



Missional Journal

From the desk of Dave Dunbar
President of Biblical Seminary

April 2007, Vol 1. No. 3

Upcoming Events

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's First Online Course Offered This Spring
the course that gives "feet" to theology
Missional Theology 1

[More Information](#)
limited cyber-seating
REGISTER TODAY
800-235-4021 Ext 106

You Respond

I've appreciated the thoughtful responses I've received from my e-mail letters. I'll be sharing some of them with you in this newsletter.

Dear Dave,

What's Different About Missional?

In my previous articles I raised the question, "Is missional any different from evangelistic?" The answer is yes, and in this communiqué I will address some of those differences.

To be evangelistic is to be committed to and involved with the proclamation of the gospel (the evangel). For many of us the gospel is primarily a verbal message focused on what God has done and will yet do in Jesus Christ to reconcile fallen humanity to himself. The form in which this message came to us was shaped by Scripture, by the Protestant reformers (especially Martin Luther), and by the revivalism of the 19th century. It was often a brief summary of the good news (the "Romans Road," "The Four Spiritual Laws," "Steps to Peace with God," etc.) combined with a strong appeal to "trust Christ" or "accept Jesus as your personal Savior."

There is no denying that many people (including me) came to a deep and abiding faith by this approach. But we should also recognize that those who are reached in this way are normally people who have been prepared for the message. Like me they may have grown up in a Christian home and, though they may not be church attenders, they at least have a "Christian memory." By this I mean that they have acquired a basic stock of Christian truths that they embrace, even if they have never come to a place of personal commitment. A brief, focused presentation of the gospel is often very effective with people at this level of spiritual preparedness.

What the missional movement recognizes is that the percentage of the general population in America who now

Thank you for your recent e-mail to the Biblical alumni. I appreciated very much your thoughts on the concept of being "missional." I must admit, I usually turn off quickly to the latest "catch words" that enter our Christian vocabulary and get tossed around until new words come along to take their place. I had been doing that with the word "missional." This word, however, describes the response needed by the church to the shift that has occurred in our culture toward Christianity. Your brief digest is most helpful.

Jim Miller, DMin '05

Quick Links

[Our website](#)

[CECL at Biblical](#)

[Planned Giving](#)

Click below to access past Missional Journals

[Archived Missional Journals](#)

Your comments are welcome
please e-mail us!

president@biblical.edu

If you are interested in supporting our vision for seminary education
click here

[Institutional Advancement](#)

fit the above profile is rapidly shrinking. As I mentioned in my last article, our culture is increasingly post-Christian and biased against the gospel. So what should we do? Is the answer simply to be "faithful," i.e., to say, "Just keep doing what worked before, and trust God for the results"? The problem with this answer is the assumption that "what worked before" was a comprehensive and biblically sufficient presentation of the gospel--one that doesn't need to be examined or modified.

But this assumption is being challenged in some of the missional literature, and I find it a healthy challenge. Consider these two lines of discussion:

An incarnational gospel

One legacy of the liberal-fundamentalist controversies of the first half of the 20th century was the tendency to sever gospel words from gospel deeds: fundamentalists were more intent on preserving a faithful message and liberals were more concerned with social applications. The result for many fundamentalist and evangelical churches was an individualistic and privatized spirituality that had little connection to the surrounding environment. Of course there were exceptions: evangelicals in the latter part of the 20th century have been involved in the pro-life movement, prison ministry, care for the poor, etc. And in some quarters, like the African-American church, there has always been a more balanced understanding of the need to incarnate the message. Nevertheless, there remains a strong tendency toward a disembodied gospel.

Alan Hirsch (*The Forgotten Ways* [Brazos, 2006], pp. 127ff.) **has argued the need for the western church to recapture what he calls the "Apostolic Genius" of the early church.** Part of this genius he describes as the "missional-incarnational impulse." By this he means that "the incarnation not only qualifies God's acts in the world, but must also

qualify ours. . . . To act incarnationally therefore will mean in part that in our mission to those outside of the faith we will need to exercise a genuine identification and affinity with those we are attempting to reach" (p. 133).

The missional church is concerned about a transformative gospel that unites word and deed, theory and praxis. Scot McKnight writes, "This holistic emphasis finds perfect expression in the ministry of Jesus, who went about doing good to bodies, spirits, families, and societies. He picked the marginalized up from the floor and put them back in their seats at the table; he attracted harlots and tax collectors; he made the lame walk and opened the ears of the deaf. He cared, in other words, not just about lost souls, but also about whole persons and whole societies" ("Five Streams of the Emerging Church," *Christianity Today* [Feb 2007], p. 38). In other words, **the good news is not just a message to be delivered; it is a reality that must be demonstrated by a faith active in love.** As my colleague Charles Zimmerman says, "We need good messaging and good neighboring."

The congregation as hermeneutic

As Os Guinness observed nearly a quarter century ago, the problem with Christianity in western culture is not credibility but plausibility. In other words, the problem is not that there are no good reasons for people to believe in Jesus; rather, because the idea of Christian faith lacks plausibility, people are less inclined to take the reasons seriously. So the crucial question to be addressed is how might Christians strengthen the plausibility of the message?

The theologian who has probably given greatest impetus to the missional

movement is the British missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin. In a wonderful chapter titled "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel" he asks, "How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live it" (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* [Eerdmans, 1989], 227).

The challenge for the evangelical church is to shake itself free of the reigning plausibility structure so powerfully conveyed by modern culture. The sociological evidence suggests that we have not done this very well. The missional church movement emphasizes the fact that embodying the truth of the gospel in our congregations is important not just for us but for the world. **In the post-Christian world, a counter-cultural life style is as important as a counter-cultural message.** Newbigin says, "The reigning plausibility structure can only be effectively challenged by people who are fully integrated inhabitants of another" (p. 228).

A good question for another article: what would a congregation look like that embodied such a counter-cultural life?

Think about it!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. Newbigin', written in a cursive style.