



Evaluating the Missional Church Movement

The expression “missional church” is a popular catchphrase in ministry today, evident through its use in book titles, conference themes, blog contributions, and methodologies for church planting. While the phrase has a healthy sound and a familiar ring, one wonders just what the phrase stands for.

On the surface, “missional church” sounds good. Because our own movement of independent Baptist churches was built with an emphasis on church planting and missionary efforts, we have a natural affinity for missions. Who wouldn’t want to be a missional church?

But as is true with any developing idea, careful evaluation is necessary. Because “missional church” represents a recent movement in church ministry, defining the movement can be as difficult as nailing down the meaning of the emergent church. Only now, 20 years after the idea developed, are scholars able to look back with some authority and say, “This is what ‘emergent church’ meant.” My prayer is that we learn to think carefully about such movements as they are developing. While a consensus is still building on the meaning and significance of the missional church, I would like to offer a working definition and a kindly evaluation of the movement.

Defining the Missional Church Idea

Because of its developing nature, I will offer two definitions with rather broad strokes, even somewhat reductionist. There is always danger of misrepresentation or creating confusion, but the goal is a fair article and continued wise evaluation of two key aspects: the original concept of *missio Dei*, and adapted forms of the missional church.

The traditional concept of *missio Dei*. The original form of the missional church movement is strongly connected to the concept of *missio Dei*, which is Latin for “sending of God” or “mission of God.” The idea is considered to be an application of Trinitarian theology, with God the Father sending the Son, followed by the Father and Son sending the Spirit, then the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. In *Transforming Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), David J. Bosch suggests that the idea of *missio Dei* is a develop-

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ment of Karl Barth’s theology, the term originating with Karl Hartenstein.

According to Darrell L. Guder in *Missional Church* (Eerdmans, 1998), *missio Dei* is God’s mission to the world, working to “restore and heal creation.” It involves declaring the

good news of “God’s reign,” a concept that is hard for Guder to define, but may include the general idea of “God’s kingdom” without any differentiation between Christ’s millennial reign and God’s universal reign.

Believers together must be a model and haven of love and fellowship that strengthen those who gather. The church must remain strong as a source for missionary endeavors beyond the scope of church planting.

Followers of this view often believe *missio Dei* includes the church in its mission strategy, but the church is only a small part of the larger mission of God. Proponents of this approach often define the gospel as both word and deed, with a resulting strong emphasis on social justice and social responsibility. They also speak often of participating in “incarnational ministry.” Some key, recent books that fit within this category are Guder’s *Missional Church* and Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*, as well as *The Forgotten Ways* by Alan Hirsch and *Introducing the Missional Church* by Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren.

Adapted forms of the missional church. As the missional idea developed, it incorporated fairly diverse ideas. One end of the spectrum still has some roots in the *missio Dei* concept; the other end of the spectrum is an intensified form of friendship evangelism. Most advocates of these adapted forms see the missional movement as the church or individual Christians who are doing mission right where they are.

The idea is that every believer needs to carry out the work of a missionary. This belief is not just a kind of missionary-mindedness, but more of mission-centeredness. This movement in general is more church centered than the traditional *missio Dei* movement and focuses heavily on church planting.

Much of this adaptation is positive, but some adherents are heavily involved with social responsibility and a concern for social justice, and others continue to blur the line between the church and the millennial Kingdom. Representative writers in this area include Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*; Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church*; David Putman, *Breaking the Discipleship Code*; Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice*; and Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*.

Positives of the Movement

The missional movement makes some positive contributions to church ministry.

A more external approach to evangelism. The missional movement challenges the church toward a more external approach to evangelism rather than having them try to attract

unbelievers to the church. While the church may have unbelievers present (1 Corinthians 14:23–25), the primary work of evangelism takes place outside the walls of the church building. The missional church movement rightly challenges the church to this kind of missionary labor.

An effort to reach people who would not attend a church. The missional movement pushes the church to reach out to

people who are less likely to ever visit the church. The culture in the United States is increasingly pagan; people are less likely to just walk through the doors of the church. The missional movement rightly challenges the church to reach *all* of its neighbors.

A careful evaluation of existing programs. The missional movement reminds the church of the danger of becoming too ingrown, too consumed with buildings and bureaucracy.

A missionary mind-set for everyone.

The missional movement rightly causes us to think through how to correctly adapt to reaching our culture. Where previous generations believed cross-cultural missions required international travel, now we merely walk across the street.

An emphasis on church planting. The missional movement solicits the church to greater church-planting endeavors, somewhat of a reactivation and correction to a megachurch mind-set.

Concerns about the Movement

While the missional movement makes some contributions to the missionary effort of the church, a few concerns should be noted.

