

RESEARCH PAPER ON CONCEPTS SURROUNDING THE TERM “MISSIONAL”
By David Kim

The term ‘missional’ has been grabbing a significant amount of headlines lately. In every new book, article, magazine, sermons, even conferences, the term is being employed to describe a new movement; a new genre within Christianity. One Google search on the term will bring up half a million hits.¹ This movement is being looked upon as the author of new communities, ministries, groups, services, and churches. It is being branded as a term that gives new meaning to the way we do ‘church’; even a new way of doing ‘Christianity.’ Yet, while for some it is a completely new concept, others see it as simply a new form of an old tradition. The only thing ‘new’ in this movement is the fact that it is being revisited by the one that lived it in the first place centuries and centuries ago: the church.

There really is not anything new about the term ‘missional’ or ‘missional living’ as some put it when describing a Christian missionary lifestyle. What some today are calling new was in fact a way of life in the early days of the primitive church.² The term that has risen over the past century or two in American evangelical Christianity, ‘evangelism’, was not something to be done door-to-door, every Saturday, or every two weeks, as a group of people geared towards the unknown community members. Evangelism was more than a tract. It was more than a program.

¹ Billings, J. Todd. "What Makes a Church Missional? | Christianity Today | A Magazine of Evangelical Conviction." *Christianity Today | A Magazine of Evangelical Conviction*. N.p., n.d. Web. 3 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/march/16.56.html>>

² Hirsch, Alan. *The forgotten ways: reactivating the missional church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006. Print. Pg. 64

It was more than something to be done on a checklist. It was in and of itself a way of life; albeit, a radical, new, life-transforming, life-giving, Spirit-empowered, Christ-preaching, cross-exulting way of life. In fact, Mortimer Arias argues that Jesus himself, while being the evangel, was also the evangelizer, but that “Jesus’ evangelization, then, was kingdom evangelization.”³ What this meant will be included later in this paper.

While the term ‘missional’ itself gained traction in the last years of the 20th century, with leaders such as Alan Hirsch, Tim Keller and others, its spirit has certainly been alive for much longer than that. The very basic idea, and at the root of the term, is that all Christians, clerical and laity, are involved in the Great Commission and are sent on behalf of God to rescue all of that which is lost. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”⁴ It is God that sends believers on this mission. While it could be said that this has been the position of the church and what it has believed since its founding, “that which is lost” in missional thinking is much, much bigger than it has been thought of in times past. To understand this, it is important to understand how the Bible supports the argument that all Christians are sent.

The way God has communicated His will and plans, the way He has revealed Himself to human beings, has from the beginning of time been through the sending of missionaries to communicate this message. All the way from Noah, to Abraham, to

³ Arias, Mortimer. *Announcing the reign of God: evangelization and the subversive memory of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. Print. Pg. 3

⁴ John 20:21

Moses, through the prophets, up until Jesus, the premise has always been that God is a ‘sending God.’ This is a theme emphasized throughout the Bible, and specifically through the stories Jesus related in the New Testament.⁵ Jesus himself is called the Word⁶ - the ultimate and complete message of God. God the Son was sent from God the Father, and God the Spirit is also sent by God the Father and God the Son.⁷ It is clearly then seen that God, the Trinity, sends and is itself sent.

All Christians are missionaries, and as such, must learn to adapt and embrace the culture they are sent to, including its postures, thinking, behaviors and practices. This does not mean it must give in to the sins and passions of a world that does not know God. For to do as much would be to become nothing more than they already are. However, what it does mean is Christians must meet non-believers where they are at, instead of forcing non-believers to meet Christians where they are at.

Being missional arises out of the belief that God is a ‘sending’ or ‘missionary God.’ As a church corporately, and human beings individually, Genesis says humans are made in the image of God. When Christ indwells believers by His Spirit after conversion, their call is to reflect His image more clearly every day. As Paul reminds believers, we “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”⁸ This includes, among other things, reflecting His passion for seeking and saving the lost. Darrell Guder says, “Mission [is] understood as being derived from

⁵ Dukes, Jason C.. *Live sent: you are a letter*. Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2011. Print. Pg. 13

⁶ John 1:1

⁷ John 15:26

⁸ 2 Cor. 3:18

the very nature of God.”⁹ The mission Guder alludes to is a doctrine long seeming to be lost in the history of the church. That doctrine is known as *missio Dei*. No one perhaps better defined God’s mission than Abraham Kuyper when he said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'”¹⁰

