

The Missional Church

A Primer

By John Sterner

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Introduction

Almost everyone in North America and Europe agrees that the church is in trouble. There are any number of different opinions as to what the trouble is, how bad it is, how we got into that trouble and what to do to get out of it. These opinions range from the hostile secular “Close the churches, they are wastes of time and money,” to “Leave the churches alone, God will renew the hearts of the people in good time.” Most of us who love God and God’s Church are of the opinion that we must do something about the troubles – but what?

There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of books and seminars with various diagnoses of the problems in our churches, complete with strategies to fix those problems. Most of us who read about church matters read books on church growth, transformation and renewal. We read books from psychological points of view, from sales perspectives and from theological viewpoints. Still, the church continues to lose membership, attendance, influence and finance. The political and social influence and the moral authority

of the church continue to dwindle. We live in what many now call a “Post-Christian Era.”¹

Meanwhile, in places like Africa, Asia and South America, the church is flourishing. One might ask “Why?” The British missionary Leslie Newbigin returned from India, and found that his native land had now become a mission field. His paper, *The Other Side of 1984*², began a series of studies resulting in what is now called “The Missional Church.”

For about five years I have been reading articles and books about the Missional Church. This reading has been enlightening, inspiring and has changed the way I think about and attempt to do church. The Gospel and Our Culture Network has now produced many volumes on this subject. I wondered if those new to the field might wonder where to begin. This primer is intended to be a beginning.

Being faithful to the movement, this is not so much a booklet about *how* to transform the church as it is about *what* the church should transform *into*. What is a “successful” church? What does God want from God’s people in the 21st Century? Can we even *know* that with certainty? Is it possible to become that church? Is it being attempted with success anywhere?

Warning – This booklet, in order to be a short and simple overview, leaves out much of the valuable information that was reviewed. I hope to whet your appetite to read many of the books and articles cited and listed in the bibliography.

Some of the chapters may present information that is very familiar to you – I invite you to scan those chapters. Some others may present information that is brand new, or that troubles you – I invite you to study those chapters carefully. I especially invite you to begin reading further and praying about and discussing these concepts. At stake is the future of our Church, and the proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world.

¹ See *Missional Church*, Chapters 2-3 for a full discussion of this description.

² A short paper that may be found at www.newbigin.net, and is a logical place to start further reading.

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;
Repent and believe in the good news.*

Mark 1:15

The Gospel is Jesus himself

George Hunsberger, *Missional Church*

Chapter One

What is The Gospel?

Almost every Christian has heard that “gospel” (*euangelion* in Greek) means “good news.” But what exactly *is* this good news?

Some have concentrated almost entirely upon the good news of personal forgiveness; the remission of sin by the death of our Lord on the cross. Some have added to this the resurrection; the good news that death has been conquered. Others add the theology of sanctification, of personal holiness. Still others have added the contemplative life, social action or personal practices.³

Some speak of the incorporation of the believer into the body of Christ. Other Christians will speak of liberation from oppression and injustice, of reconciliation, or of the restoration of creation.

All of these are important facets of the gospel and still, in a missional use of the term, incomplete. The missional church movement insists that the gospel is primarily about God, and only secondarily about us. James Brownson writes, “When Jesus speaks about the gospel, he uses the term primarily to refer to the kingdom of God or the reign of God. When the rest of the New

Testament writers speak about the gospel, they use the term primarily to refer to what God has done in Jesus.”⁴

Most people (Christian and non-Christian) think of salvation as something we receive. This puts the churches in the position of being vendors of religion, competing with one another for the favor of religious consumers (or potential religious consumers – the “unchurched”).

The missional church movement views salvation as an invitation to participate in God’s plan for the world. The church then is to become the body of Christ, sent forth on Christ’s mission to that world (2nd Corinthians 5:17-20).

Our God Reigns

The “Gospel,” as used in this book, is the good news that Christ has come into his kingdom. It means that our God reigns. This statement means more than I could ever put in a book. It means, amongst other meanings, that God has always loved humans with an “everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). It means that the universe in general and human lives in particular have meaning and purpose. It means there is hope for this world. It means that the God who made promises in the Old Testament has fulfilled all of those promises in Christ (Romans 15:8).

