyard’s “Statement of Faith” represents mainstream, historic Christianity. It is fed by a number of sources. First, the creeds of the Church Fathers. We confess the Trinity, one God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the two natures of Christ incarnate, both fully divine and fully human at the same time (God and Man).

Second, as heirs of the Reformation, we agree with Luther, “He only is a theologian who can distinguish between law and gospel.” Abandoning salvation by works or salvation mediated by the church, we hold to Pauline “Justification by Faith” alone. Like the Reformers, we concur that “Popes and councils can err.” Thus we accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the Word of God written, as the only absolute authority for the church. This (*sola Scriptura*) is the final rule for faith and practice. And like the Reformers, we know that “still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe” (Luther). Spiritual warfare is our lot in this world. While we live in Christ’s kingdom, we do battle with Satan’s kingdom, knowing that the victory has already been won. As Luther sings, “Let goods and kindred go. This mortal life also. The body they may kill. God’s truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever.”

Third, we embrace the themes of the Evangelical Awakening of the 18th century, led by John and Charles Wesley. We believe in the necessity of personal conversion to Christ through the “new birth,” authored by His Spirit, and personal holiness as its necessary fruit. The character of Christ and the works of the kingdom: reaching the lost, healing the sick, serving the poor, and seeking justice for the oppressed, come through this transforming work. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes (in proper sequence), “Only he who believes can obey and only he who obeys can believe.”

Fourth, we are heirs of the “Great Century of World Missions” (the 19th Century), and believe that the “Great Commission” stands, making us intentional “missional communities.” Calls for conversion and church planting are not optional. As a movement, we exist to bring the nations to Christ.

Fifth, we are also heirs of the 20th Century Pentecostal/Charismatic renewals. We welcome this stream of the Spirit into the church, while remaining solidly evangelical in our theology. As our “Statement of Faith” confesses: “We believe in the filling or the empowering of the Holy Spirit, often a conscious experience, for ministry today. We believe in the present ministry of the Spirit and exercise all of the biblical gifts of the Spirit.” This leads to action: “We practice the laying on of hands for the empowering of the Spirit, for healing, and for recognition and empowering of those whom God has ordained to lead and serve the Church.”

Sixth, the “Biblical Theology Movement” instructs us. We see New Testament faith as fully “eschatological.” This means that we are not simply waiting for the End, we are living in it. The consummation of all things has already begun in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost. We live in the tension of the kingdom come and coming, “the already and the not yet.” We grow in sanctification and build churches knowing that the kingdom is here, but not fully here.

The Theological Story of the Vineyard

Our “Statement of Faith,” offers not only a clear theological structure, but also the story of Redemptive History (“Heilsgeschichte”). Perhaps anticipating Post-Modernism’s stress on stories, we too have a story to tell. It is this story of the kingdom, rather than, say, the structure of the Trinity (as in the Apostles’ Creed), which guides our Statement. It confesses the One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as the true, eternal God, who is also the creator and ruler of all things. It then immediately moves to Satan’s heavenly revolt and his counter-kingdom now infecting this good earth. Through his temptation, our original parents “fell from grace, bringing sin, [and] sickness to the earth.” As a result, “Human beings are born in sin, subject to God’s judgment of death and captive to Satan’s kingdom of darkness.”

But God still rules his universe. As Luther said, “Even the devil is God’s devil.” God therefore intervened to reverse the effects of the Fall by establishing his unconditional covenant with Abraham, promising blessing to the nations, by delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt, and by giving the law through Moses. Its purpose is to convict us of sin and bring “us to Christ alone for salvation.” Later, God makes an unconditional covenant with David, promising an heir, seated upon his throne forever. This is fulfilled in Christ, the incarnate, eternal Son who comes from his line and reestablishes God’s kingdom over Israel, and then extends it to the nations.

With the Apostles’ Creed, Jesus is confessed as God’s Son, “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.” But our “Statement of Faith” not only speaks of his incarnation and atonement, but also of his kingdom ministry.

“Jesus was anointed as God’s Messiah and empowered by the Holy Spirit, inaugurating God’s kingdom reign on earth, overpowering the reign of Satan by resisting temptation, preaching the good news of salvation, healing the sick, casting out demons and raising the dead. Gathering His disciples, He reconstituted God’s people as His Church to be the instrument of His kingdom.” This is crucial to Vineyard identity. Jesus preaches and ministers the kingdom, trains his disciples to do the same, and passes this on to every generation of the church. We stand resolutely in this line.

For the “Statement of Faith,” the ministry of Jesus climaxes in his death and resurrection. The meaning of his death is expressed classically: “In His sinless, perfect life Jesus met the demands of the law and in His atoning death on the cross He took God’s judgment for sin which we deserve as law-breakers. By His death on the cross He also disarmed the demonic powers.” Jesus is now the reigning King: “The covenant with David was fulfilled in Jesus’ birth from David’s house, His Messianic ministry, His glorious resurrection from the dead, His ascent into heaven and His present rule at the right hand of the Father. As God’s Son and David’s heir, He is the eternal Messiah-King, advancing God’s reign throughout every generation and throughout the whole earth today.”

Next, the “Statement of Faith” speaks of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. “The Spirit brings the permanent indwelling presence of God to us for spiritual worship, personal sanctification, building up the Church, gifting us for ministry, and driving back the kingdom of Satan by the evangelization of the world through proclaiming the word of Jesus and doing the works of Jesus.” This ministry climaxes with Christ’s visible, glorious return, Satan’s destruction, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. Then “God will be all in all; His kingdom, His rule and reign will be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells and in which He will forever be worshiped.”

Conclusion

The Vineyard’s “Statement of Faith” is also the Vineyard’s “Story of Faith.” Through the whole of Scripture, God is King, reigning through his kingdom. Our theology identifies our non-negotiables, the sweep of Biblical revelation from eternity to time, from creation to consummation. It focuses our identity and nurtures us in the truth. It protects us from heresy and idolatry, and steels us for suffering and persecution in this fallen world. It also gives us the “Big Story,” our “meta-narrative” to tell. As we confess our faith, and are caught up in its story, it enlivens our worship and becomes a weapon in our warfare, to bring down Satan’s kingdom, to subvert this world’s systems, and proclaim, “Jesus alone is Lord.”

“The Big Story” of the kingdom intersects our little stories and we discover that we were made for this! As we live out this faith, in proclamation and demonstration, we contribute to the larger church. By “signs and wonders,” evangelizing the poor, healing the sick, and driving out demons, and contending for justice, we confront the secular mind-set and manifest God’s intention to fully restore this fallen creation when Christ returns. In this we also answer the question: “Why Vineyard?”