

# What is the Missional Church?

## A Brief Introduction

*by*

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### **A Brief History**

The concept of missional church has its recent roots in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin (former bishop of the Church of South India and student of missiology) and David Bosch (pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa). Today a number of scholars have added a North American flavor to this discussion, including Douglas John Hall (McGill), Darrell Guder (Princeton), and Craig Van Gelder (Luther Seminary, St. Paul). In addition, the *Gospel in Our Culture Network* has produced a number of books and booklets around the theme of missional church.

All of these works are efforts to address the increasingly clear reality of the disestablishment of religion in the western world (especially in Europe, but increasingly in the United States and Canada as well) and the growth of what is now called “Post Modernism.” In the very diverse and pluralistic world in which we now live, the place of organized religion—and especially mainline religion as represented by the Presbyterian Church—has shrunk drastically over the past half-century. We all know that what worked very well when we or our parents were young no longer works in the church. Older members may remain in our pews out of loyalty, but younger people will not.

This new reality has called forth a number of responses from church leaders. Among them are the growth of Pentecostal movements, the so called “Seeker Churches” (many of which are patterned on the Willow Creek model), and an effort to retake the religious high ground that has been lost among very conservative congregations (some of which have become quite large). All of these efforts draw inspiration from portions of the Scriptures and the history of the Church.

But for many of us, this change in the social and religious landscape has provided an opportunity to rediscover the mission of God in our midst and the role of the Church as God’s agent of mission in the world. This old, old landscape of the Early Church is what the authors mentioned above have been exploring for clues to how the Church can respond to God’s call today in our world. What they have discovered is that the more the Church has been pushed to the margins of society, the more it looks like the early church bravely bearing witness to God in a largely pagan world.

## The Book of Acts

If the book of Romans was the pivotal book both in the Reformation (Luther) and the Twentieth Century (Barth), then the book of **Acts** has become the key text for our time. In earlier times the book of Acts was studied for its clues on church government and organization or its presentation of the early preaching of the Church. Today, scholars are discovering compelling parallels with our time both in the culture being addressed by the Gospel and in the way the Holy Spirit led the church (often kicking and screaming) into new understandings of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.

A study of the Early Church as found in the book of Acts from the perspective of the changing landscape of the North American church will suggest new ways of being the church in such areas as:

- Selection of leaders (Acts 1 – Matthias; and Acts 6 – the deacons, *all of whom were Hellenists!*)
- The role of prayer in the life of the Church (almost on every page)
- The way persecution led to expansion of the Church (Acts 8)
- The gradual inclusion of “outsiders” into the Church
  - Samaritans – Acts 8
  - The Ethiopian Eunuch – Acts 8
  - Gentile Jewish proselytes – Acts 10 – Cornelius
  - Other Gentiles – Acts 11 and many other places later
- The establishment of Christian worship in Jewish synagogues followed by the establishment of churches – Paul’s missions
- The spread of the Gospel to the very heart of the Empire – not in power – but through the arrest of Paul.

Congregations interested in understanding their own context need look no farther than this book for inspiration.

But perhaps the most important contribution that the book of Acts offers to our Church today is the vision that it is God who is leading the Church forward into mission at every step of the way. The church leaders often try to lead in old familiar ways only to be drawn back to what

God is doing by the Holy Spirit. Learning to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit may be the best lesson that we can learn from this important book.

### **What Happened to the Church?**

If the Early Church was very different in outlook and character from ours today, what happened? What changed a small, isolated band of Christians into a mass movement that could sway empires and shape whole cultures in deep and profound ways? The history of the Church is one of many ups and downs, of expansions and contractions, of heroic service to others, and of selfish greed. Yet most scholars agree that the central turning point in Western Christianity occurred when the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. This shrewd move both eliminated a competitor to his rule and served to unite the Empire since the Church, by then, was more popular across the Roman Empire than was the Emperor.

The Church benefited in that it was no longer under persecution by the Empire, and its numbers swelled enormously. The danger to the soul of the Church was, however, real. Multitudes of new Christians had to be accommodated into the Church. This required new church buildings—many of which were old pagan temples. A vast company of clergy were needed—not all of whom understood the message of the one who came to serve and not be served. Bishops went from being the principal targets of attack by the Roman Empire to princes within the Empire. Western civilization became Christianized and the Church became politicized. Even in America (land of the separation of Church and State) the Church and civic order were closely intertwined. This mutual accommodation between Church and State began to break down in Europe after the First World War and in the United States in the 1960s. Today the Church in Europe has virtually no political or civic impact on the society. Things are still different in the United States, but one can only wonder how long they will last.

The signs of change are all around us. The New Age Movement is accepted as a fact of life by many. *Karma* has become a part of ordinary speech. People make up their own blend of religion from a dozen or more ingredients—including Christianity. Admit that you attend church regularly and people will wonder about your education or your intelligence or both.

The changes in modern church life we have been speaking of have happened in the lifetime of many in our churches. They (and we) sometimes wonder why programs that worked so well in the 50s and early 60s have no impact today. Many of us were born into a period of “successful” churches and cannot understand what has happened or what we should do about it.

In even the recent past, all you had to do to have a full sanctuary or a booming youth program was to have good space (“build it and they will come”) or a good program. Today even better programs and far superior space are not enough to attract the crowds we remember.

And so we are drawn back to the basics. What is God doing in our world? Where is God at work (like the book of Acts) to surprise us with a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Where are the broken places that God’s reconciliation is working to restore?

### **The Character of a “Missional Church”**

From all we have said above, it should be clear that a “missional church” will be both familiar and new--familiar in the sense that there has always been within the Church a thread of the Gospel that, in every generation and in every place and culture, has spoken to the deep need people have for a personal relationship with God, for a reconciliation with God and with each other. We may mourn the loss of the great crowds of the last century, and we may wish for a more receptive ear to the Gospel in our modern society, but we are now thrown back upon the power of God in ways that remind us of the Church in Acts.

So what will this new Church look like? We can begin to sense some of the central features. Members of a missional church (congregation):

- Will be aware that they are agents of God’s mission in the world. By our baptism we are made part of the Body of Christ and commissioned to God’s ministry.
- Will find our life together around the table of the Lord where divisions are bridged, hurts are healed, and family is built.
- Will be aware that we do not take God into the world, but rather we meet God there.
- Will be more concerned about those who are not yet in the church than those who are already members.

#### **A missional congregation:**

- Will be a place of prayer and worship in preparation for ministry that is *both* corporate and individual.
- Will equip its members to be in mission where they live, work, play.
- Will practice true hospitality which demonstrates the reconciling work of Jesus Christ in the life of the world.
- Will make decisions based on prayerful attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit—even when this process is slower than we would like.

## **To Learn More**

For an introduction to some of the key thinking in the area of Missional Church you may want to begin with:

Barrett, Lois, *Treasure in Clay Jar: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004.

Bosch, David J., *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1991.

Guder, Darrell L., ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998.

Guder, Darrell L., *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001.

Hunsberger, George R and Craig Van Gelder, eds. *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Church in North America*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996.

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Open Secret: Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989.