It means that the God of the Old Testament, who is fully revealed in the person of Christ, “Shall reign forever and ever, King of Kings and Lord of Lords” over all the earth. This is a huge claim! As Leslie Newbigin states emphatically:

It is not the reaching of a new way of personal salvation after the manner of the Buddha. Nor is it the announcement of a theocratic kingdom in the manner of Islam ... It is neither simply the announcement of a new

³ See *What is the Gospel? Participation Not Consumption* by James V. Brownson, www.gocn.org/newsletter.htm

⁴ *ibid*

religious doctrine, nor the launching of a new secular programme ... It is the announcement of the decisive encounter of God with men ... It concerns the consummation of all things. Its character as 'final' lies in this fact.⁵

The Good News is that our sin is forgiven, that we may live with God forever, and that we are now empowered by the Holy Spirit to live in God's will. But the message does not end there. The Good News is that human beings may stop fighting and begin to one another, as God loves us. The Good News is that peace, mercy and justice can become realities in human relationships. The Good News is both individual and corporate. Those who hear and believe this News have the joy and the responsibility to share it with those who have not heard or who do not yet believe. The Good News is "The Kingdom of God is at hand," and that you and I may live into that kingdom. Inagrace Dietterich writes:

The proclamation of the gospel involves not simply the saying of certain words ... but the manifestation of the reality contained within those words. The gospel is communicated to the world not only through ideas, beliefs, or ideals but through reconciled and reconciling communities of people – communities formed and transformed by their "indwelling" of God's new reality. In other words, the gospel is not only that by which the church lives, the gospel itself lives through the life and witness of the church. This is my vision of "missional church." As the enfleshment or embodiment of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit, missional communities serve the world by showing God's truthfulness, by confirming God's promises, and by glorifying God for God's mercy (cf. Rom. 15:8).⁶

⁵ *The Open Secret*, 181-182) 1978

⁶ Inagrace Dietterich, *Embodying the Gospel: Communal Interpretation and Witness*, www.gocn.org/newsletter.htm

There has been for as long as I can remember (I am in my early sixties) a somewhat hostile and distrusting division between those churches who primarily concern themselves with speaking the gospel in order to facilitate personal salvation, and those who primarily concern themselves with living out the gospel in order to facilitate justice, peace and mercy in their culture. Jesus and Paul would be amazed. The early church would be amazed. Luther and Calvin would be amazed.

The good news that Christ preached was that the Kingdom of God (something which the Jews had been discussing and expecting for centuries) was now here. He therefore demanded repentance, belief and obedience to the King. And although Peter and Paul preached from a post-resurrection viewpoint, they never changed the message.

Our God Reigns
Personally and Corporately

A local missional church takes *all* Scripture seriously. No matter how it may interpret the text differently from other churches; no matter what theological and governmental distinctions it may embrace;⁷ it strives mightily to be *primarily* the mission of Christ to its neighbors. Jesus, while in the Nazareth synagogue, read from the prophet Isaiah what might be interpreted today as his "personal mission statement."

The spirit of the lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the

⁷ There are Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Independent churches striving to be missional – See *Treasures in Clay Jars*

year of the Lord's favor ... Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. (Luke 4:18-21)

A missional church is one that understands Jesus' mission statement to be its own. It understands the Gospel to be both personally and corporately received and practiced. It demands that individuals decide to become disciples, to follow Christ in their personal ethics, beliefs and mission – or not. Missional church bodies (local and connectional) have also decided to follow Christ in those same ways. Christ preached salvation *and* healed bodies, he taught us to live lives of holiness *and* cleaned up the temple – we must go and do likewise.

Then the Israelites said to Gideon "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian."

Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you."

Judges 8:22-23

The Kingdom of God is a realm governed by God in which citizens may live obediently.

It is not something we can control via ownership

David Buttrick

Chapter 2

What is the Kingdom of God?

Jesus' first proclamation after his baptism, according to Mark 1:14 (see also Matthew 4:17) is "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This, Jesus primary message throughout his ministry, is of course a repetition of John the Baptist's message (Matthew 3:2), but with a new twist – Jesus will slowly reveal himself to be the king, the expected messiah, the Christ. Eugene Peterson writes:

The arrival of Jesus signaled the beginning of a new era. God entered history in a personal way, and made it unmistakably clear that he is on our side, doing everything possible to save us. It was all presented and worked out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was, and is, hard to believe – seemingly too good to be true.

But one by one, men and women did believe it, believed Jesus was God alive among them and for them. Soon they would realize that he also lived in them. To their great surprise they found themselves living in a world where God called all the shots – had the first word on everything; had the last word on everything. That meant that everything,

quite literally everything, had to be re-centered, re-imagined, and re-thought.⁸

Jesus, to our great dismay, never defined his terms. He told stories. About one third of his parables actually contain references to the kingdom – yet many commentators declare that all of them are kingdom parables. One thing is clear – all of Jesus preaching and teaching is somehow connected to the declaration that the kingdom of God (or as Matthew has it “Kingdom of Heaven”) has now arrived.

Where did Jesus learn about the kingdom of God?⁹ He learned it from his elders, from his family, from the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁰ The kingdom of God had been a topic of conversation for hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. The Jews, drawing on the former deliverances of Moses, the judges, David, Cyrus the Mede, and others, prayed for and eagerly expected God to end their present evil age of Roman servitude, and bring in a Golden age of peace, plenty and joy. Their prophets declared that this kingdom would not be limited to Jews alone, but would be established among all peoples.

