

SURPRISE THE WORLD SERMON SERIES

The *Surprise the World* sermon series has been designed for use alongside the NavPress book of the same name by Michael Frost. Here are a few things to be aware of:

You need to bring them to life

Each sermon outline is 5 pages long (in its current formatting) and between 1500-1800 words. They're just outlines. So you'll need to flesh them out with personal illustrations and references to examples that make them come to life with your congregation.

Each sermon has a Bible reading and a reading from Surprise the World

This isn't an expository sermon series. It's topical. But each sermon is anchored in the Bible as all sermons should be.

You can preach them while your small groups read the book

The sermons don't simply rehash the book. They refer to the book and cover related material, but they're designed to stimulate interest in the book not stand in its place. There are 8 chapters in the book, but only 4 sermons here. You could use each sermon to catalyze your group to read two chapters each week (they're very short).

It might look like this:

	Sermon	Small Group Reading
Week 1	Surprising the World	Ch.1 Living "Questionable Lives" Ch.2 A New Set of Habits
Week 2	Changing the World One Meal at a Time	Ch.3 Bless: the First Habit Ch.4 Eat: the Second Habit
Week 3	The Answer is Always Jesus	Ch.5 Listen: the Third Habit Ch.6 Learn: the Fourth Habit
Week 4	The Sent Ones	Ch.7 Sent: the Fifth Habit Ch.8 Discipleship, Nurture, Accountability

We trust they'll be of great to use to you in equipping a missional people for God's service.

Week 1 – Surprising the World

Scripture Readings: Colossians 4:2-6 and 1Peter 3:15-16

Background Reading: *Surprise the World* Chs. 1 & 3

Introduction

Why does the word ‘evangelism’ cause some people so much anxiety? Do you get images of door-knocking or approaching strangers in shopping malls? Does it make you feel like you’re being turned into a reluctant recruitment officer for the church?

Should faith-sharing really be anxiety producing?

In his book *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost puts it this way:

“When gifted evangelists tell the rest of us that we should behave like gifted evangelists too it has a debilitating effect. We look at confident, articulate, theologically trained evangelists preaching in our churches and hear their stories of sharing the gospel on the back of a napkin in a restaurant or on a plane, and then we hear them tell us that we too can (and indeed, should) do what they do and we freeze! We know we can’t do what they do.” (p.6-7)

Do you feel that way?

Are we all meant to be little Billy Grahams? Or have we been getting it wrong?

What exactly does the Bible say about evangelism? Let’s see what both Paul and Peter say as they encourage their churches to share their faith. (Re)read Colossians 4:2-6 and 1Pet. 3:15-16

You’ll note in these passages there’s a kind of two-pronged approach to evangelism assumed. Let’s look at those two prongs:

1. Evangelists Should be Bold

Firstly, Paul clearly seems to think that there are certain people in the church who are gifted evangelists.

And obviously Paul obviously places himself in that category in the Colossians passage we read.

It seems that Paul assumed that gifted evangelists could be either:

- a) *local* (like Timothy – see 2 Tim. 4:5) or *trans-local* (like himself);
- b) *leaders* in local churches (see Eph 4:11) or just *members* of churches.

For these people Paul asks his churches to pray for two things: opportunities (“pray... that God may open a door for our message...”) and clarity (“Pray that I may proclaim it clearly...”).

And here is a challenge for our church. Have we identified the gifted evangelists in our midst? Are we praying that our evangelistic leaders will have opportunities to share Christ? And are we praying that those evangelists will be clear in the way they talk about Jesus?

But it doesn’t appear that Paul believes all Christians bear the responsibility for that kind of bold proclamation to which he is called. While evangelism is an essential gifting for all churches, it isn’t a gifting given to every believer. Otherwise, he would have encouraged the Colossians to pray for opportunities and clarity for themselves as well. He doesn’t. He asks something slightly different from them.

This leads us to look at Paul’s second prong of evangelism. What does he think the rest of us should be doing to share Christ with others?

Firstly, Paul calls on evangelists to be bold, and secondly...

2. The Rest of us should be Questionable

Yep, I said questionable! Well, I didn’t say it, Paul did. Listen:

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Col. 4:6)

While Paul sees the gifted evangelist seizing opportunities and boldly proclaiming the Gospel (as Acts clearly shows him doing), it appears he thinks the contribution that the average believer will make to evangelism is to answer the enquiries of unbelievers.

