

Title: “Lions, Lambs, and the New Creation: An Exploration of the Eschatological Vision of Isaiah 11 for the Church”

Presentation Description: An exploration of the literary/prophetic function of Isaiah 11, particularly as it applies to an eschatological vision for the Church generally, and the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition specifically. Particular focus will be given to the practical implications for the local church.

Early on in my ministerial preparation I began to pray that God would lead me to a passage of scripture that would become the guiding vision of my pastoral ministry. It was during that time that one of my professors, and now my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Steve Green, introduced me to Isaiah 11. It has become the *telos* scripture of what I believe about the Kingdom of God, and the paradigm for which I live as a spiritual leader in God’s Church. I would like to read it for you now.

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots. The Lord’s spirit will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of planning and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD. He will delight in fearing the LORD. He won’t judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay. He will judge the needy with righteousness, and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth; by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked. Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze. Their young will lie down together, and a lion will eat straw like an ox. A nursing child will play over the snake’s hole; toddlers will reach right over the serpent’s den. They won’t harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain. The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD, just as the water covers the sea. On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious. (Isaiah 11:1-10, *Common English Bible*)

Much has been written in recent biblical studies regarding the importance of literary genres and their rhetorical function. “Genre” refers to the form of the literature. “Rhetorical function” refers to how the genre is to be used literarily, or “what a particular genre is designed to do in the reading process.”¹

For example, one would not read all forms of the genre of a letter in the same way. A “Dear Grandma” letter has a very different purpose than a “Dear John” letter. A letter of resignation has a very different purpose than a reference letter. There are different forms of letters with various rhetorical functions.

There are even “forms within the form.” A newspaper is a form of literature that has distinctive and separate rhetorical functions. There are headlines and editorials, obituaries and box scores, crosswords and weather reports. While they are all in the form of a newspaper, these “forms within the form,” have different functions and therefore must be read in light of those purposes.

Reading the literary genres of scripture with an eye toward form and function helps to ensure exegetical accuracy. According to our Nazarene Articles of Faith, the sixty-six books of the Christian Scriptures have the same purposes; they are “given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation.”² However, the forms those

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 24-25.

scriptures take to express these purposes are rich and varied. There are narratives and poems, historical records and genealogies, law and wisdom, songs and letters, prophets and gospels. And there are “forms within the form.” There are psalms of thanksgiving, psalms of lament, psalms of ascent, and royal psalms. All of them compose the psalter, but each with very different rhetorical functions intended to elicit different responses from the hearer/reader. To “read” a lament psalm with the same literary eye as a thanksgiving psalm would miss the power of the inspired Word’s intent.

The literary form of Isaiah 11 contains both prophetic and apocalyptic elements. Prophetic is more than prediction. It is forth-telling. Additionally, apocalyptic is more than end-time projections. James K.A. Smith says that the point of apocalyptic literature is “unveiling the realities around us for what they really are.”³

With these purposes in mind, the two-fold rhetorical function of prophetic/apocalyptic genres is to offer hope for the future and to serve as a paradigm for living today. It does not deny the reality of the way things *are*, but looks with hope to the way things will *be*. Biblical theologians have described this

² Church of the Nazarene, *Manual*.

³ James A.K. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 92.

apocalyptic viewpoint as the “already” and “not yet” kingdom of God.⁴ It is a call to a particular way for God’s people to order their lives today, according to the way one day things will be. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). In other words, our life together in Christian community *now* is a small glimpse of heaven on earth.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful. I have several friends who do not have a lot of money right now. They work regular type jobs. They live fairly normal lives. Except for one thing . . . they know that sometime in the near future they are going to come into a great deal of money through an inheritance, because a member of their family is very wealthy. As a result they don’t tend to worry much about financial issues. They don’t worry about how they’re going to pay for their kids’ education. They don’t worry about getting the promotion at work. They don’t worry about a lot of things because they are coming into an amazing inheritance, and that affects the way they live now.