The Jews were agreed that this deliverance from the present evil age to the kingdom would be accomplished by the “anointed one” the “Messiah.” A rabbi proclaiming the coming of the kingdom was everyday fare – the startling news of Christ is not that the kingdom is coming – but that it is at hand. He was not the first, nor the last Jew to proclaim himself the messiah, but he is the only one that ever had one third of the world believing it, and he is the one whose followers finally dominated Rome. How many of the others are we even aware of?

The problem, of course, is that Jesus established his kingdom in a totally unexpected manner. He died. The popular idea of the

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Introduction to the New Testament, The Message*, p. 1741, 2002, NavPress

⁹ Matthew, out of deference to Jewish readers, calls it “the kingdom of heaven.” Many missional church writers refer to it as the “reign of God.”

¹⁰ See for instance Psalms 96-99, Isaiah 25:6-10, 9:2-7, 11:1-10

messiah was the leader of an army, a conquering king. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus says to Pilate, “If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.”

As we examine the kingdom, we need always to keep in mind that it is “not from this world,” therefore, it does not generally fit in with the customs of our culture. Modern writers in the field of church transformation often seem to attempt to enter the kingdom of God using human methods. This is understandable. They are in fact, human, and brought up in a certain culture. But a close examination of history reveals that those with the greatest impact are often those whose methods are illogical in the human sense. Think of St. Francis in the 11th century, or Mother Teresa in the 20th. One of the ways that the kingdom differs radically from this world is in its values. David Buttrick writes:

Though the Declaration of Independence calls for individual rights – “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” – the Bible pictures a social order where all God’s children live together with God, interacting with justice and love. The biblical dream may be wiser, for my liberty to engage in the pursuit of my happiness is almost certain to collide with a neighbor’s similar aim.¹¹

In the kingdom of God, we are to (1) Love God above all else and (2) Love our neighbors as though they were our own kin – which in the kingdom they truly are. We are empowered to do this by the Holy Spirit, who empowers us with the mind of Christ. Paul implores us:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled

¹¹ David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, (p. 106) 2000, Westminster John Knox Press

himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

The ethics of the kingdom are spelled out at length in Matthew Chapters 5-7, often referred to as “the sermon on the mount.” They are radical departures from the “rugged individualism” and the consumer focus of North America in the 21st Century. They were radical departures from the ethics of the Roman Empire, and radical enough from the current Jewish practices to cause major opposition. They are the stuff of long, serious study – and longer even more serious attempts to live out.

While not attempting to be exhaustive, it is easy to note some of the ethics espoused in the sermon. Love your enemies, fast and pray in secret, do not be angry, reconcile with those who have something against you, do not divorce, go the second mile, don’t worry about what you need, don’t judge – not exactly the values espoused in our media.

Those blessed by our culture are those who succeed, those who demand, and those who become rich and powerful. Jesus claims the “blessed” are the mourners, the nobodies, the merciful, the persecuted and those who make peace.

As many commentators point out, most of the uses of the word “you” in these chapters are plural. The ethics of the kingdom are not to be reduced to a system of personal piety – they are normative ways of being under the reign of God. They are the culture of the kingdom. No group of which I am aware has been able to successfully live them out – yet these are the ways to live that Jesus demands. These then, are what the church must point to, must strive for, and must never be content with less.

It must be pointed out that the gospel writers are not alone in espousing these ethics. Paul continually follows his theological discourses with “therefore” and then proceeds to encourage his congregations to live precisely in the same manner.

Truly, the kingdom of God is a much different place than we are used to – or that our culture is attempting to become. Those who attempt to enter it will be sometimes misunderstood, opposed

and ridiculed – all of which were predicted by Jesus and experienced by the early church.

So, how are we humans to respond to this kingdom message? We talk about “building” the kingdom and “expanding” the kingdom, but Scripture never uses these terms. The kingdom is God’s and God will build and expand as God chooses. Hans Kung writes:

The “reign of God” is not in the preaching of Jesus – as it was in that of several rabbis – something that could be brought about or achieved by faithful adherence to the law; it appears as a powerful *sovereign act of God himself*. There is no one who can invite himself to the eschatological banquet. The Father issues the invitations.

It is not then, our task to build or expand the kingdom, but to receive and enter into the reign of God. As such, we do play an important part. Jesus said:

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26-29)

An old story concerns a man who gardens. When someone says to him, “Look at the wonders of God,” he replies “You should have seen this plot of ground when God had it alone.” “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;” teaches Paul, “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12-13)

It is our task to discover what God is doing to build the kingdom and to extend God’s reign, and then to enter into that task. We have a part to play, and that part is what the Church is all about.

Greed is good – Greed works!