And Peter agrees:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (1Pet. 3:15-16)

In *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost says,

“The believers’ function then was to pray like crazy and to conduct themselves, in word and deed, in such a way as to provoke unbelievers to question their beliefs and enter into an evangelistic dialogue.” (p.5)

While the evangelists are making the most of every opportunity, the primary contribution the rest of us make to the work of evangelism is to answer questions!

To be questionable. Intriguing. Surprising.

That's why Michael Frost called his book *Surprise the World*. It's only when we're surprising or intriguing that anyone will ask us a question.

Here's the central issue to consider: we're doing it all wrong if no one ever asks us any questions about our lives. If our lives look pretty much like any other respectable law-abiding citizen, what's so intriguing about that?

Now let's bring those two prongs together, but change the metaphor. Because the gifted evangelists and the rest of us are the two halves of the biblical approach to evangelism. They are...

3. Like the Two Blades of a Pair of Scissors

The biblical model of evangelism then is for church leaders to:

- a) identify, equip and mobilize gifted evangelists (with gifted evangelistic leaders taking the primary responsibility), and
- b) inspire all believers to live questionable lives.

If all believers are leading the kind of lives that evoke questions from their friends, then opportunities for faith sharing abound and chances for the gifted evangelists to boldly proclaim are increased.

Michael Frost puts it this way:

"I think gifted evangelistic leaders bear the responsibility to equip their congregations to be able to tell others about Jesus, but that the opportunities for faith sharing will emerge from questioning unbelievers. Gifted evangelistic leaders should be training their congregations to speak about Jesus conversationally when questioned about how they deal with suffering, or why they spend their vacation serving the poor, or why they've opened their home to refugees, or why they're fasting during Lent, or why they've made career choices that allow them to contribute to the greater social good." (p.6)

How questionable is your life? Does it look just like your neighbors' lives? Is there anything intriguing or surprising about it at all? If not, then we leaders haven't done a good job in helping you.

4. How Can We be more Questionable?

Let's consider making it a project to be more surprising to our neighbors.

Michael Frost suggests five ways we can all live more questionable lives, but today I just want to look at just one of them.

Blessing others.

In church we use the term “bless” a lot, but have you ever considered what it really means? Way back, in Old English, it comes from the term meaning, “to add strength to another’s arm.”

Therefore, to bless another is to build them up, to fill them with the encouragement for them to increase in strength and prosperity.

When we bless others we surprise them. In our busy world, when people are running from one thing to the next, the simple decision to add strength to another’s arm is intriguing.

Here are three ways we can bless our unbelieving friends and neighbors:

- a) **Words of Affirmation:** This is the simplest way to bless someone. Send them a note, write them an email, text them. Send them some words of affirmation and encouragement.
“I can live for two months on a good compliment.” – Mark Twain
“A word of encouragement is like oxygen to the soul.” – Michael Frost
- b) **Acts of Kindness:** Bless others by doing them a favor or providing some kind of practical support – cut an old lady’s lawn, babysitting an exhausted couple’s kids, help a neighbor move house.
- c) **Gifts:** I’m talking about totally random gift-giving. Nothing blesses someone more than an unexpected gift.

You might have thought I was going to say provide a meal for someone. That would definitely bless them, but next week we’re going to look at the surprising power of eating together, so we’ll save that until then.

In *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost urges us to undertake the challenge of blessing three people every week – at least one of whom is not a member of your church; at least one whom is a member of your church; and the third can be from either category.

Do you think you could do that?

Would you pray with me that God might reveal three people we could bless either with a word of affirmation, an act of kindness or a gift?

And remember the words of Paul and Peter we read earlier. They say in our dealings with outsiders we should “be wise..., full of grace..., seasoned with salt..., gentleness and respect.” When we do this, people will be intrigued by our motivations. And that’s when we get to speak about Jesus, the one who taught us to bless others.

Conclusion

In his book, *Discover Your Mission Now*, Dave Ferguson recounts reading a doctoral thesis entitled “Blessers versus Converters.” The researcher had looked at two teams of short-term missionaries that visited Thailand with distinctly different missional strategies.