We have a way of speaking about that in Christian theology. We call it “living eschatologically.” The Greek word *eschaton* means “last things” or “end times” or “the climax of history.” A Christian, therefore, is someone who lives *today* based on what they know will happen *tomorrow*. A Christian is someone

⁴ A phrase first attributed to Reformed theologian and Princeton professor Gerhardus Vos.

who lives every second of every day with an eye to the future knowing that the best is yet to come. Just like my friends that live today in light of their future inheritance, so Christians live today on the basis of the future. That is living eschatologically.

The apostle Paul alludes to this in the first chapter of Ephesians. As God's children we have been given a rich inheritance by which we can live in light of today. And the basis of this hope is not just a future projection, but the *arrabon*, the down payment, a foretaste of heaven that we can experience now.

Reflecting on this idea, Alan Hirsch quotes R.T. Pascale, proposing that spiritual leadership in the “already” and “not yet” kingdom means that we must learn to “manage from the future.”⁵ Hirsch goes on to write:

This means placing ourselves in the new future and then taking a series of steps, not in order to get there someday, but as if you are there, or almost there, now. . . We are called to act in the knowledge that is already here *now* and yet will be completed *then*.⁶

The assumption of this paper is that the prophetic vision of Isaiah is a vivid portrayal of God's perfect intention for life in the Christian community, and therefore a description of what the Church is called to be like today. The animals mentioned in this text (leopards, goats, oxen, lions, and lambs) are symbolic of a

⁵ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 234.

⁶ Ibid.

variety of different kinds of people. They are metaphors of what God's new creation will look like when the entire world comes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

It has the rhetorical function of offering hope, because it tells us what will be in God's new creation. But it also has the rhetorical function of paradigm, because it is an invitation to order our lives today in Christian community according to the way things will one day be for the whole world. Isaiah 11 is a "type" of what the church is called to be like. This suggests that the animals referred to in the biblical text (leopards, goats, ox, lions, lambs, etc.) can be viewed as metaphors for the people of God. The messianic vision is a vivid depiction of what God's perfected new creation will look like when the entire world comes under the lordship of Jesus Christ, the fruitful Branch from the stump of Jesse.

One reason I believe Isaiah's vision of a "peaceable kingdom"⁷ has captured the imagination of so many is that it is a compelling snapshot of what God's *shalom*, peace and wholeness, look like when God's kingdom begins to break in. Some have suggested that this is only a description of what heaven will be like, because, they say, this is not the way of the world today. Wolves do not live with lambs; leopards do not lie down with goats; calves and lions and yearlings do not

⁷ Edward Hicks, Quaker minister and artist, coined this phrase for his first rendition of a painting on Isaiah 11 in 1834. He eventually produced 61 re-creations of the first painting.

coexist together. Indeed, lambs get eaten, as wolves get fatter. However, if this scriptural vision is intended to be a paradigm for the way we are to construct our lives as the church today, it serves as a beautiful portrait of how God desires life to be shared among his people. The church is a sign and symbol that God's kingdom is breaking into the world. In this way the church becomes both "word" and "witness" to an unbelieving world.

If the church were to live toward Isaiah's vision today there are at least four core values that would have to exist for this communal dream to become a reality.

First, this community must be **inclusive**. Inclusive is about diversity. It has something to do with very dissimilar people coming together in spite of their differences. Exclusive is the opposite of that. When a place is exclusive it means that only particular kinds of people are welcome there. Exclusive refers to country clubs and gated communities. These places require people to have similar socio-economic backgrounds and interests. They are restricted by design. People join clubs and live in gated communities because they want to choose what kinds of friends and neighbors they will have. A church based on Isaiah 11 is the polar opposite of that. It offers a warm embrace to every person, and does not insist that everyone *be* alike, *think* alike, and *act* alike.

Some advocates of the church growth movement suggest that for churches to grow, congregations must form themselves around homogenous units. In his

landmark book, *Understanding Church Growth*, Donald McGavran defines a homogenous unit as “a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common.”⁸ While McGavran’s assessment may be sociologically sound, it is not a biblical picture of Christian community. Homogeneity may be valid in the context of evangelism, but as people come to the faith and are discipled accordingly, they must be integrated into the life of a very diverse body of Christ that will not be homogeneous. Dallas Willard rightly notes, “God’s aim in human history is the creation of an *inclusive* community of loving persons, with himself included as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.”⁹

Isaiah 11 does not promote homogeneity. Leopards, goats, ox, bear, cobras, and little children all co-exist together. This snapshot of the kingdom of God breaks down all potential barriers to Christian community, including gender, class, race, age, economics, and personality differences. This community does not demand everyone be analogous to be loved and accepted. It does not require people to change their essential strengths and natural talents. Lions are still lions; lambs are still lambs. This community celebrates diversity and learns to live

⁸ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Third Edition 1990), 69.