For Kuyper, God was and still is in the redeeming business. He is in the business of redeeming all of His creation, not just individuals isolated from this grand corporate community that is humanity. This means God is in the process of redeeming all of life, all of culture, all of the arts and the music. Some would say the goal of the gospel, its limitation and judgment, is the reign of God.¹¹ In fact, Mortimer Arias says that there is but one gospel: the gospel of the kingdom.¹²

This belief then allows believers to see themselves, the church and bride of Christ, as representatives, or “ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”¹³ God has graciously allowed His church to participate with Him on His mission. In fact, as Alan Hirsch says, to be the church is to be missional. “A true encounter with God in Jesus will result in mission, defined as extending the mission of God

⁹ Guder, Darrell L., and Lois Barrett. *Missional church: a vision for the sending of the church in North America*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998. Print. Pg. 5

¹⁰ Kuyper, Abraham (1998). "Sphere Sovereignty". In Bratt, James D.. *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. pp. 488

¹¹ Guder, Darrell L., and Lois Barrett. *Missional church: a vision for the sending of the church in North America*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998. Print. Pg. 86

¹² Arias, Mortimer. *Announcing the reign of God: evangelization and the subversive memory of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. Print. Pg. 8

¹³ 2 Cor. 5:20 (ESV)

through the activities of his people.”¹⁴ There is a link between the church and its mission, that if it truly is doing its work, they are inseparable. The first, and perhaps greatest effect, of the Gospel truly hitting home and true encounter with Jesus will be the newly converted believer driven to reach out to others and spread the message of good news.

The term missional is ultimately not about the church, but about God. The mission is not the church’s, though the church would like to say that it has a mission to accomplish. In reality, the mission is God’s (*missio Dei*), and the church is part of that mission, not the author of it. This is not to say the church is not important or has a minor role. The church is very important, not because it is the author, but because it is the representative of the Head of the church. In fact, many have applied the term not only to individual Christians as being “missional”, but to whole churches and denominations, labeling them as ‘missional churches’ and their leaders as “missional leaders.”¹⁵

But what exactly does this mean? What does it mean for a church to be missional in a very practical sense? What are its practices? What does community look like? What do evangelism and discipleship begin to look like in this setting as opposed to how they have traditionally been seen over the course of the last century?

Before getting into that, one more thing must be explained. Where exactly did this idea, that has become so revolutionary in the last few years, originate? As

¹⁴ Hirsch, Alan. *The forgotten ways: reactivating the missional church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006. Print. Pg. 41

¹⁵ Roxburgh, Alan J., and Fred Romanuk. *The missional leader: equipping your church to reach a changing world*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006. Print.

previously stated, a ‘rediscovering’ of *missio Dei* a few years ago gave the church a new way to think about mission. It was not seen as something to be done overseas, but something to be done across the street. It was not something to be done only in Africa, but to and with the African-American and Asian and Hispanic family next door. In an increasingly pluralistic and secular American nation, Christians have woken up to the fact that they are no longer the majority, but in many places, the minority in their own ‘homeland.’

The fact of the matter is *missio Dei* began with God. He Himself sends missionaries and is a missionary. In the person of Jesus Christ, God descended into this earth, taking on flesh, “being made in human likeness”¹⁶. He took on the culture, the customs, the language, the very human nature (but without sin), and took upon Himself the daily rigors of what it means to be human. Ultimately, He took the biggest curse imposed upon humanity, death, and he conquered it. With this last step, He proved to all that He would do whatever it took, take upon whatever burden, go as far as He could go, in order to become one of us and allow humans to be reconciled to God. He proved that the 2 Corinthians 5 ‘ambassador’ mindset could be done and in the most real sense. This is the same posture Christ-followers committed to mission must take. They must be willing to go as far as it takes in order to save that which is lost.

The fact that the basic message and the spirit of a ‘missional mindset’ and of ‘missional living’ has existed in church’s DNA since its inception does not necessarily

¹⁶ Phillipians 2:6 (NIV)

mean the church has always followed through in its practice. The argument that many within the church now are making is that there is in fact no new discovery when we talk about ‘being missional.’ It has been there since the beginning of the church and since the beginning of time.¹⁷ But the conclusion they are also drawing is that society seems to have seen no effects from all the talking. The argument goes that Christians ‘talk the talk’, but do not ‘walk the walk.’