The team referred to as the “blessers” went with the intention of simply blessing people. They saw their mission as being to bless whoever came their way in whatever practical ways they could. On the other hand, the “converters” went with the sole intention of converting people and evangelizing everyone they encountered. The researchers found that the “blessers” also had almost 50 times as many conversions than the “converters!”

When we live unexpected lives (which clearly includes the blessing of strangers), we find ourselves being questioned by others. Then we have the best opportunity for sharing the hope of Christ within us.

Week 2 – Changing the World One Meal at a Time

Scripture Reading: Multiple passages. An introductory reading could be Luke 14:1, 7-14.

Background Reading: *Surprise the World* Ch. 4

Introduction

Last week we looked at Paul’s two-pronged approach to evangelism – bold proclamation by the evangelists, and the living of questionable or intriguing lives by believers.

We explored briefly what it means to live a questionable life – one that surprises unbelievers and evokes curiosity about our faith. This week I want us to look at a distinctly biblical practice that could do exactly that.

Before we get to it, let me ask you a question. How would you complete the following sentence: ‘The Son of Man came ...?’” [pause]

There are three ways that the New Testament completes that sentence and while the first two are well known, the third is somewhat surprising:

- i. The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45);
- ii. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Lk.19:10);
- iii. The Son of Man came *eating and drinking...* (Lk.7:34).

Yep, eating and drinking.

You see the first two passages tell us what Jesus came to achieve, but the third tells us the *manner* in which he did it. He did it around tables. One of the ways we can surprise the world is by how we use our table. Let’s look at how the table can shape our mission in the neighbourhood:

1. The Table Can Be a Surprising Place

One of the most surprising things about Jesus was who he ate with. His detractors regularly accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton. Jesus was neither of those things, but obviously his preparedness to eat and drink with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes gave his enemies plenty of ammunition.

He began his public ministry by providing more wine at a wedding feast in Cana.

Indeed, the miracle at Cana, which we find in John 2, is a great example of the surprising nature of the table.

The water jars Jesus used to turn water into wine had been set aside for the ceremonial washing associated with Jewish purification rites. If a Jew felt they had been ‘contaminated’ by contact with Gentiles they would wash in water and recite certain prayers to restore themselves to their sanctified state before God.

Jesus takes these symbols of the separation between Jews and Gentiles, between the holy and the unholy, and fills them with wine, the universal symbol of hospitality, inclusion and fellowship. And then he continues to do this all through his earthly ministry.

In Luke’s Gospel you see how often Jesus used the table to surprise his fellow guests.

It is at a table that Jesus accepted the worship of a sinful woman and criticizes the self-righteousness of Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:36-50). It is at a table that Jesus dispensed advice for how to welcome the poor into your lives (Lk 14:7-14). And it is at a table that Jesus revealed himself as the risen Lord in Emmaus (Lk 24:28-32).

Use your table to break down the walls that separate people in our society. Surprise the world by who you invite to share your table.

In his book *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost says we should be “radical socializers.” What a great thought. How can your socializing be more radical?

Along these lines, in their book, *Right Here Right Now*, Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford say:

“Sharing meals together on a regular basis is one of the most sacred practices we can engage in as believers. Missional hospitality is a tremendous opportunity to extend the kingdom of God. We can literally eat our way into the kingdom of God! If every Christian household regularly invited a stranger or a poor person into their home for a meal once a week, we would literally change the world by eating!”

So the table can be a surprising place that gets people asking why we break bread with unexpected guests. But secondly...

2. The Table Fosters Community

Have you ever seen an older couple eating in a restaurant in complete silence? It seems odd doesn’t it?

The table is a forum for conversation and conviviality, for rest and reconciliation. At the table we *talk*.

Instead of just inviting your neighbors to church or a church event, why not start by inviting them to your table.

Simon Carey Holt is a theologian as well as a professional chef. He says this about how the table creates community:

“It is through the daily practice of the table that we live a life worth living. Through the table we know who we are, where we come from, what we value and believe. At the table we learn what it means to be family and how to live in responsible, loving relationships. Through the table we live our neighborliness and citizenship, express our allegiance to particular places and communities, and claim our sense of home and belonging. At the table we celebrate beauty and express solidarity with those who are broken and hungry.”