⁹ Dallas Willard, “Studies in the Book of Apostolic Acts: Journey Into the Spiritual Unknown” [unpublished study guide available only from the author] as quoted in Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper and Row, revised edition 1988), 189.

together without devaluing or destroying the other, with the very plan for multiplication thoroughly connected to the range of differences.

The second core value of a church living toward Christian community is **safety**. It must be a place of spiritual, emotional, and physical protection.

If you were to visit a zoo and see a sign on an exhibit that read “Lion-Lamb Enclosure,” how many lambs do you think would be in that exhibit? Zero! There would be no lambs, and several overweight lions. Such is the world we live in. The strong get stronger and the weak get eaten.

[Or as I heard someone say recently: “The lion and the lamb may lay down together, but the lamb won’t get much sleep!”]

Christian community must be the one place where “natural instincts” give way to “new desires.” People in Christian community learn new ways to live together that do not intentionally hurt or harm the other. Lion-like people learn to live without the taste of blood in their mouth. They begin to use their power over others to reinforce and strengthen the community, rather than destroy it. As Isaiah eloquently states, “the lion will eat straw like the ox” (Isaiah 11:7). This is clearly a not so subtle reference to the new creation. This community of God’s people is a place where “lions” become trustworthy, “lambs” become trusting, and where we find ways to sustain our existence together without taking life from one another.

The use of power is an essential part of becoming a community of safety. All power must be submitted to the good of the whole, and be used for the common good. Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks to the issue of power by saying, “Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong, but also the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of the fellowship.”¹⁰ This understanding of community promotes a kind of interdependence, where justice is measured by the power given to the weakest in the community.

The third core value of a Christian community is **life transformation**, because finally, no matter how much a church desires to be inclusive and safe, it cannot happen if its members are not genuinely being changed.

Several years ago my uncle adopted a new pet. It was a female puppy that was half-wolf and half-dog. It was the strangest thing. It looked like a wolf, and acted like a dog. It would fetch sticks, sleep at your feet, and play dead. It was a domesticated wild animal. Until one day this half-wolf and half-dog got into the neighbor’s chicken coop, and for the first time she experienced the taste of blood in her mouth. Her entire countenance changed. Her eyes had a kind of wild-look. I was genuinely afraid of her from that day on. She was no longer half one thing or

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 94.

half another. Her truest, most innate nature was revealed. She was a wolf to the core of her being and there was no going back.

Transformation, in the Christian sense, is not the metamorphosis of lions to lambs, but a spiritual transformation of each person into the likeness of Christ. It is a change of nature, not from the essence of who a person is, but taking the very best God-given aspects of who they are and sanctifying them for kingdom purposes. To further expand Isaiah's metaphor, whenever lions lose the taste of blood in their mouths, it requires a major reorientation of life that can be explained as nothing short of conversion and newness of life. It is the difference between being only a lion, to being a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled lion that God can now use for his glory.

There is a vast difference between a collection of individuals and a community of faith. Life transformation is ultimately what distinguishes the difference between ordinary community and Christian community. While this "heart shaping"¹¹ involves both divine and human activity, it proceeds from the heart of the Trinity. Tod Bolsinger writes, "The essence of God is the love that is shared by the Persons of the Trinity, demonstrated in Jesus Christ and poured into

¹¹McNeal, *A Work of Heart*, xi.

our hearts by the Holy Spirit—and that love, when expressed by the communion of believers, transforms.”¹²

Not only is the quality and depth of community affected by the power of personal life transformation, individual people are impacted by the shared life of the community. Quoting Stanley Hauerwas, Alan Roxburgh states, “We are not Christians because of what we believe, but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus. To become a disciple is not a matter of a new or changed self-understanding, but rather to become part of a different community with a different set of practices.”¹³

The fourth core value of Christian community is **healing**. The reality of the Isaiah 11 metaphor suggests that there will be many lambs that enter the church with deep wounds, brokenness, and in desperate need of healing and wholeness. Not all of these wounds will be inflicted on them by other people; some will be the self-inflicted consequences of bad decisions and poor choices. Yet however those hurts are derived, they need a community that will surround them with grace and offer hope in their despair.

