



Missional Journal

From the desk of Dave Dunbar
President of Biblical Seminary

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Upcoming Events

Eastern Region
Conference
Evangelical Theological
Society

Friday, March 23, 2007
8:00-9:00 a.m. registration
9:00 a.m.-6:30 p.m. event
Location: Biblical's campus,
suburban Philadelphia

[More information](#)

The Gospel and the
Church that is Emerging

a symposium with
Scot McKnight
and
John Franke

Saturday, April 21
8:30 a.m. to noon
Cost: \$10

[Registration limited](#)

Biblical
Seminary Information
Night
for all prospective students

[Tuesday, March 13, 2007](#)

What's the Big Deal?

Back again! This is the second installment discussing the seminary's new vision "to train missional leaders." I have received a number of letters in response to my initial discussion. I appreciate the feedback. Glad to know somebody reads this stuff!



What's the big deal with "missional"?

I want to spill a little ink over two questions I have encountered that are really opposite sides of the same coin. The first goes something like this: **is missional really new?** Often this is followed immediately by the statement, "I've (we've) always been missional!" The implication is that the missional movement is really only talking about evangelism, and that is obviously not new.

First, a note on the word itself. Although a few authors used the word earlier in the twentieth century, the book *Missional Church* (Darrell Guder, ed. [Eerdmans, 1998]) really pushed the term to the front of the class. The problem addressed by this collection of essays is that ". . . while modern missions have led to an expansion of world Christianity, **Christianity in North America has moved (or been moved) away from its position of dominance as it has experienced the loss of not only numbers but of power and influence**

5:45-7:30 p.m.
information on MDivs, MAs,
& Certificates
Location: Biblical's campus

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within society" (p. 1). The thesis of the book is that answers to this crisis in the church will not be effectively addressed at the level of method and problem solving, but only at a spiritual and theological level (p. 3).

In the ensuing nine years many other voices have joined this discussion. The cover of the most recent edition of *Leadership* reads "Going Missional: Break Free of the Box and Touch Your World" (Winter 2007).

Is missional really new?

So, back to our question. Is missional really new? Yes, I believe it is, at least for a large part of the American church. It is new because it seeks to address the new reality of the post-Christian or post-Christendom culture that increasingly dominates America, particularly the larger metropolitan centers. There are many features of this culture that we might discuss, but I'll mention just two:

1. **The disappearance of a "churched" society.**

The demise of Christendom means that the positive "pressure" that leads people to attend church is gone. For hundreds of years churches have been able to assume that a significant stream of non-Christians would trickle in the doors, and once inside we knew what to do with them.

But now the pressure is off. If people are not disposed to come in, then we must figure out how to go to them. This will require a major transition for most of our churches. As a missionary friend of mine expresses this, we need to shift from being "*Come*" churches to being "*Go*" churches.

2. **A post-Christian context.** This involves two important characteristics. The first is *the loss of Christian memory*. Increasingly the people around us are unaware of the basics of the biblical story or the teachings of the Christian faith. Many traditional presentations of the gospel, however, assume that people have the

basics and only need a quick summary of the message with a direct appeal to "receive Christ." We will need to adapt our evangelistic strategy to reflect more of Paul's strategy as he spoke to the skeptical Greeks in Athens.

The other critical aspect of the post-Christian context is that people who don't really know what the faith is about *assume that they do*. And what many of them assume is that evangelical (and fundamentalist) Christians are an angry bunch of people who are at war with mainstream American culture. For many we are defined primarily by our stance against abortion and homosexuality. And that's a problem. Even though I see the abortion culture and the growing approval of homosexuality as manifestations of our society's loss of the knowledge of God, I don't want opposition to these trends to define who I am. I want to be defined by the gospel and by the character of Jesus.

This is a roundabout way of saying "yes" to our first question. Yes, there is something new about this missional discussion. **It is not just a new way of talking about evangelism.** It recognizes that we have lost home-court advantage. We can no longer assume that our message is understandable or that people are disposed to receive the message favorably. The missional movement seeks to address this set of issues.

Or is "missional" just the latest fad?

The second question flips the coin over and asks, **is missional just the latest fad?** Is this just another program in a seemingly endless line of "with-it" ideas designed to sell books or make pastors feel guilty? Good questions. As the term grows in popularity and visibility (which seems to be happening), there may be a faddish element to it and it may get so diluted it is of little value.

However, I think the term presently has value in pointing us toward something deeply rooted in the

history of the early church, and in the life and teaching of Jesus: the missionary character of the people of God. ***"Missional" reminds us that the church was formed to carry the reconciling word and work of Jesus into the world.***

In a recent article Chad Hall suggests two distractions that interfere with a congregation's missional calling: *self-preservation* and *church growth*. Concerning the first he writes: ". . . the point is not whether we can build churches that last, but whether churches can touch the world with God's love." In regard to the second he says, "When the emphasis is on bringing the world to the church, the church's mission of going to the world can get lost" ("Missional: Possible," *Leadership* [Winter 2007], p. 35).

Summary

To summarize then, "missional" is an old idea that Western Christians in the 21st century are beginning to re-discover. It is new in the sense that many (most?) of our churches have lost touch with our missionary identity. Southern Baptist Reggie McNeal says that American Christians have "missional amnesia"-we have forgotten who we are. At Biblical Seminary we are trying to remember.

In my next letter I will expand a bit on how "missional" might be distinguished from "evangelistic."

Stay tuned!