Us Christians can be victims of the holy huddle, can't we? We only invite other Christians to our tables because we feel more comfortable with each other. But I think Jesus calls us to foster community with unbelievers as well.

In Jesus' time a person would never eat with someone of different social standing, and certainly never with someone of a different religion (i.e. Jews eating at the table of Gentiles). But Jesus turns this on its head. He ate with them first, and asked repentance of them later.

Ben Myers says of Jesus' presence at a sinner's table: “Contact triggered repentance; conversion flowered from communion.”

Conversion flowered from communion. What a beautiful expression. We see it in Jesus' attendance at a meal at the home of the tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). His communion with the sinful tax collector led to repentance and conversion.

We need to become radical socializers too.

3. The Table Mirrors the Character of God

Thirdly, eating with others can be a profoundly theological practice. It mirrors the character of the Triune God. Look at this icon of the Holy Trinity. It was painted around 1410 by Andrei Rublev and it depicts the Father, Son and Spirit gathered together around a table.



It's a beautiful image of the *fellowship* of three persons of the Trinity. When we join together around a table we mirror the relationships of the Father, Son and Spirit.

Janice Price puts it this way:

“Hospitality becomes the ‘modus operandi’ of mission, as those in common participation in the life and mission of God meet and receive from each other. This mirrors the hospitality of the Trinity as God chooses to open himself to the other through the Incarnation and to subject himself to the created order.”

I think it's no coincidence that when Jesus gave his disciples a practice to remember him by it was the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine.

Today, we celebrate communion or the Lord's Supper in a very formal, liturgical way. But the first Christians celebrated it in the context of a banquet. The table, therefore, was the primary symbol of Christian worship. Not the pulpit or the choir or the band. The table.

Conclusion

We have been reading through Michael Frost's book, *Surprise the World*, in which he says we should live “questionable lives” – the kinds of lives that intrigue our neighbors and evoke their questions about our faith. The way we eat can be intriguing. By refusing to be gluttons or drunkards we can model the character of God, foster community and surprise our guests with our table fellowship.

So I'm calling you to foster the habit of eating with three people each week. You won't need to add a great deal into your often already busy schedule. You already eat three times a day. That's 21 meals a

week. I'm simply asking that you bring another person to your table for three of those. Or if you want to cut corners, you could bring three people to your table for one of them.

Invite the unpopular and the outcast as well as your friends and work colleagues. Let's show the world what heaven will be like. Jesus regularly used the illustration of a banquet to describe his Kingdom. We can show and tell our neighbors about that over a delicious meal with friends and soon-to-be-friends.

Week 3: The Answer is Always Jesus

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:1-6

Background Reading: *Surprise the World* Ch.4

Introduction

Michael Frost, the author of *Surprise the World*, the book we're studying this month, tells the story of volunteering to help the Salvation Army collect money for a disaster relief appeal. The local Salvation Army corps was very small so they called on Christians from the other churches in town to go door-to-door asking for donations. Michael volunteered and was given an identification tag and a bucket with the famous red shield symbol of the Salvation Army.

At one house, Michael knocked on the door and was met by a very warm and enthusiastic man. He gladly donated and proceeded to explain that the Salvation Army had helped his family when he was a young boy. They really got his family through a very tough time. He then proceeded to explain how grateful he was for that assistance and how much he loved the Salvation Army for all the work it did to alleviate suffering and help the poor in the world.

"In fact," the man continued, "I've always been intrigued by you guys. I mean, you do so much for others, but what are you exactly? Are you a church? Or a charity? You're Christians, right? What exactly do you believe? Do you baptize people? Do you agree with same-sex marriage? Are you like the Southern Baptists? Or the Pentecostals?"

Much to Michael's embarrassment, he went on and on with scores of questions about the Salvation Army. I say much to his embarrassment because Michael isn't a member of the Salvation Army and couldn't accurately answer many of his enquiries. Finally he had to admit he was only volunteering for the organisation, he didn't actually belong to it.

I open with this story because we have been exploring our need to live "questionable lives" to surprise the world, to attract the questions of others. But unless we know what to say when those questions come it's been all in vain.

