



Missional Journal

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Following Jesus into the World

A recent issue of *Leadership* magazine carries a brief article by Alan Hirsch that cuts through some of the fog surrounding the term "missional." He first clarifies what missional does *not* mean. It is not synonymous with *emerging*, or *evangelistic*, or *seeker-sensitive*. It is not simply another way to talk about *church growth* or *social justice programs*.^[1]

The need for such clarification, fully a decade after the publication of the landmark book *Missional Church*, is symptomatic of at least two problems.

First is the linguistic fact that the meaning of words is fluid over time. As more people incorporate a word into their vocabulary, its meaning changes depending on the context. Think back to what happened to the words "born again" after the election of Jimmy Carter. This is happening with "missional"--more people are hearing it and using it, and this creates some ambiguity. While it is encouraging that more folks are getting comfortable with the word and using it positively, I share Hirsch's concern with the loss of precision.

The second problem troubles me more. I fear that those of us in the missional movement have not communicated clearly and concretely. In other words, we must take some ownership for the confusion that exists. My purpose here is to take another run at a simple definition.

At the end of a recent conversation on this very topic, one of the trustees of Biblical Seminary observed, "Isn't this whole missional thing really just about following Jesus into the world?" Now summarizing a decade of scholarly and popular discussion with one sentence could seem dismissive or belittling of what some of us feel is an incredibly important set of issues. However, the comment was not made with any negative intent and, as I have reflected on it, I've become convinced that it may be a very valuable handle for grasping the missional concern.

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Following Jesus into the World

These words provide a concrete image of the church's call to mission. The disciple is to be like the teacher. As the Father sent the Son into the world, the resurrected Jesus now sends his followers (John 20:21). The death and resurrection of Jesus is the life-transforming and world-transforming event that empowers the disciples to go, and insures that their going will not be in vain. Like their master, the disciples go forth with word and deed--they announce the good news and they do good works (the works of the kingdom).

Now if you are on board with this, you may be tempted to say, "What's new about that? This is what I've always thought!" Or perhaps, "This is what our church has always done!" Yes, well . . . maybe, but not so fast. The fact is that most of the churches I know are not missional in the sense I have just described. So perhaps your church is different . . . perhaps!

Let me point out some differences between this vision of the church's mission and what I most frequently observe.

1. The missional vision is outward-facing rather than inward-facing. My experience of church has been of groups that were largely inwardly focused. The primary concern and expenditure of energy was for the internal community of believers. We gave our attention to questions like: How can we improve the worship experience? How can we better care for the congregation? How can we increase the number of people in small groups? How can we provide discipleship for our children and young people? How can we increase attendance and grow the membership?

I am not suggesting that most churches have no concern for non-Christians or strangers--many do. **But even where such concern exists, it often appears as an after-thought or as something important that we will get to after we take care of what is really important--edifying the congregation and performing church in a particular place.** Is this one of the reasons most churches see very little conversion growth?

By contrast, the missional congregation follows Jesus outside of the church. It walks with him through the community. It visits with people who no longer feel comfortable coming to church, either because they feel unwelcome, unacceptable, or unsure. The missional congregation recognizes that some of its most important ministry will take place *outside* the church. It asks, "How is the Holy Spirit moving in our community and how might we be "workers together" with God?"

2. The missional vision is confident rather than fearful. Following Jesus into the world means we travel with the One who has authority over wind and waves and evil spirits, who heals the sick, feeds the hungry, speaks forgiveness to sinners, and raises the dead.

But much of Western Christianity today is fearful. Our churches have become places of retreat, bastions of intellectual and spiritual timidity. Sundays are times to convince ourselves that what we believe is true even though it seems to have little bearing on the other six days of life in the big bad world.

I am not suggesting that retreat is always wrong or that the world is not a dangerous place. It's just that hunkering down in a foxhole is not a good tactic if we are serious about following Jesus. He best understood the dangers for himself and for us. "I am sending you out like lambs among wolves!" (Luke 10:3). The church that follows Jesus into the world will choose confident vulnerability over fortified security.

3. The missional vision is incarnational. I have written about this in earlier articles, but it bears repeating. Following Jesus means that we are disciples of the God who became flesh and walked among us, who combined words and deeds in announcing the good news that God's Kingdom was at hand. The Kingdom is the coming reign of God who is now setting the world to rights (to borrow N.T. Wright's fine phrase). All is to be restored, and the ministry of Jesus is the sign and foretaste of what the new creation will ultimately be.

The churches I have experienced focused primarily on words. We stressed the importance of teaching and preaching the gospel clearly--most of it within the church and for the church. Good works were encouraged as a response to the gospel and as a way of saying "thank you" to God for his mercy.

What this perspective lacks is an incarnational understanding of discipleship. The power of the Lord's ministry is that he not only proclaimed the kingdom, he enacted it. And this is what the missional church has understood: the gospel not only needs to be announced, it needs to be performed. Where? In church? Well, yes, that's important (though most of our congregations aren't doing too well on this, right?).

If we are serious about following Jesus into the world, isn't it equally important for us to "perform the gospel" in the world? When Paul tells the Ephesian Christians that "we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10) he is not speaking about private spirituality but about the signs of

the new creation that God has prepared for us to enact as witnesses to the gospel.

What specific good works are in view? A local congregation can only answer this question by prayerfully following Jesus into the "world" (i.e. their local neighborhood). Such a congregation might ask the question, "How would this community be different if the Kingdom arrived in power today?" The answer would offer a helpful clue to the kind of good works God has prepared for them.

So there you have it. A simple idea but, like many simple ideas, profound. The missional church movement is an attempt by Western Christians to reclaim our identity as disciples--people learning to be like Jesus and ready to follow him into our world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dave', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

[1] *Leadership* (Fall 2008), p. 22.

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