



NEW CHURCHES

MULTIPLY THE MISSION.

A HISTORICAL VIEW OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

By: JR Woodward

As one who just a few years ago wrote a book entitled, *Creating a Missional Culture*, I think it is important for us to understand an overview of the history of what is called the “Missional Church.” Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile in their book, *Missional Church in Perspective*, published recently in the last couple years, are just the people to help us.

Before I give you an overview of the first half of this book, let me say this: In 1998, God used six North American theologians’ seminal book, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, to bring the missional church conversation into high gear. From that point on, a slew of books have been published using the term “missional church.” Some are amazing books, but some lack a certain depth or understanding about the full nature of what missional churches have been and are becoming. Some people say, “Isn’t ‘missional church’ redundant?” I would say, “Only if you don’t know your history.”

While some think that the missional church is just another fad or strategy like the church growth movement, the seeker church, or the multi-site church, Van Gelder and Zscheile in their book, *Missional Church in Perspective*, help us understand that the missional church has been in the making for quite a while over the last century, in fact. It’s not a fad, but a development with deep theological roots.

Van Gelder gives an important historical backdrop to the emergence of the missional church from the time of the reformation until today. If you want to understand the richness of the historical development of the missional church, you really need to read the book.

Let me whet your appetite by giving you a crude overview of Van Gelder's history of the missional church.

A Wall of Separation

Van Gelder writes about how we inherited a church that dichotomized the categories of "church" and "mission." In the 16th century when Christendom was still strong, the church in Northern Europe was established by the state. Germany established the Lutheran church, England the Anglicans, and the Netherlands and Scotland started the Reformed tradition. During this time the Mennonites, Quakers, Anabaptist and Independent Baptists were persecuted sects. Because the state started the church, most in the state considered themselves Christians, thus mission wasn't something that needed to take place locally. Mission was something that took place in other non-Christian countries.

Then the modern missions movement which began in the 18th century, largely developed outside and alongside the established churches, adding to the separation of mission and the church. After William Carey's proposal in 1792, many missionary societies were formed to reach "the heathen" in other countries.

As European immigrants helped to colonize the states, the state churches as well as the persecuted sects established Christianity here in North America. In the 19th century, inter-denominational mission societies formed, but then because of interchurch politics, each denomination started their own mission societies and para-church organizations. All the while there was still the separation of "church" and "mission."

The mission conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 was the peak of the modern missions movement, where 1,200 were called to fulfill the challenge of the student volunteer movement "to evangelize the world in our generation." World War I eventually disrupted this plan in the years that followed. The two large questions that remained unresolved were how the churches started by the western missionary societies (younger churches) should relate to the older established church, and how to define the relationship between church and mission.

Trinitarian Unity Reunites Church and Mission

Three different organizations formed following Edinburgh to focus on these two questions. In fact, these questions dominated the discussion for the next few decades at various mission conferences including the

Jerusalem Conference (1928), the Madras Conference (1938) and the conference in Whitby, Canada (1947).

By the middle of the 20th century, the question continued to loom over the church. Ecclesiology (the study of the church) had been developing for the longest time apart from missiology (the study of missions) and vice versa.

Then enters Karl Barth, who through his *Church Dogmatics*, which was designed around the Trinity, re-introduced the concept of Trinitarian missiology. The Trinity had hit hard times during the enlightenment, and while it was confessed during the enlightenment, theologians usually didn't write about it because rationalism reigned. But with the introduction of the Trinity into the theological conversation, the concept of *Missio Dei* (mission of God) was recovered, and there was a shift from a church-centric approach to mission to a Theo-centric approach to mission. The rediscovery of God being missional in his very nature (the Father sending the Son and the Father and Son sending the Spirit) changed the game. The starting point for missions was no longer the church, but God. As Jürgen Moltmann said, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church." In other words, there is mission because God is a missionary God.

A Mission of Salvation and the Renewal of all Things

Then the quest for the historical Jesus put a needed emphasis on the life and teachings of Jesus. As the quest moved from the classical liberals to the neo-orthodox and others through the third quest, the central message of Jesus' teaching—the kingdom of God—became more clear as a more holistic understanding of the good news was developing. God wasn't just interested in saving individuals; there was also a corporate and cosmic aspect to the good news. God wanted to recover all that was lost at the fall, restoring relationships between God and people, people and each other, people and themselves, and the way we relate to creation.

Consequently, as ecclesiology and missiology began to be fused back together through the understanding of *missio Dei* and the kingdom of God, the realization that the church was missionary in essence was also being understood at a deeper level. British missionary, Lesslie Newbigin became a key figure in the integrating of mission and church, and the South African missiologist, David Bosch in his seminal work *Transforming Mission*, not only helped us to read scripture with a missional hermeneutic, but also highlighted many of these key developments of the missional church.

So when you hear the words "missional church," I trust you will be more informed on what it historically means.

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