We'll be like Michael, standing dumbfounded on a stranger's porch not knowing what to say.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that the biblical model of evangelism involves the dual action of gifted evangelists who are called to practice bold proclamation, and everyday believers who are to live such surprising lives they invite the questions of neighbours.

But this only works if us everyday believers know how to answer those questions. Here are a few things to bear in mind when considering how to answer people...

1. Don't "Preach the Gospel", Tell Them About Jesus

I'm sure you've heard the joke about the pastor giving the children's message during church who asked the kids for the name of the little creature that lives in trees (pause – no response) and eats nuts (pause – no response). "It's gray (pause) and has a long bushy tail (pause) and it jumps from branch to branch (pause) and chatters and flips its tail when it's excited (pause – still no response)."

Finally one little boy tentatively raised his hand. The pastor breathed a sigh of relief and called on him.

"Well," said the boy, "it sure sounds like a squirrel, but I know the answer must be Jesus!"

As funny as that is, when it comes to responding to people's questions the answer *is* always Jesus.

The church has often told Christians they need to "preach the gospel" when they get an opportunity to do so. But as I mentioned a few weeks ago, this can be intimidating for many Christians.

What exactly does it mean to "preach the gospel"? Listen to the words of Paul in Romans 1:1

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God..."

Paul describes himself as set apart for the gospel and then he goes on to explain what that gospel is. Listen as he continues:

"...the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake." (Rom 1:2-5)

According to this passage, the gospel is the story of Jesus – his messianic credentials, his physical descent from David, his vindication/validation by the Spirit of God, his resurrection from the dead.

In fact, every time Paul explains his use of the term gospel he does so by recounting the life of Jesus.

If you read Paul's lengthy evangelistic sermon in Acts 13:16-39, where he is literally "preaching" the gospel, the focus is on the events of Jesus' life – his royal birth, miracles, teaching, sacrificial death, and resurrection.

Even when he doesn't have much space for a lengthy retelling of Jesus' story, he summarizes it like he did in Romans 1.

Listen to his words in 2Tim 2:8: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. *This is my gospel.*"

According to Paul the gospel isn't the 4 Spiritual Laws or the Bridge to Life illustration. It is all about Jesus:

- his claim to the eternal throne promised to King David;
- his embodiment of the presence of God's kingdom;
- his invitation to enter the kingdom, to enjoy its blessing and embrace its demands;
- his atonement for the sins of those who would otherwise be condemned at the consummation of the kingdom;
- his status as the risen Lord of the coming kingdom.

So you can see when I say “don't preach the gospel just tell them about Jesus” telling people about Jesus is telling them the gospel.

We need to become so familiar with the stories of the Gospels (Matt, Mark, Luke, John) that they roll off the tongue when people ask us why we host dinner parties for the poor. Or why we bless so many people every week. Or why we volunteer for various organizations. Or why we spent our vacation on disaster relief projects.

Michael Frost refers to us needing to be “marinated” in the Gospels so we can share any part of the story as the occasion calls for.

2. Don't Focus on their Sin, Focus on Jesus' Kingship

You'll notice that none of Paul's gospel sharing (Rom 1, Acts 13, 2Tim 2) focuses on telling people they're sinners. If there's anything all three of those passages focus on it's Jesus' Davidic kingly rule.

When people ask you why you live as you do, your goal should be to let them know that it's because of the example and teaching of King Jesus.

David Bosch writes, “The mission of God's people is to alert others to the universal reign of God.”

If we believe Jesus reigns as King, and if we believe his Kingdom is a realm of reconciliation, justice, beauty and wholeness, we should not only demonstrate these things. We should also speak about them.

Learn the stories of Jesus and how he both announced and demonstrated the Kingdom. When people ask you why you're so committed to social justice, tell them about King Jesus. When they ask you why you feed the poor, or protect the environment, or produce beautiful art or food, tell them these are expressions of the world King Jesus is bringing.

Don't be disturbed that I said not to focus on people's sin. If you share Jesus well, it will lead people to question their own lives.

In fact, in the Acts 13 sermon I referred to earlier, it concludes this way:

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.” (Act 13:38-39)

So he ends up addressing people's sin. But he begins with Jesus.

In other words, after preaching the story of Jesus from verse 16-37, he ends up with the doctrine of justification by faith, anchoring it explicitly in the historical events of Jesus' messianic rule, life, death and resurrection.