Gordon Gekko, *Wall Street*

*Man is the only creature that blushes
or needs to..*

Mark Twain

Chapter Three

Why Do We Need The Kingdom?

David Buttrick tells this story:

In a little village in Michigan, a week after the Trade Towers tumbled into dust, stacks of purple paper appeared all over town ... If you picked up a page, you discovered that they were covered top to bottom with quotations; “Blessed are the peacemakers, Love your enemies, Do not oppose evil” ... As we looked at a page in Suzie’s Restaurant, an old fellow sitting at the counter spoke up: “I don’t know what all them words are,” he said, “but they don’t sound right to me.” In our kind of world, the words of Jesus don’t sound right. What has happened to the teaching of Jesus? Or, better, what’s happened to us?¹²

As we saw in Chapter Two, the Kingdom of God has a very different culture from the Kingdoms of Humans. Jesus says we are to be light in the darkness, salt in the food and leaven in the bread. The early church understood itself to be a mission, “In the world, yet not of the world.” The reason for this was that the world was clearly seen by them as under the reign of evil. Paul exhorts us to: “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in

¹² *The Return of the Stranger*, (p. 106) 2001, Transcript of a lecture delivered at the Washington National Cathedral

which you shine like stars in the world.” (Philippians 2:14-15) Peter urges his listeners to “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” (Acts 2:40)

When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he promised to give Jesus authority and power over all of the human kingdoms. Jesus rejected this temptation, but never stated that Satan couldn’t do it. Whether we take satanic power to be that of a personal being or systemic human evil, our political, economic and educational systems are far from the reign of God.

Most human systems are built on greed. That is why they work. When some idealistic souls attempted to transform their governments based upon the Marxist belief that humans were altruistic and generous at heart, they failed. Observe China, becoming more like Wall Street every day.

But just because greed works does not make it good. Critics from John Calvin to John Kenneth Galbraith, have long argued that capitalism, based on greed, creates inequality, alienation, and deception in society. Capitalism is, in short, morally corrupting, both for the individual and business. The problem is, we humans cannot seem to figure out a better system.

The Kingdom of God

Is a Better System!

Imagine, if you will, a people ruled by love. Imagine laws that were loving, firm, unchanging and kept! Imagine a system that was peaceful and just – working constantly for the welfare of all humankind, no matter what color, sex, origin or creed. Imagine a culture with no drug abuse, spousal or child abuse, no gluttony, greed or violence. Think about communities where marriages stay intact because people love each other, and bars close because people stay home with their families! Imagine a world where

everyone is loved, everyone is respected and everyone is treated equally. This is a brief description of the Kingdom of God.

Now look at the evening news. Check out the History Channel or read Charles Dickens and see that the “Good old days” are a myth. Look up hunger, war and violence statistics on the Internet. Observe the abuses of power in government, commerce, and education and in the Church. God does not rule this world.

Robert Henderson¹³ divides the evil of this world into three parts 1) Personal evil; attempting to live without God. 2) Interpersonal evil; the arena of destructive relationships. And 3) Systemic evil; economic, political, cultural, military, educational and ecclesiastical systems that oppress people. He then describes the two basic types of persons living in such a world: victims of evil, and those who prey on them. I noticed as I read that there was no comfortable middle ground, the place I always imagined I had inhabited.

The 20th Century was the time of the church and the unchurched liberal’s undoing. Going in, we believed that through education and technology, we would eliminate poverty and ignorance. Two world wars, a great depression, the holocaust, Hiroshima and Viet Nam have torn away our fantasy.

What shall we do? We shall sever our allegiance with this world and enter into the reign of God. Since Eden, it has been the only cure for the dis-ease of this world.

*Here is the church, and here is the steeple
Open the doors and see all the people.*

Nursery Rhyme

The Church is the place where the Spirit is at work

Hans Kung

Chapter Four

What is The Church?

We have all perhaps heard sermons that tell us “The church is not the building.” Nevertheless, we usually speak of “Going to church.” Old habits die hard. So, what is the church? Why does it exist? What is its task? How shall we measure its effectiveness? What do we mean when we say, “I believe in the holy catholic Church?”

**The Church is not
The Kingdom**

Sometimes, in order to know what a thing is, it is helpful to know what it is *not* – the Church is not the Kingdom of God. Almost all scholars and commentators are sure of this, and for good reason – the Church is too much like the world, and too little like the kingdom.

It apparently always fell short of that Kingdom Culture described in the sermon on the Mount. Paul’s constant reproofs to his beloved churches belie the fantasy of the “New Testament Church” as described by some teachers. Theological and moral

¹³ *Joy to the World*, 1980

problems abounded in the early church, and have continued to this day.

From the improprieties that sparked the reformation (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) to the television evangelists of the 21st Century – we have fallen far short of the Kingdom culture outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. Our Church has supported unjust governments and wars, has murdered innocents and protected villains.