There are many reasons that could be given for this discrepancy between what the church should be like and what non-Christians experience when seeing this church. Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw name some of the reasons why the church is not culturally engaged. Among them are missional factors, theological factors, secular factors and personal factors.¹⁸ As they both agree, moving out of a comfort zone is cumbersome. Steering a mammoth ship a different direction is no easy feat; especially when that ship has been going on a single direction for hundreds of years. But missional living proponents say that if the church must go forward, and if it indeed must survive in a secular, postmodern, pluralist world, then changes must accompany it.

If God is in fact in the cosmos-redeeming business, and if He in fact has sent the church to join Him on this missionary journey, why does it seem like the world is in worse condition than years past? Surely a theology which includes the Fall and sin and corruption has something to do with it. But if Christians, as Christ-followers, also

¹⁷ Swanson, Eric, and Rick Rusaw. *The externally focused quest: becoming the best church for the community*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010. Print. Pg. 30

¹⁸ Ibid. Pgs. 31-36

believe that the Kingdom of God has come, while not completely here yet, but nevertheless here in a real sense; then why does it seem that rather than society and culture being better than how Jesus left it two thousand years ago, it seems to have gotten worse, with no cure or medication in sight? What is needed then, the argument concludes, is a “new map”.¹⁹ A ‘new vision.’ Many, however, have taken this to mean a completely different message. And surely, the rise of churches that seem to show a different gospel-message has not helped.

This seems like a good point to differentiate between those that are missional churches and those that are not. “Missional” churches are very different than “attractional” or “seeker-sensitive” or even “emerging” churches. Every new church leader seems to want to jump on the “missional bandwagon”, but as this happens, there is a risk of losing the terms’ real meaning and with it, assumptions arise that have no relation to being “missional.” So then, the question that begs to be answered is: what does it mean to be missional?

First of all, it must mean being committed to knowing, obeying and listening to the Sender. If the church is in fact the one being sent, not the one doing the sending; and if God is the one doing the sending, allowing the church to graciously participate in redeeming the universe, by sending it to every culture, race, and language; then it must realize that to do its job effectively means to do the job it was sent to do. Jason Dukes says, “If we are really committed to being the church and

¹⁹ Roxburgh, Alan J.. *Missional map-making: skills for leading in times of transition*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2010. Print.

living sent and living on mission like God has called us to, then hearing the voice of the Sender is paramount.”²⁰

If the church is not listening to the Word, submitting itself to it daily, and realizing its place in this chain of command, all of its programs, services, and good will might change a person’s life for a day, but it won’t change the person’s soul for eternity. As the saying goes, “Give a person a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a person to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.”²¹ The church’s charge is to proclaim and feed the Gospel in such a way that the person being communicated learns to feed on the Gospel by himself, without an aid.

Time and time again, God tells His people that their sacrifices are nothing but “empty rituals just for show.”²² What good is it to give a piece of bread, if we are not following it up by communicating the message of the Sender? While God did work miracles and healing through Jesus, above a miracle-maker and healer, Jesus saw himself as a missionary sent to communicate the message of the Sender. Providing services to the needy and suffering is the work the church must take upon herself if she sees herself as a bride rescued from sin and corruption. However, this is an effect of the message being preached, not her first priority. Her first priority has always been, and will always be, to communicate the Sender’s message to all the world. In order to hear the message clearly, it must be in constant and consistent communication with the Sender through the Word and prayer.

²⁰ Dukes, Jason C.. *Live sent: you are a letter*. Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2011. Print. Pg. 36

²¹ Chinese proverb.

²² 1 Sam. 15:22

Second, being missional means the church recognizes that it is in fact being sent as missionaries to the culture. The church must wake up to the fact that the world is a very different one than the one they inherited. The strategies that worked in yesteryear will not work quite precisely the same way now than it did a hundred years ago; even fifty years ago. And it is only changing even more at an incredibly rapid pace. What does this mean for the church? It means being cautious, yes, but also becoming risk-taking missionaries. It must be willing to be stretched and moved out of its comfort zone.

