



RAPID RESPONSE TO PRACTICES OF A MISSIONAL PEOPLE BY ALAN J ROXBURGH

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was traveling to Harlem and around the US in 1930, and it was there, in the neighborhood of Harlem that he said, 'I moved from phraseology to reality.' Current ecclesial speech in the US is around phraseology and not the concrete. We fight over whether we should focus on evangelism, justice, leadership, or discipleship, and meanwhile the ship of the church has sailed from most of the neighborhood.

I finished reading Alan Roxburgh's article in Capitol Hill neighborhood in Seattle. I don't live here, but I visit at least once a year and it is clear that this is not West Michigan, where I do live. This is also not Harlem, yet my sense of Roxburgh's article was similar to Bonhoeffer's realization - it is time to move from phraseology to reality

Capitol Hill is the quintessential home of the NONE ZONE as popularly described, yet I have every sense that God has not deserted this neighborhood. This neighborhood does not know nor do they care about the church conversation around Driscoll, Rob Bell, or any other anglo-evangelicals; they don't concern themselves with 3DM, denominational fights over social questions, or the next church conference that has an X in the name. They don't know that I preached this morning, nor do I think that most heard someone proclaim what we call the 'good news' today. Yet, I cannot help but believe that there is something here, in this neighborhood, for which God is deeply concerned and the neighbors are deeply interested. I believe that this is a town and place where Jesus himself intended to go, yet he did not intend to go as most current church discussions would want to.

Any engagement with God in this neighborhood will begin in a very different space than church health, growth, attraction, or style; it will begin not by answering 'what is...discipleship, evangelism, or justice.' I believe that a missional discussion here requires a renaissance perspective, where the engaged theologian is consistently aware of Roxburgh's sense of the materiality of the neighborhood, *per se*. The walking follower of Jesus is willing to enter the frays of this materiality. The Renaissance person recognizes the brewery, the coffee shop, the sex shops, the public library and Microsoft. The Renaissance person sees the homeless, the walkers, loiterers, businessmen, and pets and says, 'What is God up to here?' She reads these signs as sociologist, literary genius, foodie, political theorist, and even sports enthusiast. She is more curious than convicted, more expansive than condescending. The people and places are not objects for her judgment or conversion; they are people participating in a world that God so deeply loves. Her wandering is not devoid of calling forth the redemptive narrative of Scripture, and her renaissance curiosity allows her to enter the Capitol Hill neighborhood as one 'dependent upon their hospitality.' She comes to the neighborhood as one who Jesus called *friend* and seeks to befriend those around her (in these towns and places he himself intended to go). This collision of neighborhood and narrative is not a conflict to be solved but a creative exercise in discovering the gospel anew. This kind of friendship requires one to have received the Holy Spirit (John 20) and to live into and out of the delegated agency of God. Capitol Hill is a friend of God that the people of God (read Church) is invited to engage.

I found myself envisioning the kind of school that Roxburgh's essay invites. The kind of missional theologian that Roxburgh invites to enter Capitol Hill is one who was educated in the monastery and not necessarily the American system of higher education. Every subject of concern in this monastic school is a subject for exploring the place of God in the world. The monastic teachers knew their neighborhoods and invited their students into this understanding. The American system of education that celebrates expertise, competition, and autonomy (each a small aspect of 'why we don't participate in the life of the Triune God') reduces the agency of God to a personal experience and separates the wisdom of God from our daily curiosity.

The aforementioned Renaissance woman ends her walk about the neighborhood and returns to be with her friends for dinner behind the secure doors of Christian fellowship (John 20:19). The fellowship begins to reflect on their days, and the Renaissance woman gently rejects the abstractions and quick explanations of her friends about the world; she simply narrates the worlds she saw. There is nothing

abstract or phrase-heavy in her speech, and she appears to be without suspicion of her own body OR the bodies of the tattooed, disabled, pretentious, and otherwise. Her friends, all from her *church*, begin to consider how their church could help or 'reach' these people. They use catchy Christian discipleship phrases and are unable to move from 'phraseology to reality.' She kindly says 'no, I don't think so.' She wants to narrate what she sees, wrestle with the God upon *their* faces, and invite her fellowship to more regularly walk their neighborhoods to engage and be engaged. Her friends experience *disorientation* in her narration, yet they are growingly curious as she unfolds the day. She trusts that overtime God will reveal to her fellowship what has been hidden, and meals will be shared, illness healed, and demons cast out; indeed the Kingdom of God has come near.

I finish this response to Roxburgh as I arrived back in Holland, MI. In some ways Capitol Hill and Holland could not be further apart. Yet I am eager to return to my weekly meal at the Community Kitchen, where I often eat what is set before me with strangers; we rarely say a word to one another. I walk the heated sidewalks of downtown Holland or visit the breweries, coffee shops, and the local Gazelle Sports and make connections and discover God's friends. I am learning to suspend judgment in all of these places that I may discover God as I ask 'Who are these people?' And like the disciples, my engagement with God is no longer behind locked doors for fears of the *neighborhood*.



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