So, the church is not a building, nor the kingdom – what is it? Jesus hardly used the word. From the 77 uses in the New Testament, only four are Jesus'. On the other hand, all but 14 of the 97 incidences of the words Kingdom of God (Heaven in Matthew) are from our Lord. One might think that if the Church was that important to Christ, he would have said more about it.

This apparent difficulty is understandable when we realize that the Church was born on Pentecost, about 50 days after the resurrection. Christ was concerned with his disciples, for they would become the leaders of the Church. Jesus obviously expected them, and us, to be very concerned that the Church enter into the kingdom. He expected that, as the Father had reigned over his life decisions, he would reign over ours. This is why Paul calls him the “Head of the body, the church.” (Colossians 1:18)

So, even though the Church is not the Kingdom, it is absolutely connected to the Kingdom. It is the task of the church to enter into and to proclaim the Kingdom in word, and to serve the King in deed. Nothing less will do.

Church: *ekklesia*
“That which is called out”
(Young’s Analytical Concordance)

The Church is a group of ordinary people, called out by God for a specific purpose: to be sent by God. We are sent to proclaim by word and action that the Kingdom of God is at hand. That it has come; is here; and will someday come in fullness. We announce, by word and action, that we are servants of the King. We are Christ’s Ambassadors. We are the light, the salt, the leaven. We are those who are turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). (Actually, we are advocating the return of the world as it was originally created, so we are turning it right side up!)

Paul states that Christ is the head of the Church, that we are in fact his body on earth. We might soberly reflect on what Christ did with his corporal body. He spent a life serving God and neighbor, and then died on a cross. If we are now his body, it would be good to wrestle with this issue in light of our time and our annual budget.

The Church is called out by God to enter into the Kingdom, and to invite others to enter. Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against his church (Matthew 16:18). This presumes that the church is on the attack. We are to attack injustice, poverty, ignorance and every kind of sin, personal and corporate which sets itself against the reign of God. Our weapons, our *only* weapons are love and truth – the same ones Jesus used.

But all this is theory. All this is what the Church is *supposed* to be. In fact, many *experience* the Church as did Rev. Nicky Gumble, before he became a Christian; as boring, untrue and irrelevant. An Archbishop of Canterbury is reported to have been asked “What’s wrong with the Church.” He replied, “Wherever Paul and Silas would go, there were riots. Wherever I go, we have tea.” What happened? Many books have been written on this subject. One of the more important things that happened, in a word, was “Christendom.”

*I have this against you,
that you have abandoned the love you had at first.
Remember then from what you have fallen; repent,
and do the works you did at first.
If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place,*

Revelation 2:4-5

*The Presbyterian Church (USA) has now learned
to be of the world without being in the world.”*

Anonymous

Chapter Five

Christendom

When I was young and less experienced, I was caught up in a group that proposed to “live as the New Testament Church lived.” We enthusiastically studied the Book of Acts in order to carry out this mandate. We wanted the miracles, the power, the steadfastness and the constant inflowing of new disciples. We missed noting the greed, the arguments and the other problems found in Acts and addressed by Paul and other writers. We found that we were not able to simply copy the goodness of the early Christians. We were dismayed, and our group slowly fell apart.

Another group, with which I had some contact, began the same way. Years later, they still worship together. But they are not the same as they once were – they are now organized. They call themselves a “fellowship” rather than a “denomination” but the result is the same. They have rules, commitments, bylaws and officers. As they become organized they wonder out loud, “Will we be able to keep the fire?”

The Church of Jesus Christ has always been a curious combination of allegiances to God and to human powers. The Kingdom of God has never been perfectly exhibited by humans. Having said that however, it is impossible to read the New Testament without coming to the conclusion that the church which

I pastor, and the churches with which I am familiar are a far cry from the early church. We lack their miracles, power, steadfastness and their constant inflowing of new disciples. What happened?

In the world – Not of the world

The Church, from the Day of Pentecost, 30 A.D. until the Council of Nicaea in 325, was fairly disorganized and somewhat congregational in nature. It was not constant in theology, government or procedures. The churches organized by Paul for instance, differed from those organized by John. The culture of the local Christians was reflected in their church. The rule of the Jerusalem church, never absolute, ended when the city fell to Rome in 70 A.D. There were bitter and loud arguments over doctrine, especially the nature of the Godhead. From time to time and from place to place there were serious persecutions from the community, some sanctioned by the Roman government. There were disagreements and splits regarding those who left the church to avoid martyrdom and attempted to return when the violence was over. I cannot count the times that one Bishop would excommunicate another for one reason or another. Meanwhile the Church thrived and grew. Why?