Though in a very different setting, and for a very different purpose, Charles Darwin caught this spirit when he wrote, “It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”²³ This does not mean the church seeks to change the message, but that instead, it must adapt the form of the message. Just like the world is changing from a paper-based culture to an electronic-based culture, the church must reflect the growing changes within the culture and this way, seek to be most effective with its commission.

This will require “new churches and mission structures capable of accommodating the new thing God’s Spirit is doing in these days.”²⁴ The purpose is not merely to accommodate the culture, but to freely allow the Spirit to do His work among new generations and new cultures. The church has to see that the purpose of being missional is not to make the Gospel relevant, but to show the relevance of the

²³ Charles Darwin

²⁴ Bessenecker, Scott. *Living mission: the vision and voices of new friars*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010. Print. Pg. 18

Gospel. It is the Spirit convicting sinner's hearts, leading them to repentance and faith in Christ. It is the church's role to allow this and be open to it.

This means the church must develop another concept that's closely related along with missional thinking: taking an incarnational approach. Scott Bessenecker defines incarnational approach as "moving into a community of neighbors and friends just as Jesus did when he relocated from heaven to live among us."²⁵ Being effective missionaries means much more, though certainly not less, than learning the culture's language. Effective missionaries are lifelong learners of the culture. They live, work, shop, study, grow, sleep, play, and breathe the culture, in order to lead the people in it to a true understanding of the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

This missional mindset is not only for 'big churches' and it certainly does not only 'work' in 'big cities.' It is true that urban settings have traditionally been the environment that has lent itself for movement and growth for those seeking a missional mindset for their churches.²⁶ In fact, the pattern of New Testament missions is an 'urban-mission movement' pattern. But this does not mean small communities and towns, and smaller-scale churches, cannot lend themselves just as much to this mindset. In fact, while statistics and demographics would lead many to believe that more and more people are pouring into cities, many lead articles in national newspapers are saying quite the opposite: that people are moving away from the cities

²⁵ Bessenecker, Scott. *Living mission: the vision and voices of new friars*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010. Print. Pg. 37

²⁶ Greenway, Roger S., and Timothy M. Monsma. *Cities: missions' new frontier*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989. Print. Pg. 36

into smaller towns.²⁷ God's plan for small communities is quite the same as his plan for cities, albeit maybe on a smaller scale.²⁸ Tom Nebel perhaps summarizes best the most compelling reason to target small towns: "the human reality that lives will be redeemed for eternity when people respond to the gospel."²⁹

This is not about big vs. small. This is about souls and their eternal destinies. These are neighbors and friends. The church cannot wait until it gets to heaven and have the Judge Himself proclaim the Gospel message to the lost. Its members must realize they are missionaries and must start spreading the message passionately today. This leads to the next point.

Third, being missional means being committed to the message. But what is the message the Sender is giving to the world, and thus the ones being sent must communicate? Quite simply, the gospel. And the gospel is Jesus himself.³⁰ But a truly revolutionary and radical presentation of the gospel must include its missional aspects as well. In other words, the gospel that missionaries must present is the one that preaches God reconciling the world to himself by sending Jesus, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.³¹ This message includes Christ's life, death, and his resurrection, while also making the

²⁷ Wanda Urbanska, "Boomers Bewitched by Charms of Small Towns," *USA Today*, 22 April, 197, D-1.

²⁸ Nebel, Thomas P. *Big dreams in small places: church planting in smaller communities*. St. Charles, IL.: ChurchSmart Resources, 2002. Print.

²⁹ Nebel, Thomas P. *Big dreams in small places: church planting in smaller communities*. St. Charles, IL.: ChurchSmart Resources, 2002. Print. Pg. 21

³⁰ Guder, Darrell L., and Lois Barrett. *Missional church: a vision for the sending of the church in North America*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998. Print. Pg. 87

³¹ 2 Cor. 5:19

church a part of the plan that God has to reconcile the world to Himself. This is the message the church has been entrusted to preach.

