




# Missional Journal

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David G. Dunbar, President

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## That the World May Know

The gospel is the announcement of what God is up to in the world. It discloses the mystery long hidden--that God is reconciling all things to himself in the Messiah. The unfolding of this plan is the common mission of Father, Son, and Spirit; and it is out of this mission and for the sake of this mission that Israel and the church receive their calling.

The mission of God is not merely announced, it is *embodied*. The Word of the Father becomes flesh: We not only hear of glory, **we behold it in Jesus** (John 1:14). Now the church is called and sent on the mission as "the body of Christ" in the world, the concrete representation of the fact that the Father sent the Son to be the savior of the world. The church announces the once-for-all reconciliation of the cross and also makes that reconciliation visible--it is the community of the peace-makers (Matt. 5:6; Eph. 2:14-16). At least in theory!

The critical importance of embodying the message is one of the central themes in our Lord's final prayer. It is prayer for the success of the mission. As the cross looms immediately before him, Jesus centers on the knowledge that he has been sent by the Father (John 17: 3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25) to lay down his life. This is the mission: To sacrifice himself so that the world may know the Father.

Jesus prays not only for himself but also for his immediate and future disciples. The mission is not only his but theirs: "As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (vs. 18). Thus the baton is passed. As he sanctifies himself to faithfully complete the journey, he also prays for their sanctification (vs. 19). And they will need his prayer!

We should listen especially to the concluding petitions. The close of the prayer is an eschatological request that those who believe will join Jesus in the presence of the Father (vs. 24). But leading up to this (vs. 20-23) is a petition for the unity of the disciples:

"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

- a) **that all of them may be one,**
- b) Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us
- c) ***so that the world may believe that you have sent me.***

I have given them the glory that you gave me,

- d) **that they may be one**
- e) as we are one: I in them and you in me.
- f) **May they be brought to complete unity**
- g) ***so that the world may know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.***

Notice the three-fold reference to unity among his disciples (a, d, f). Their oneness is to be like the unity of the Father and the Son (b, d, e), which I suggest in this case should be seen as a unity of reciprocal honor, mutual love, and shared mission.

The consequences of unity are stunning: **That the world may know and believe that the Father has sent Jesus on a great mission of love** (c, g). This is the central motif of what I have described in previous articles as missional-ecumenism.

### **Unity drives mission**

I grew up and trained for ministry in conservative evangelical circles heavily influenced by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century revivalism. In those circles we understood "gospel" as a verbal message and "evangelism" as the techniques used to communicate the message and call people to a "decision." The primary concern was careful doctrinal articulation of the message. This was understandable because in the liberal-fundamentalist debates of the last century essential parts of the message were at risk.

The problem is not that we focused on the gospel as a message, but that we missed the incarnational element. We ignored the importance of *being* the body of Christ, the visible expression of what God's reconciling love seeks to accomplish in the world. **But the gospel is verbal and visual (corporal).** This is what Jesus points us to in his prayer. The verbal message is crucial--he prays for "those who will believe in me through their *message*" (literally, their *word*).

But the unity of believers who live out the message of reconciliation is also crucial. Jesus ties the results specifically to the idea of unity: so that the world may know and believe the gospel. C.K. Barrett, commenting on these verses, says it well: "The unity of the church in God is the supreme testimony to the truth of the claim that Jesus is God's authorized emissary. The existence of such a community is a supernatural fact which can be explained only as the result of a supernatural cause." [1]

Unfortunately, a truncated understanding of the gospel as a merely verbal message has combined with a truncated view of the church. Howard Snyder observes that "Despite the sixteenth-century Reformation in its various branches, Protestantism has never

developed a fully biblical doctrine of the church. Protestantism (and thus contemporary evangelicalism) operates with an often confused and somewhat Platonic ecclesiology that undercuts the possibility of arriving at a biblically sound solution to many problems related to the church's nature and mission." [2]

It is this Platonizing tendency which allows us to function too comfortably with a spiritualized notion of the unity of the church that has little connection to the discord and division that troubles everyday life in our churches. Instead we need to affirm with the 1974 Lausanne Covenant that "...our oneness strengthens our witness, just as our disunity undermines our gospel of reconciliation." [3]

### **Mission drives unity**

If unity is essential for effectiveness in mission, then the reverse is also true: mission establishes and sustains the unity of God's people. Since Genesis 3 unity has never been easy or natural, but the current cultural climate increases the challenge. Narcissism and consumerism encourage us to view the church as a collection of individuals gathered for purposes of personal fulfillment and self-help. [4] The idea that we are "one body" in the Lord is completely foreign to the radical individualism that dominates the Western church. Little wonder that unity is hard to come by.

We need the attitude of Christ so that we look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4-5). We must immediately add that it is not sufficient just to care for those within our particular circle, congregation, or denomination. True, care for our own is better than mere individualism. But isn't there also the danger of a kind of group Narcissism--an internal focus that results in clubbishness and complacency?

Many of us yearn for something deeper and more authentic. Where shall we find it? Alan Hirsch speaks to this question by contrasting *mission* with *ministry*, meaning an outward-facing church as opposed to an inward-facing church. "Experience tells us that a church that aims at ministry seldom gets to mission even if it sincerely intends to do so. But the church that aims at mission will have to do ministry, because *ministry is the means* to do mission. Our services, our ministries, need a greater cause to keep them alive and give them their broader meaning. By planting the flag outside the walls of the church, so to speak, the church discovers itself by rallying to it--this is mission." [5] In the same way unity must not be seen as an end in itself--it needs to be placed in the context of a larger vision. Unity without mission becomes self-serving.

The TV mini-series "A Band of Brothers" is the story of the formation and deployment of Easy Company of the U.S. Army 101st Airborne division; it narrates their mission in WWII's European theatre from Operation Overlord through V-J Day. As the title of the series suggests, the men of Easy Company developed an extraordinary bond of friendship that produced profound feats of bravery and sacrifice. They had one of the more dangerous tasks in the assault on Fortress Europe--to be dropped behind enemy lines, to neutralize defensive positions, and to disrupt German communications.

An obvious insight from this story is the way their common mission forged bonds between these soldiers. Is it likely that the same men, organized around a different or lesser purpose, would have willingly endured such hardship? Would they have sacrificed or loved one another so deeply? I doubt it.

So think about the church. We are the people of God called to share in the GREATEST MISSION. Our captain (no stranger to courageous sacrifice) leads the way. The closer we follow him and share his mission, the more we become a band of brothers (and sisters) who need and value one another. On the other hand, if we forget or ignore the mission, the quality of our life together will surely deteriorate.

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In the last three articles we have considered missional-ecumenism. Is it biblically warranted? I believe it is. Does it address a major weakness in the Western church? I think so. Does it answer all the historical and practical problems of our current dis-unity? No. Is it a critical step on the road to spiritual health and vitality in mission? Absolutely!



[1] C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Westminster, 1978, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), p. 512.

[2] Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (InterVarsity, 2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), pp. 198-99.

[3] <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant1>.

[4] See my earlier article on narcissism and materialism:

<http://www.biblical.edu/images/missionaljournal/vol1no11.pdf>.

[5] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Brazos, 2006), p. 236.



**Andy Crouch**

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