The reason the church flourished in the midst of heresy, disorganization and persecution is best summed up by Historian W. Ward Gasque: “Early Christianity in no way depended solely upon professional leaders for its practice and growth. Each Christian was both ‘priest’ and ‘missionary’ ... all were active in sharing the message of Christ with others.”¹⁴ Passages of an anonymous letter to someone called “Diognetus” explains how Christians were viewed in the 2nd century:

They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens, they share all things with others; but like aliens, suffer all things ... they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table,

¹⁴ *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, Fortress Press, 1995 p. 68

but not a shared bed ... They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven ... They love every one, but are persecuted by all ... They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things ... To put it simply – the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world ... The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.”¹⁵

Running the World

In 325 A.D. the Roman Emperor Constantine convened the first ecumenical council of Bishops in Nicaea. The council was assembled to deal with the heated arguments concerning the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and resulted in the Nicene Creed. It also resulted in a new relationship between the emperor (and subsequent emperors) and the Church. By the end of the century, Christianity, formerly a persecuted group, had become the official religion of the empire, and the Bishop of Rome began to claim authority over the entire church. By the time of Pope Gregory (590-604) the collapse of the Western Empire left the Church the real ruler of much of central Italy, and a powerful and wealthy entity in most of Europe.

From that time until recently, the Church has been the undisputed authority of how humans should live in Europe and the Americas. The term “Christendom” has been applied to the relationship between the Church, the people and their governments. The Pope made kings. No wise noble would oppose the Church. While common people might not follow the proscribed ethics, they did not deny the Church’s right to make them.

The rise of Protestantism changed this relationship, but did not eliminate it. Many churches were still financially supported by their governments, and had official power within them. In America, there were some states with this arrangement, but the

Constitution provided for official separation of church and state. The unofficial arrangement between Protestantism and the United States (Sunday laws, prayer in schools and government functions, etc.) has only recently begun to erode, as we have become more secular and more religiously diverse. Rev. David Frees writes:

I grew up in a small town in northeastern Ohio where the churches dominated the community. In fact, they used to brag that the churches outnumbered the bars two to one. But they literally influenced and defined schedules, marketing patterns, and standards of behavior for the great majority of the population.

The schools had an understanding that no activities would take place on Wednesday evening, which was considered “church night,” and morning devotions over the high school P.A. system were resourced by the local ministerial association.

The only things that were open on Sunday were filling stations and a few restaurants. When I was in the 7th grade, a local grocery attempted to open their doors in the afternoon, and the local congregations petitioned and picketed the store and within a month, they were shut down. All stores on Main Street closed on Good Friday afternoon in order for the churches to hold a community Good Friday service in the largest sanctuary in town, usually lasting 3 hours.

I grew up in the middle of what came to be called both “The American Century” and “The Christian Century.” The two were assumed to be inextricably linked. Our nation was experiencing the exhilarating blush of victory in World War II, and there was a lot of talk about “winning the world for Christ in this generation.”

What a difference 40 years make! Today, in our postmodern world, our mainline faith communities are no longer main street or even side street. In many ways, we are in exile. For the church we knew in an earlier time is no longer the center of cultural life as was the faith and practice of the Jews before they were exiled to Babylon

The church of our traditional past, which was the source of our values, the definer of our identity, the center of our

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 67

cultural life is simply no more. We, like the Jews of old, are in a different land, a place not so much characterized by the church that molds us, but by a culture which can seduce us.¹⁶

The relationships between Christianity, government and the people have been in flux for over 1000 years, yet the Church has always been a powerful influence in western culture – until recently. I shall not attempt in this booklet to trace all of the influences of the enlightenment and of secularism, but suffice it to say that while many Americans pay lip service to God, to prayer and to the Scriptures, few serve God by regular church attendance, prayer or reading those Scriptures.

Worse, there seems to be little difference between the behavior of religious and the non-religious North Americans. One of the most disturbing reports of the 1990's was George Barna's findings that Christians "think and behave no differently than anyone else." The Barna Research Group polled thousands of Christians and non-Christians on dozens of moral and ethical issues and found very little difference between the two groups in their thinking or their behavior.¹⁷

Estranged From the World

One has only to watch television to see how the Church and its clergy are viewed by the world and its media. From the "Church Lady" on *Saturday Night Live*, to Whoopie Goldberg's *Kicking Habits*, few see religion as a reliable authority. Fewer seem to take Christianity seriously (including many who find themselves in worship on a given Sunday.)

In my small town for instance, the "faith-based community" is being called upon to help with those students who are failing in school and getting in trouble with the law. But we are simply being called upon to help the school meet *their* goals – not to

prescribe those goals. Jesus, Peter and Paul (and the Old Testament heroes before them) never attempted to help out a failing human system. They declared the Kingdom of God. The fact that their followers never behaved perfectly did not dissuade them from insisting on perfection as a goal.

What in the World?

