

Is “Missional” the Best Word to Use?

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Over the last couple of decades the word “missional” has found its way into the vocabulary of the church, including its Evangelical wing. However, this word has been as difficult to define clearly as nailing Jell-o to the wall. One of the results of this lack of a clear definition is that its meaning “has been in the eye and mind of the beholder.” So the question is appropriate: Is “missional” the best word to use in seeking to define, express and practice ministry, especially in a church that considers itself Evangelical?

I raise this question because a case can be made that the term “missional” has been co-opted and influenced by a number of theological views that are contrary to an Evangelical/Reformed view. As more popularly stated (as much as it can be discerned given the fluidity of its use), missional is a combination of classical liberalism, which promotes a social gospel; Neo-Orthodoxy, with its existential interpretations of Scripture; and the hermeneutics popularized in the New Perspective on Paul. These influences are so deeply rooted in the term “missional” that it makes it counterproductive to use it in churches that do not affirm these views; it has the effect of creating cognitive and theological dissonance.

I am convinced that missional thinking, with the roots I have mentioned, is a philosophy and model of ministry that will in time have a deteriorating effect on the historic definition and application of the gospel. That is, the gospel will be stripped of its power, leaving the church, the people of God, impotent to be effective in a lost world with the gospel of grace (I Cor. 1:18-2:16).

The following assessment is based on the understanding that “missional” has its roots as defined above, and as much as I have been able to understand it from the literature and practitioners. Missional is not the best word to use to define the philosophy and practice of ministry.

Missional thinking has some noble points:

1. It wants the church to be more outfacing.
2. It has a concern for ministry to culture.

3. It wants to disturb and/or breakup the “holy huddle,” separatist mentality in the church.
4. It is not afraid of speaking into culture.
5. It desires to see church members bring light into a dark world.
6. It desires church members to have an outward focus and genuine concern for and engagement in the world around them, and provides various means for people to do so by using their gifts and talents.
7. It provides a less threatening means for engaging the world than confrontational evangelism as a result it’s easier and less intimidating for Christians to engage the world.

Missional thinking, however, has a number of problematic features that are so weighty that they will be its undoing, that is, it will fall under its own weight.

1. Its theological underpinnings are poorly outlined and defined. It just states its propositions without developing them from a theological grid. No philosophy of ministry flows from a neutral base; even if unstated there is a theological framework directing the formulations. In this case, it appears more sociologically driven than theologically driven.
2. There is little evidence of exegesis to demonstrate a biblical foundation for its propositions. It makes sweeping assertions of church and ministry, of inward vs. outward stances, and the church’s engagement in culture and community, but there is little to no exegetical foundation to demonstrate these notions.
3. There is very little indication that Scripture is normative for planning and effectuating ministry. Instead, missional thinking is defined more by its reaction to the way church has been done in the past; older paradigms are referenced as if they were the normative standard by which to measure a “successful” church. Hence the comparison that the missional church “is not this...but it is this.”
4. It is man-centered without a clear theocentric base, that is, it focuses on what the institution does not what God has commanded.
5. It presents its themes in an “either/or” as opposed to a “both/and” manner. This leaves those considering missional propositions believing that they must choose one style/manner over another style/manner of ministry.
6. Instead of recognizing that there are different stances of the church’s ministry (both/and), it promotes ministry that is “either” infacing “or ” outfacing.” It does not recognize that both are necessary for a full-orbed ministry.
7. It avers that missional is not a model of ministry but a way of ministering. This is a mere assertion that is not demonstrated just by saying it. In fact, missional thinking is a model of ministry that desires to move the church in a different direction from what its proponents have observed concerning the present state of the church’s ministry.
8. It makes a claim such that it assumes that 2000 years of church history have missed the mark, and that ministry has been ineffective all of these years.

9. It claims that the church is not so much a place to gather but a place to send out. If this is the case, how are new (and older) believers disciplined, trained and equipped for any ministry, missional or otherwise? Where do believers “go” to be trained so they can be “sent out”?
10. Its definitions of terms like “community,” “culture,” and “justice” are fluid, and not anchored to constant meanings.
11. It is more therapeutic than theological in its practice, using psychological language like “brokenness” and “wholeness.” There is very little, if any, reference concerning the need of repentance. The underlying assumption is that the main problem in the world is the problem of “brokenness,” and the church exists to address this. This thinking substitutes a consequence of sin for the sin itself.
12. It appears to give more credence to the corporate than the individual. Here is an example of the pendulum swinging too far; while it can be argued that traditional ministry was more infacing and geared toward the individual, missional thinking has moved too far to the corporate to the neglect or denigration of the importance of ministry to individuals.
13. It is another model of ministry no matter how much the proponents of missional thinking say it is not.
14. It blends all ministries of the church, removing distinctions. For example, worship is a distinct stance of the church that looks upward to God and his glory, not man and his needs. Edification is a distinct stance that focuses on the inward need of developing, equipping and bringing believers to maturity in Christ. Evangelism is a distinct stance with an outward focus, going into the world with the gospel, reasoning and persuading within culture, using biblical truth to declare that our real problem is sin, original and actual, and the absolute need of a Savior.
15. Where a doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) is discernable, it is a narrow understanding, having such an outward focus that it leaves out the necessity of an inward dimension.
16. It is activity-centered (“doing”) to the minimization of “being.”
17. It accommodates to culture, believing enculturation is a major goal. This neglects the biblical notion of Christians being aliens and strangers on the earth and in this age. That is, we are contra mundum, with our agenda being set by Scripture not the current cultural ideas and practices.
18. It has an overly heavy emphasis on “community” to the neglect of the “individual” and his/her place in the life of the church.
19. Its focus on word/deed ministry is based on the need “to do” in order to validate ministry, with more of an emphasis on deeds than propositional truth.

20. It de-emphasizes the importance of soteriology as a major foundation for ministry, placing more importance on community and “feeling” with people rather than being with them to tell them of their deepest need. The biblical doctrine of salvation implies there is a major problem, our separation from God because of sin, and that nothing, no activity or person can remedy this problem but Christ. In justification the power of sin is broken and believers are declared to be in a right standing before God. In sanctification the moral pollution of sin in believers is confronted and they are enabled by the power of the Spirit to live out the radical imperatives of the gospel. As a result, deeds flow from renewed hearts.
21. It confuses the application and implications of justification and sanctification.
22. Justice is promoted as a high virtue and mark of holiness, but justice is loosely defined. What does this justice really mean and look like? The priority of justice appears to be to make all things equitable and missional thinking is intended to create a level playing field. However, seeking justice without a biblical soteriology is vain and fruitless.
23. Can there be true justice if there isn't justice first from God that was displayed on the cross in the propitiatory death of Christ, and the declaratory justice that comes individually in justification? Justice cannot be sought or declared apart from the atonement. The cross is central to salvation and ultimate justice. Without a clear doctrine of the atonement, then Richard Niebuhr's summary statement of the social gospel will become true: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”
24. In the end, missional thinking is not new, novel or unique; it contains ideas and notions that have been around for all of church history. Its present incarnation is dressed in modern garb/language, but it promotes the ideas that have been a part of church ministry for centuries. Missional thinking is not the result of careful theological reflection, but more a reaction to whatever is perceived as the dominant practices of ministry that some find inadequate in some way. In short order, there will be a reaction to missional thinking that will then become the latest ministry fad.

The Evangelical/Reformed church can do better than what “missional” appears to provide. The church has such a rich heritage that it should not give it up for pottage. While it is true that each generation of the church needs to translate the truths of historic Christianity for its time, doing this does not mean changing the nature of that truth.

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