



Missional Journal

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Two Good Books

This year a number of books have appeared that represent important contributions to the missional church discussion. In this issue of *Missional Journal* I briefly review two of these books: **Reggie McNeal's** *Missional Renaissance* (Jossey-Bass, 2009) and **Jim Belcher's** *Deep Church--A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (IVP Books, 2009).

Missional Renaissance

Reggie McNeal is a lecturer and consultant with Leadership Network. His earlier book, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, was a valuable catalyst for our board of trustees when the seminary began its missional turn in 2003.

His new work is important because it is the most concrete and "practical" treatment of missional church that has appeared to date. Earlier books and articles were more deconstructive and theoretical. This was necessary because the Western church needed to think (and act!) its way out of the constricting assumptions of Christendom and modernity. But hope for a new day resides in our ability to move beyond *critique to construction*.

McNeal believes we have come to a tipping point in the movement where "...we can now begin to say what missional is, not just what it is not" (p. xv). This leads him to a broad but useful definition: "The missional church is the people of God partnering with God in his redemptive mission in the world....Missional is not a place you arrive but a direction in which you are moving. It is a way of being in the world" (p. 38).

The burden of McNeal's book is identifying three shifts that need to take place if ministry leaders are to effect missional change. The shifts are: 1) From internal to external focus; 2) From program development to people development; and 3) From church-based to kingdom-based leadership. These shifts require churches to develop a new scorecard for monitoring ministry effectiveness. McNeal states, "What gets rewarded gets done....That is why the current scorecard for most congregations actually militates against missional behavior. It rewards antimissional values; it promotes an antimissional ministry agenda" (p. 68).

What I like about the book is that McNeal follows up his critiques with practical suggestions and actual examples of how churches can

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establish fresh patterns of ministry and new metrics to evaluate outcomes. For example, he suggests that missional leaders may want to track the number of relationships they have with non-Christians, or the number of hours they invest in community service outside the church, or the number of relationships they have with other community leaders.

I also like the realistic way he talks about the leadership challenge in the missional movement. Leaders will need to be clear about their calling: "Does your call revolve around a mission or a job?" They need to count the potential cost: "Do we have the courage to pursue the call to missional leadership even if our incomes are jeopardized?" And they must prioritize their commitments: "Are we content with assessing our ministry on how well we meet the expectations of those we lead, or is our greatest allegiance still reserved for following Jesus?" (pp. 154-55).

One quality some may find off-putting is McNeal's tendency to pose choices in absolutist, either/or terms. He states that missional means a turn from *member* culture to *missionary* culture, from *attractional* ministry to *incarnational* ministry, from gospel *proclamation* to gospel *demonstration*, and from the *institutional* church to the *organic* church, etc. In the end he usually qualifies his bolder initial statements, but those looking for a fight will easily find sound bites to debate. That said, the book is still a valuable contribution.

Deep Church--A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional

The second book I'm reviewing, *Deep Church* by Jim Belcher, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California, moderates some of the nasty theological and ecclesiological debates currently racking the evangelical church. In particular, he is concerned about the growing animosity between "emerging church" proponents and "traditionalists." Commenting on an interchange between the influential Calvinist pastor John Piper and emerging church leaders Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, the author writes, "There appears to be little common ground. Unity seems impossible. Can the two sides get along? Are they really this far apart? Can they work together to build evangelicalism, or are their differences irreconcilable?" (p. 12).

Belcher believes that many of us are caught in the middle of this conflict. We are pretty sure some things need to change in the evangelical church, but we are not sure that either the traditionalist or the emerging options get us where we need to go. His book is offered as an attempt to help us understand the issues of the debate, and to point toward a "third way," which the author (borrowing from C.S. Lewis) calls *Deep Church*.

At the heart of Belcher's book is the contention that both traditionalists and emergents need to be rooted more in the history of the Christian faith-what Belcher describes as the Great Tradition, classical orthodoxy, mere Christianity, or ancient ecumenical teaching (terms borrowed from other writers). He does not use the term "generous orthodoxy," [1] perhaps for fear that his position will be confused with that of Brian McLaren. In fact, he places more emphasis on the Great Tradition than McLaren, but his spirit is equally irenic and his theological listening to those he disagrees with is perhaps more careful and even-handed than McLaren.

Belcher believes both traditionalists and emergents fail to take tradition seriously. "All along, I have been making the case that we need tradition to help us interpret Scripture faithfully. The Great Tradition is a plumb line or 'rule of faith' the church has used for two millennia to understand the faith, live it out faithfully, and pass it on to the next generation. Without this plumb line, we don't have the theological tools to remain faithful to Scripture" (p. 153).

Not only is the Great Tradition a guide and protection for interpretation, it is also a basis for a new ecumenism, a fresh and practical expression of unity within the evangelical camp. Belcher follows Robert Greer in advocating a two-tiered approach to doctrine in which the top tier comprises the teachings of the classical orthodox consensus (Nicene Christianity). The second tier comprises the particular doctrinal formulations of individual churches or denominations.

Belcher hopes that adopting such a framework will encourage relational health within the church: "When the top tier is agreed upon, the various parties mutually trust and respect one another as orthodox. Then discussions that deal with bottom-tier teachings become opportunities to learn and grow, and not tests of orthodoxy" (p. 60). Careful listening, trust, and respect are qualities that the author finds lacking in much of the current debate between traditional and emerging church representatives.

From his "third-way," *Deep Church* vantage point, Belcher examines seven issues of disagreement between the emerging church and traditionalists: truth, evangelism, gospel, worship, preaching, ecclesiology, and culture. In each area the author practices what he advocates. He avoids "straw man" arguments, does his best to represent fairly all the positions he interacts with, and maintains a courteous and respectful tone at all times.

Missional thinkers have argued that the church in the West is currently in a state of exile.[2] I believe that one of the reasons we find ourselves in this predicament stems from our predilection for theological warfare. "Friendly fire" kills many of our own, and we too easily justify our behavior as necessary to protect the church and preserve the truth. Jim Belcher points us to a different way. May his tribe increase!



[1] I have discussed this in an earlier article "Generous-Joyful Orthodoxy," *MJ*, Vol.1, No. 6 at <http://www.biblical.edu/index.php/missional-journal>.

[2] See my earlier article, "By the Waters of Babylon," *MJ*, Vol. 2. No. 1 at <http://www.biblical.edu/index.php/missional-journal>.