We have seen how the Church was slowly transformed from an energetic though persecuted mission into an inside power relationship with European culture and resultantly – North American culture. We understand how this relationship has changed. We may see this change as good or evil – but we shall not change back within the foreseeable future. How shall we who name Christ as Lord and Savior react to the change?

One can look back either with sadness or joy on the passing of the authority of the Church in our culture, depending on one's point of view. One thing is certain. The Church changed much when it became powerful. It must now again change much, or face extinction. What in the world shall we become?

¹⁶ David Frees, from a speech at the Synod of the Covenant, e-mailed to the author

¹⁷ *The Second Coming of the Church*, Word Publishing, 1998, pp 6-7

*The great ends of the church are
the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness;
and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.*

Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Order

*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as
their God; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them*

Revelation 21:3b

Chapter Six

The Missional Church

God desires deeply to have perfect intimate fellowship with humans, and to involve them in God's purposes and plans for planet earth. The reason for this is unknown, or as we like to put it "It is God's nature." The writer of Genesis makes this clear in the first chapters. God gives life. God provides a perfect environment for that life. Human beings defy God's only commandment ("Leave that tree alone") and are thus not able to sustain that perfect fellowship, nor perfectly carry out God's purposes. But God does not leave them alone. God seeks them out ("Where are you?" Genesis 3:9) and provides clothing for them to prepare them for the harsh reality of living in an imperfect world.

God seeks us out, and calls us into covenant. This is the story of Scripture. Men and women do not initiate a search for God, they rather respond to God's call. God calls Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel and David. God calls to prophets and kings; and to ordinary men and women. God seeks them out.

Why? So that God can love them and lead them into the place where that perfect fellowship is again possible – The Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is where God reigns. God reigns in individual human hearts. God reigns in groups of individuals called out to be the Church. God reigns in those connections between local churches that we call denominations, fellowships or just "The Church." God reigns wherever and whenever we allow that reign. The fact that God reigns imperfectly in individuals, local churches and organizations is due to the sin that dwells in humans, and to the fact that God does not reign forcefully, but calls us to choose whether to serve God or not.

As the Church became organized, it made the mistake of confusing the kingdom with their own hierarchy, and their own agenda with God's rule. Both Protestants and Catholics have had their version of Christendom, where the Church and the State were co-rulers of the population.

The harsh reality is that Christendom is over. Europeans and North Americans are staying away from church in droves. The clergy now have a "sprinkling relationship" with many if not most of their flock – we sprinkle them with water – then with rice – and finally with dirt. In between, the flock does their lives on their own.

The Church Responds

Various local churches and denominations have responded to the death of Christendom in various ways. Some have buried their heads in the sand, hoping for a return of the 1950's. Others have attempted to separate themselves from the world (sometimes from other churches as well) and hoped to at least retain their children. Still others have modeled their churches after the entertainment that is offered by the media, and created "mega-churches" with rock bands and Starbucks coffee bars. Despite the

local and denominational differences, there are two distinct types of churches that exist today (and which have probably existed since the Book of Acts was written). There are vendors and there are missions.

Vendor churches attempt to fill the religious needs and desires of humans. They may be traditional “mainline” denominations, or brand new independent congregations. They may target only their own congregation’s needs, or the needs of those unchurched persons who live near them, or both. They come in all sizes, worship styles and theologies, but their main task is to serve their people. They measure their success by nickels and noses (budget, mission giving, attendance, baptisms, decisions for Christ, etc.)

Vendors strategize much like corporations do to advertise, create a marketable product, and sell that product. Some vendors attempt to serve the general public, others have a “niche market” defined by age, culture and/or theology. Many would be shocked to find themselves compared with others who are outside their theological or denominational milieu. Nevertheless, they have the same goals; that certain groups of individuals respond positively to their wares.

Hundreds of books and seminars now exist to promote these types of churches. They are by far, the dominant models in western culture. Humans are seen as consumers, and churches as places where religion is served up. The worst thing one of these churches can hear are the words “I don’t get my needs met there.”

Missional churches attempt to serve the desires of God. They provide for the needs of their people, but their main task is their mission. Missional churches exist to enter into and to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Humans are seen as subjects (or potential subjects) of the kingdom. They measure success by faithfulness.

Worship, for instance, is measured by asking the question “Did we please God?” Service is measured by asking, “Did we love our neighbors as ourselves?” These are difficult things to measure, and require much time in prayer and discernment. The

worst thing one of these churches can hear is “I don’t think we’re being faithful to our mission.”

**“How would you know a
Missional Church if you saw one?”**

This was the question asked by many in the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN). For years, the theological constructs had been examined and debated thoroughly in books, seminars and articles, and there were twelve indicators of a missional church¹⁸ that had been developed, but they were theoretical.