A tendency to misapply the Old Testament. Most of the Old Testament commands concerning the poor and social justice were given to the theocratic community of Israel and were to be applied within the limited framework of that society. Within some missional thinking, Old Testament commands concerning justice and poverty are being widely applied to all humankind or to the church in its relationship to society at large.

Confusion on the content of the gospel. For some in the missional church movement, the gospel encompasses both word (preaching) and deed (socially directed good works), something reminiscent of the social gospel of past years. Others incorporate the “reign of God” into the good news, which clouds the clarity of the gospel’s message and work. The most precise definition of the gospel is given in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4, where Paul preached salvation based on the death and resurrection of Christ.

Confusion between the Kingdom and the church. Scripture, especially the Gospels, must be understood in the light of Jesus’ coming as Messiah to offer Israel the Kingdom, the literal thousand-year reign of Christ. Many in the missional church movement see the kingdom of God as something happening right now, or something they will proactively bring in, or even something that is really quite ambiguous.

Confusion over being sent like Christ. The emphasis of John 20:21 is on obedience, not on form of ministry or likeness

Missional Church—What Can Go Wrong?

After seven weeks of preparation and a final Easter Sunday service, Courageous Church of Atlanta, Ga., has canceled its Sunday services in favor of a once-a-month gathering.

“As I read the Gospels and see Jesus, I am increasingly stumped by how we determined sermons and songs are what makes us most like Him,” says Pastor Shaun King. “I am not saying we do away with them, but we preach and sing too much and serve and love in radical ways far too little. The answer is not to add love on top of the sermons and songs, but to decrease the sermons and songs and increase the service and love to create a balance that looks like the life of Jesus.”

King says his decision was motivated by a concern over Atlanta’s significant social blights: sex trafficking, high rates of teen incarceration, and inferior public schools.

Freed from its emphasis on Sunday morning gatherings of 10–12 services per month, the church will now concentrate on small group ministry and community activism. “An intense focus will be placed on discipleship, relationships, and radical service to hurting people and pressing causes in our city and around the world,” King says.

This seems to be a concrete example of right motivations leading to wrong practices. No one is in favor of a church that invests so much time and effort in its Sunday gatherings that it abdicates its responsibility to reach out to its community. When the church growth movement of the 1980s and ’90s was at its zenith, some churches expended way too much energy improving the production values of the Sunday morning service. Cloistered in high-tech suburban temples, congregations spent too much time reflecting on . . . themselves.

But churches cannot repair this problem (or any other) without sound preaching. Interestingly, Pastor King prepared his church for this transition by *preaching a seven-week sermon series on why they should have fewer sermons.*

One might look at such situations wishing for a bit of balance. While every believer has a duty to “read the Gospels and see Jesus,” this must be done while understanding that our beliefs about the New Testament church are motivated primarily by the teachings of the New Testament Epistles, a progressive understanding of God’s will that cannot be limited to the Gospels.—*Kevin Mungons*

to Christ. Christians will never be truly “incarnate.” This description belongs to Christ alone.

Confusion over Jesus’ role in social responsibility. Christ ministered in word (He proclaimed good news) and deed (He also ministered to the poor, healed, and dealt with issues of injustice). Therefore, some conclude, Christians must also minister in word and deed.

However, believers must remember that while Jesus did do some social service, it had a specific purpose and character.

In *What You Should Know about Social Responsibility*, Charles Ryrie wrote that Christ performed social services “very selectively, almost within the community of Israel, and never oriented toward politics or economic redistribution.”

An overemphasis on social involvement. In light of the definition of the gospel and the confusion between the Kingdom and the church, missional church advocates often overemphasize social responsibility. The issue of social responsibility and the church is not new. It was a key tenet of liberalism and a defining issue between new evangelicals and fundamentalists in the ’40s. (See *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* by Carl F. H. Henry.)

Diminished role of the church in missions. The focus is on God’s mission (to restore and heal His creation) and not so much on the mission of the church (to evangelize the lost and to baptize, disciple, and edify believers).

A possible devaluing of the importance of the church gathered. The church’s ministry is at least two-pronged: to the world and to the believer. Ministry to believers must remain pure and doctrinally sound; it must faithfully teach and preach the Word of God. Believers together must be a model and haven of love and fellowship that strengthen those who gather. The church must remain strong as a source for missionary endeavors beyond the scope of church planting. **B**

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5 Responses to the Missional Church

- 1] **Adopt some of the missionary fervor** that is being generated from the missional movement.
- 2] **Learn from the strategic thinking** of some of the missiologists and writers involved in the missional church movement concerning ways we can minister to the culture of the day.
- 3] **Study how the church relates to social responsibilities.** Differentiate between the responsibilities of the individual believer and the mission of the church.
- 4] **Renew efforts to declare the gospel to others.** The mission of the church to the world is primarily proclamational. Find new ways to share the message of the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection with others outside the church.
- 5] **Strengthen the edification mission** of Christ’s gathered church.