3. Don't Focus on Church, Focus on Purpose

Theologian, David Bosch once wrote, "At its heart, the gospel is news about God's action and his reign, not his institution."

We often fall into the trap of wanting to tell everyone how great our church is, but we're not recruitment officers for the church.

It's tempting when people ask us questions about the mistakes made by the church (the Crusades, sexual abuse of minors by priests, etc) to feel our job is to defend the church. But real gospel ministry is about pointing people to Jesus.

Instead of spruiking church programs or defending the actions of other Christians, try to focus on sharing how King Jesus has changed your life.

God created the world according to his good purposes, and even though human sin opened the door for evil, undermining God's purposes, Jesus took our punishment.

He conquers evil, brings forgiveness and defeats death. So there will be a new social and political order according to God's purposes, a new order that began with his resurrection.

We live in the light of the future in the power of the Spirit. Our lives have purpose. Not just the purpose of church-going, but the purpose to join God in the redemption, repair and renewal of this world.

Conclusion

In *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost tells the story of meeting a group of hardcore surfing enthusiasts and asking them who their favourite surfer of all time was. They said it was the Florida surfer, Kelly Slater, who has been crowned the world surfing champion a record 11 times, including 5 consecutive times from 1994–98. He is the youngest (at age 20) and the oldest (at age 39) to win the title.

When Michael asked them to tell him more about Kelly Slater they went bananas, regaling him with facts about Slater's life – where he grew up (Cocoa Beach), what boards he uses (Channel Island surfboards), which years he won the title (too many to list here), what movies and television shows he's appeared in (too many to list here), which models and movie stars he's dated (again, too many to list here), and on and on.

What if I (or a neighbor of yours) was to ask you, “Tell me, what do you know about Jesus?”

What would you say?

Michael concluded:

“When we live questionable lives people should see our strange behavior and ask us about our motivations and then we should be able to speak about Jesus the way surfers would speak about Kelly Slater, with energy and enthusiasm, with reverence and awe, with delight and wonder.” (p.83)

Week 4: The Sent Ones

Scripture Reading: Mt 5:14-16; 10:7-8.

Background Reading: *Surprise the World* Ch.7

Introduction

Are you the kind of person who enjoys watching the trailers for upcoming movies?

Maybe you get to the theater early especially to see those trailers on the big screen.

Trailers are tasters, short film versions of the soon-to-be-released feature, and they usually include the best special effects or the funniest scenes or the most romantic moments, depending on the film, of the upcoming feature.

Now, watch those around you in the theater at the end of each trailer. If it has done its job, usually one person will turn to the other and “I want to see that movie.” This is a great metaphor for the church. If we do our job well, people will say, “I want to see the world they come from.”

I’ve mentioned a few times over this series that, even though not every believer is a gifted evangelist, we still need to take seriously our calling to alert others to God’s reign and rule.

Try to think of God’s rule, the Kingdom of Heaven, the coming New Creation, as the main feature. As a massive, glorious blockbuster film. Our lives should be like trailers, giving people a taste of the full thing.

Theologian Lesslie Newbigin put it this way, “[the church] exists for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.

Sign, instrument and foretaste. What do they mean?

- **Sign** – The church is a sign, pointing people to a reality that is right around the corner – the kingship of Jesus and his immanent return.
- **Foretaste** – Like the movie trailer the church is where people can get a taste of the future in the present. When the church is a foretaste we demonstrates what life is like when men and women live under the rule and reign in the power of the Spirit.
- **Instrument** – The church is not just a sign and foretaste, but also an instrument. Like a tool in the hands of God we are used to help shape God’s preferred future for this planet.

So, what is the reign of God like, and how can our lives be like a sign or a foretaste? If your life is meant to alert people to his reign, what exactly are you pointing them to? Let me suggest a few things I have borrowed from various writings by N.T. Wright. He says the reign of God has these essential elements:

1. Reconciliation is at the Heart of God's Reign

Reconciliation between God and humankind is at the heart of Christ's work on the cross. Listen to Paul explaining this in 2Cor 5:18-20:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Since reconciliation is so central, it makes sense that it should be a core expression of God's reign and rule. Reconciliation between God and humankind, between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, black and white and Asian and Hispanic, etc. etc. Paul pursues the implications of this for the church in Galatians 3:26-29:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

We are to both announce reconciliation (champion it, describe, explain, advocate for), and demonstrate it (be reconciled to others, broker reconciliation among others).