Then after much discussion, six GOCN members researched actual congregations that were becoming missional, and discovered eight “Patterns of the Missional Church.” They are as follows:¹⁹

Pattern 1: Missional Vocation. The congregation is discovering together the missional vocation of the community. It is beginning to redefine “success” and “vitality” in terms of faithfulness to God’s calling and sending. It is seeking to discern God’s specific missional vocation (“charisms”) for the entire community and for all of its members.

Pattern 2: Biblical Formation and Discipleship. The missional church is a community in which all members are involved in learning what it means to be disciples of Jesus. The Bible is normative in this church’s life. Biblical formation and discipling are essential for members of the congregation.

Pattern 3: Taking Risks as a Contrast Community. The missional church is learning to take risks for the sake of the gospel. It understands itself as different from the world because of

¹⁸ See Lois Y. Barrett (ed) *Treasures In Clay Jars* (Appendix) for the 12, Eerdmans, 2004

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. xii-xiv (These patterns are explained in whole chapters in the book)

its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord. It is raising questions, often threatening ones, about the church's cultural captivity, and it is grappling with the ethical and structural implications of its missional vocation. It is learning to deal with internal and external resistance.

Pattern 4: Practices That Demonstrate God's Intent for the World. The pattern of the church's life as community is a demonstration of what God intends for the life of the whole world. The practices of the church embody mutual care, reconciliation, loving accountability, and hospitality. A missional church is indicated by how Christians behave toward one another.

Pattern 5: Worship as Public Witness. Worship is the central act by which the community celebrates with joy and thanksgiving both God's presence and God's promised future. Flowing out of its worship, the community has a vital public witness.

Pattern 6: Dependence on the Holy Spirit. The missional community confesses its dependence upon the Holy Spirit, shown in particular in its practices of corporate prayer.

Pattern 7: Pointing Toward the Reign of God. The missional church understands its calling as witness to the gospel of the in-breaking reign of God, and strives to be an instrument, agent, and sign of that reign. As it makes its witness through its identity, activity, and communication, it is keenly aware of the provisional character of all that it is and all that it does. It points toward the reign of God that God will certainly bring about, but knows that its own response is incomplete, and that its own conversion is a continuing necessity.

Pattern 8: Missional Authority. The Holy Spirit gives the missional church a community of persons who, in a variety of ways and with a diversity of functional roles and titles, together practice the missional authority that cultivates within the community the discernment of missional vocation and is intentional about the practices that embed that vocation in the community's life.

The congregations studied were quite varied. City and suburban, black and white and mixed, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Independent. None were found to be anywhere near a perfect missional church. Each is on the way. They do not look like each other. Each is doing God's mission in a unique way, according to its own tradition, theology, calling and community.

**How can my church
become a Missional Church?**

I do not (nor does anyone else I have read or talked to) have a "Five easy steps to Missional Church" program.²⁰ I wish I did. Or perhaps I don't wish this at all. God has a plan of mission for your church, for your denomination. It was different for Abraham than for David; different for Peter than for Paul – I suspect that it will be different for your church than for mine. Nevertheless, there are some similarities in the process. Here are some steps you might consider:

First – read some (much) of the literature suggested in the reading list, and begin to pray much about your church.

Second (if you are still excited) – get others to read missional church literature, and discuss with you the possibility of your church becoming a Missional Church. It is my experience that only when the leadership is excited, will change take place.

Third – form a group sanctioned by your church to discuss ways and means to make the transition from where you are to where you believe God wants you to be. Have this group report regularly to the powers that be (board of directors).

Fourth – teach the congregation what it means to become a missional church. (This will take much repetition)

²⁰ However *The Missional Leader* (see reading List) has some excellent advice

Fifth – engage the church in a visioning process. Examine your history, your present gifts and your community. Create a statement that projects your churches’ unique mission in this time and in this place.

Sixth – begin to move toward the vision. (This will take many years – be patient) You will need some group (i.e. a vision team) that takes responsibility for reporting regularly to the powers that be your progress (or lack of progress) towards your vision for a missional church.

Seventh – repeat the above six steps forever

These are steps that many churches take, in various orders and ways, and are written about in length in many fine books. The process is easy to describe – and difficult to undergo. Count the cost. It will cost you much time, some money and a lot of grief from those who want to stay in the present or return to the past. I believe the results to be worth the cost. You pray, and then decide.

As your church communes and wrestles together, some things that you presently do in your ministries will need to be changed a bit, some changed a lot. Some need to be left alone and some eliminated entirely. God will lead us – Let us pray!

Reading List

Missional Church, Darrell L. Guder (ed), Eerdmans
The Continuing Conversion of the Church, Darrell L. Guder
Eerdmans
StormFront, James V. Brownson et al., Eerdmans
Treasure in Clay Jars, Lois Y. Barrett et al., Eerdmans
The Missional Leader, Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk,
Jossey-Bass

Many articles may be found at www.gocn.org/newsletter.htm