In order to truly communicate this message effectively, the church must embrace this theology of the cross and commit it to memory. It must remember its roots and in a very real sense, reactivate “the forgotten ways.”³² This does not necessarily entail that the same message will be heard or interpreted the same way across all cultures, nations, races, and languages. As Guder reiterates, “No culture-free expression of the gospel exists, nor could it. The church’s message, the gospel, is inevitably articulated in linguistic and cultural forms particular to its own place and time.”³³

While the missional church does not give in to culture and succumb to its thoughts and practices, it does not demonize it, but seeks to redeem it, as God does. The message is not a program. The message is not a service. The message is not ultimately about the community, about the non-saved, about Christians, or about the Church. It is ultimately about God. While it is not ‘attractional’ or ‘seeker-sensitive’, it is ‘seeker-friendly’ and ‘seeker-comprehensible.’ The missional church realizes her own limitations and failures, and realizes there is much yet to be learned. Christians embrace mystery and only seek to pronounce the Gospel, which in and of itself means nothing but Good News. In this way, Christians are not driven by the community, but to the community.

³² Hirsch, Alan. *The forgotten ways: reactivating the missional church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2006. Print.

³³ Guder, Darrell L., and Lois Barrett. *Missional church: a vision for the sending of the church in North America*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998. Print. Pg. 87

The difference now with the idea of being committed to the message as opposed to it in years past is that so many times in its history, in order for the church to reach out to the world, it gave in to the assumption that in order to stay “relevant”, it must negotiate what it believed. This was true, even if it meant losing some core doctrines along the way. This led to it giving up its very own DNA, or modifying its beliefs in such a way that you could not tell them apart from other religions’ beliefs, thereby distorting the Christian message. Because by distorting the message, the Sender is distorted as well, making Christianity unrecognizable from any other belief system. This has happened many times over the course of its history, most recently probably in its battle against the Enlightenment, where liberal Christianity could not offer anything significant to the world. As a consequence, the Christian religion was relegated to the margins of society, becoming one more commodity in an already selfish, self-centered, individualistic culture. The church lost its identity in order to accommodate the Gospel and make it ‘relevant.’

The church cannot, for the sake of its existence and survival, repeat history. It must commit itself to the message and preach it unashamed. The world does not need any more good advice; it needs good news. It does not need any more salesmen trying to sell them a product; it needs passionate people spreading a radical message of hope and salvation and a future. The only message that can do this is not a message about individuals; sure, it includes individuals, but it must also be a message that involves the whole universe itself. When that message is proclaimed, without compromises, it has far-reaching effects that last for generations.

Lastly, being missional means going back in order to go forward. The church is composed of sinful, fallen, frail and forgetful human beings who constantly and daily need to be reminded of its purpose for existence. The church, despite argument for the contrary, does not exist for itself. Its worship, preaching, and service must reflect that. The church exists for God's sole glory and for His sole purpose: the redemption of the cosmos for His glory through His Son.

However, time has proven that the history of the church in the Old Testament and very clearly the history of the church in the New Testament is a history of forgetting. Being missional, or a missional church, is not simply a 'new' way to 'do church.' It is not a new form of evangelism, nor a new way to increase attendance. It's not another fad or strategy. Being missional has to do with a rediscovery of something the church has long left in obscurity. This means leaving behind all the luggage the church has piled on top of itself, and it also means doing some de-cluttering. It means recovering our biblical identity according to the good news of Christ and His Kingdom.

In summary, to be missional means this: first, that the church is committed to obeying, following, and listening to the Sender through the Word and prayer. Second, it means that the church realizes and wakes up to the fact that it is a missionary. Every single member is needed in order for God to accomplish its goal to redeem the world. Third, it means the church is committed to the message. The church must know the message and deliver it faithfully. Last, it means going back in order to go forward. The church must never forget what she has been entrusted with. If the church will

truly commit to this structure, and to being missional and to living missionally, it will bear much fruit. The product and effect of this will be the church reaching out to a world that yearns to hear good news and see it lived out in community.

A “missional renaissance” is under way.³⁴ Those churches that catch the vision and get on board will be the change-makers of the decades and centuries that follow. The scorecard of the church will be changed forever. The vision has changed from being church-focused to Kingdom-focused. This moves the church and pushes it forward, because she realizes it is not ultimately about her, about her programs, about her services, or about her numbers. And this gives believers the freedom to fail. Too many believers are afraid to take risks because they are afraid to fail. It must be kept in mind that missions is not done for the sake of missions. Missions is done for the sake of the Gospel and lost souls. It is only when the church realizes that what it perceives as failure is but a blip on God’s Kingdom radar, that it will be willing to move forward with the power and authority it has been given by the Sender.

³⁴ McNeal, Reggie. *Missional renaissance: changing the scorecard for the church*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009. Print.

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