You might do this in your workplace, by mediating between warring colleagues. Or you might need to be reconciled with a friend or relative with whom you've been estranged. You might share the good news with someone that God reconciles us to himself through his son, Jesus.

2. Justice Characterizes God's Reign

The Hebrew word for "justice," *mishpat*, occurs in its various forms more than 200 times in the Old Testament. It means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving people their rights. Mishpat is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.

Over and over again, mishpat describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor—those who have been called "the quartet of the vulnerable."

It is related to another Hebrew word *tzadeqah*, which refers to a life of right relationships. Tzadeqah refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity and equity.

One way to look at the relationship between the two words is that *tzadeqah* is "primary justice" and *mishpat* is "rectifying justice."

In other words tzadeqah is the blockbuster film, the way life will be like in the Kingdom of Heaven, while mishpat is the trailer.

And Jesus came to bring both. Nearly every Christmas we read these words in Isaiah 9:6-7:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

His reign is one of tzadeqah. And we are called to perform acts of mishpat to reveal his reign to others.

3. Beauty Reveals God's Reign

It's my guess that the times and places where you often feel closest to God is probably on a mountaintop or a beach or in the presence of natural beauty. Doesn't a beautiful cathedral or a piece of music leverage you toward the creator of all true beauty?

But more than natural beauty, I think we should commit ourselves to creating beautiful music, art, craft, and food, and inviting others to join us. Try to find ways to alert others to the universal reign of God through Christ by an observation of his creation and by personally fashioning expressions of beauty.

NT Wright puts it this way:

"It is central to Christian living that we should celebrate the goodness of creation, ponder its present brokenness, and, insofar as we can, celebrate in advance the healing of the world, the

new creation itself. Art, music, literature, dance, theatre, and many other expressions of human delight and wisdom, can all be explored in new ways.”

4. Wholeness Demonstrates God’s Reign

When John the Baptist heard from prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to check with him whether he was really the Christ, or should he expect someone else?

This was Jesus’ message to John’s disciples in Mt 11:2-6:

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”

The primary ways that Jesus revealed his kingdom to others was through his use of parables and miracles. The miracles were trailers, or foretastes, of the world to come.

In God’s reign there will be no sickness or disease, no mental illness or depression, nor birth defects or scars. We will be remade whole.

So it follows that bringing healing and wholeness is a primary way we alert others to God’s reign.

Michael Frost describes it this way:

“Of course, many Christians are committed to bringing healing to the lives of others – doctors, nurses, psychologists, counselors, etc. And I want to encourage these as important expressions of the reign of God. When Christians provide emergency relief to victims of natural disasters we are showing them what the reign of God looks like. When we help to repair a broken marriage we do the same. When a Christian medical practitioner treats a patient with dignity and grace, bringing healing to their body, we can clearly see it as mirroring the work of God. But I want to go further and say that, more than these practical expressions of healing, we should also be praying for supernatural healing in people’s lives.” (p.92-93)

Conclusion

We Christians are the “sent ones” and we have been sent into our worlds – our workplaces, our neighborhoods – to alert others to the reign of God. It’s our role as instruments in God’s hands to bring tastes of wholeness, justice, beauty and reconciliation, and to let others know these will fully flower in the return of Christ.

In *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost recommends we journal all the ways God has sent us to be a sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom.

When you think about it, people wear fitness monitoring wristbands that record the number of steps they walk, their sleep patterns and their calorie intake. This is a form of journaling. It's a way of recording your development. It defines you in some meaningful way as a person concerned about your physical fitness.

Keeping a journal and recording all the ways you are mirroring God's work in the world is similar. It will start to shape the way you think about yourself. You will eventually come to self-identify as a missionary, a sent one.

It is about reshaping our identities around our fundamental calling as the sent ones of God. By fostering the habit of briefly journaling the various ways (large or small) that you alerted others to God's reign of reconciliation, justice, beauty and wholeness, you will find yourself increasingly identifying yourself as a sent one.