



Missional Journal

David G. Dunbar, President

April 2009, Vol. 3 No. 2

[Forward this Issue](#)

Use this link to forward the Missional Journal to a friend.

Click below to access past Missional Journals

[Archived Missional Journals](#)

Blog with Dave

[Share Your Thoughts](#)

Quick Links

[Biblical's Website](#)

[C4ML at Biblical](#)

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

Everything Changes

A few years ago I participated in a colloquium of missional church leaders. One of the participants made a striking comment: "When I look at things from a missional perspective, *everything changes!*"

In this issue of the *Journal* I want to focus on the first of four "convictions" affirmed by the faculty and board of Biblical Seminary. It is a conviction we think changes seminary education.

The Missional Character of the Christian Church

We believe the life and witness of the church should be thoroughly shaped by its participation in the mission of God to reconcile the world to himself in Jesus Christ, and by the call of Jesus to be the people of God sent into the world to proclaim and live out the gospel.^[i]

Perhaps the first observation to be made is that a statement about mission is not usually the first point mentioned when seminary teachers present their theological convictions. The reason is that for centuries mission simply has not been central to the teaching and research that most theologians do.

I began my seminary teaching career at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago. Trinity was (and is) a large institution offering multiple degrees from a number of departments. I was part of the theology and biblical studies faculty. Most of us were housed in a suite of offices separate from the "practical theology" faculty which included those who taught missions and evangelism.

Faculty in my area tended to view themselves as the "heart" of the academic program; the other areas were peripheral.

[Institutional Advancement](#)

[Planned Giving](#)

copyright © 2007 David G. Dunbar

After all, we did the heavy work of exegesis, interpretation, and theological reflection. The "practical" folks just had to apply the stuff we figured out! Of course, we never quite articulated these opinions, but we held them...or perhaps I should leave my colleagues out of this and just say that *I* held these views.

One of my friends who taught in the missions area would occasionally challenge my stance. "Shouldn't we give a more central place to missions?" he would ask. "How can we teach systematic theology without focusing on the sending of the church into the world?" In one way the answer was simple: We didn't because our predecessors didn't! The tradition of Protestant theological studies since the 16th century worked from the assumptions of Christendom--Europe needed reformation not "missioning." So it was not surprising that the great leaders of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions had little to say about mission, or that this gap can still be found in theological education.

Nevertheless, the questions bothered me. I didn't know what to do with the questions at the time, but my friend had a point. It did seem like **the Great Commission had become the Great Omission** for biblical and theological studies.

Not long before I left Trinity to move to Biblical, I visited with missiologist-theologian Harvie Conn and talked about his then recently published *Eternal Word and Changing World*. Here was a Reformed theologian and professor from one of my alma maters who was also pressing the questions that mission raises for theology. Conn believed that the Reformed tradition for many had become fossilized. In their view "the Reformation is completed, and we in the West wait for the churches of the Third World to accept as their statements of faith those shaped in a *corpus Christianum* by a Western church three centuries ago." Furthermore, systematic theology must be seen as a compilation of the Western history of dogma, "and that history, in the process of compilation, has lost its missiological thrust." [ii]

Much of Conn's work made sense to me, but I was not sure where to go with it. However, the seed had been planted in my mind for a new direction. When I encountered the missional church movement years later it made sense. Here I found missiologists, theologians, and biblical scholars in constructive conversation around the question, "What does it mean to say that the church is God's missionary people?"

This subsequently became a major point of discussion within the faculty and board of Biblical Seminary. We have reshaped our teaching and curricula because we are convinced that mission is the most important question (or set of questions) facing the church in North America today.

Now if these ideas are new to you, I suspect you may be thinking, "So what's the big deal? Hasn't the church always been concerned for missions? Surely focusing on mission would not change our understanding of theology or how we view the church?" This is where I started myself, so it seems quite reasonable that you may feel the same way.

But in reality the church in the West has *not* always been concerned for missions, or for *The Mission*. In fact when we focus on *The Mission* our perspective on many things changes. Let me give some illustrations:

1. Theology

A theology focused on mission begins with the character of God. As our conviction statement reads, "**While the love shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from all eternity past precludes any divine need, it is in God's nature to desire to extend this love and the fellowship it fosters to others.**" It is this desire to extend his love that motivates both creation and redemption.

What is crucial here is that mission is *not* first and foremost a job description for the church, but a reference to what God is up to in the world--God is on a mission! So the Father sends the Son, and subsequently both send the Spirit to empower Jesus' disciples to join in the world-wide mission. The church is sent into a harvest that God has already initiated.

The critical point here is that mission is not an after-thought in the divine agenda, and so it cannot be an after-thought in the church's agenda. It is not something we try to get to once we are finished with the real business of "doing church." As someone cleverly put it, "**God's church does not have a mission in the world; rather, God's mission has a church in the world!**" Think about it--there are far-reaching implications to this. So we say this in our convictions statement, "...the mission of God should constitute the unifying motif of theological education."

2. Church

Our statement also says, "**The life and witness of the church should be thoroughly shaped by its participation in the mission of God...**" It *"should be"* but it usually is not.

Rather, our churches are largely shaped by the assumptions of Christendom, namely that we live in a "Christian" nation, that the majority of people around us understand the basics of the Christian faith and are favorably disposed toward the message, and that if we provide church programs of sufficient number and quality they will come. The result is that most of our churches spend the majority of their time, energy, and money on activities that take place within the walls of their buildings.

A missional approach to the church reminds us that God is already at work outside the building. It emphasizes that the kingdom is larger than the church and it invites us to look outside the walls and ask: How we can join God in his mission? This question leads to others: How much of the annual budget should we spend on ourselves? How much time should church members invest in-house? How would a change in the posture of our churches affect the kinds of staff we hire or the job descriptions of church leaders?

As you can see, thinking about God as a missionary God and the church as a missionary people is challenging and uncomfortable. Does this mean that *everything changes*? Well, no, not everything. Scholars often exaggerate to make a point right? But note well--there is a point to be made. The church in North America is in trouble and our current efforts to reach our culture seem less and less effective. **There is much that needs to change!**



[i]The full statement is found here:

<http://www.biblical.edu/images/discover/Convictions0808.pdf>

[ii]*Eternal Word and Changing World* (Zondervan, 1983), pp. 221, 223.