¹² Tod Bolsinger, *It Takes A Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 10.

¹³ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 123.

Isolation from a caring community is often the source of destructive behavior. Bonhoeffer powerfully reminds us, “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation.”¹⁴ Community invites people into accountable relationships, where they can be rescued from the dangerous waters of isolation into the healing atmosphere of grace. The church is fulfilling its mission when it is “a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.”¹⁵

These four aspects of Christian community set forth in Isaiah’s vision are a snapshot of the “already” but “not yet” kingdom of God. Inclusive, safe, life-transforming, and healing community is a little slice of heaven on earth.

This is not possible through human ingenuity and striving. Isaiah says it is only possible because God has raised up a Redeemer. It is possible because God has raised up an anointed and righteous Messiah that gives us the grace to live that way. It is possible because Jesus has come and is coming again. Jesus is the new branch emerging from the old, dead stump. Jesus brings new life out of death.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112.

¹⁵ A quote often attributed to Abigail Van Buren.

The life of the Trinity creates, sustains, and renews this community and its members more and more into the likeness of the first Adam. Again, Roxburgh aptly states,

The One who encounters us in Jesus is the God who is in relationship as Father, Son, and Spirit. God called into being a creation that reflects God's nature. In the New Testament and in the early church, this meant forming a people into a new community that reflected in its life together the nature of God. The church was a sign, witness, and foretaste of God's life in the future of all creation."¹⁶

The role of missional leaders is to invite the people of God to live into this new creation of God by pointing to the vision, modeling the lifestyle, and "cultivating an environment in which this relationality of the kingdom might be experienced."¹⁷

Churches cannot reflect the image of the Triune God and simultaneously reject the purposes of God in the world. When the people of God derive their being from the nature of God, they can no longer exist to perpetuate an institution called "church." They are compelled to move outward in missional-incarnational ways. Hirsch maintains, "This transition can best be recovered by seeing mission as an activity of God and not primarily an activity of the church."¹⁸

Additionally, the church is God's incarnation today. The church is Jesus' body on earth. The church is the temple of the Spirit. The church is not a helpful thing for my individual spiritual journey. The church is the journey.

¹⁶ Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader*, 123.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 147.

The church is not a collection of ‘soul winners’ all seeking to tell unbelievers ‘the Way’ to God. The church is the Way. To be part of the church is to be part of God—to be part of God’s Communion and to be part of God’s ministry.¹⁹

This is the missional power of “being together.” Henri Nouwen argues that, “We cannot bring good news on our own. We are called to proclaim the Gospel together, in community.”²⁰ Then Nouwen reflects on his own experiences of sharing the gospel: “It is Jesus who heals, not I; Jesus who speaks words of truth, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I. This is very clearly made visible *when we proclaim the redeeming power of God together*. Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us.”²¹ When a church is rightly aligned together in this way, it does not *have* a mission; it *is* a mission.

We are not called to face the journey of life alone. Likewise, we are not asked to embrace the mission of God alone. We are called to be a community of pilgrims identified by inclusive relationships and accepting grace. Sometimes the lions among us bare our teeth, and sometimes the lambs among us run and hide. But when we are a community characterized by grace we can be honest with our

¹⁹ Bolsinger, *It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian*, 17.

²⁰ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 40.

²¹ *Ibid*, 41. Emphasis mine.

struggles and frustrations. We can afford to be human, because we no longer order our lives by the patterns of this world, but by the perfect love of Christ working in and through us.

At the very least, Isaiah's eschatological vision teaches us that human beings are hope-shaped creatures. How we live today is completely shaped by what we believe about our future. "God's future is not in a plan or strategy that you introduce; it is among the people of God."²²

This is the vision that drives my hope for the church. This is the future that I believe God is calling us to live toward.

²² Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader*, 145.