

On the Term “Missional”

Much of what I have stand for or defend eg in my book ‘*Missio Dei*’ has increasingly been labeled “missional” over the past ten years or so in place of the older term “missionary.” That is not completely coincidental, since in the case of almost all advocates of the expression “missional church” the names Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch are mentioned as the sources of inspiration and the representatives of the term’s use. Both individuals were closely allied with the term *missio Dei*. Stefan Schweyer traces the concept of *missional* back to the *missio Dei* concept.¹

The oldest documented evidence of the term’s use has been dated to 1883 or perhaps 1814.² However, the term has been used by an enormous spectrum of proponents. Additionally, there have been many in the past who did not conceive of the term *missionary* as referring to the organized activities of missionary societies and churches. Rather, they conceived of it in a more comprehensive manner, as the missionary nature of the church per se. This is the idea that the church completely engages with the society and transforms it, thus precisely reflecting that which the term *missional* is supposed to underscore.

It is naturally poor form to transport a differentiation between *missionary* and *missional* back a number of centuries to a time when the latter term was not even available, or to discredit every individual who still utilizes the former term. And in practice it was even often worse: As a rule, whoever spoke about a missionary church meant the nature of the church and not canvassing for a large organization.

Reggie McNeal, for instance, announced in his book *Missional Renaissance* that a new golden age has dawned with the emergence of the missional church, the largest setting out since the Reformation. He wrote, “The rise of the missional church is the single biggest step development in Christianity since the Reformation.”³ In typically American fashion, this is expressed in superlatives (“The shifts are tectonic.”⁴). I would, however, recommend awaiting the judgment of the next generation, when it can be seen whether something foundational has changed or if it is just a matter of a name change. One might enter

¹ Stefan Schweyer, “Kirche als Mission: Einsichten und Ausblicke zum Konzept der ‘missional church,’” *Theologische Beilage zur STH-Postille*, February and March 2009; the same statement appeared at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missional> as of July 7, 2010. Francis M. DuBose, *God Who Sends: A Fresh Quest for Biblical Mission* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1983), a classic on the justification of Trinitarian sending, refers on page 103 to “the missional call common to all Christians” and on page 110 to “the Missional Meaning of Worship.”

² C. E. Bourne, *The Heroes of African Discovery and Adventure*, vol. 2: *From the Death of Livingstone to the Year 1882* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1886); for earlier sources, see the discussion at <http://tallskinnykiwi-typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2008/01/missional-first.html>.

³ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), xiv.

⁴ Ibid.

this book into the records as typical American puffery: That which is decisive has now been discovered; everything up to now was only preliminary. That, however, changes nothing about the pretension it discloses.

But the check is still uncashed, so to speak. Typical evidence comes from McNeal's conclusion,⁵ in which a group is mentioned as a prominent example of missional activity. It collected \$10 million for the hungry and motivated 250,000 young people to enter into voluntary involvement. There is not a word about the hungry, not a word about which sustainable changes were brought about, and not a word about sinful structures that affect hunger. It was simply a program that boasts about money and numbers and conveys the sense that up to now, no one has been as good as we are. And that is supposed to be something unprecedented?

The central task, in the end, is described as asking *who* is the church instead of *what* is the church,⁶ a typical Western, indeed English word play that cannot be biblically justified and does not correspond to the reality of how churches are growing in the global South, often in the face of bitter persecution. At this point, mission truly becomes identical with life. The statement is likewise nonsense historically, considering that, for instance, Calvin defined the church as the community of believers, thus describing it as not a *what* in terms of structures but a *who* in terms of people. In addition, the statement that "the missional understanding of Christianity is undoing Christianity as religion"⁷ naturally sounds massive and perhaps could have its virtues if McNeal were to explain what he means by religion (e.g., spiritless Christianity, nominal Christianity, Karl Barth's Christianity brought about by people). However, as it stands, the missional life benefit remains equal to nothing.

Although his book is lacking as far as exegetical and theological foundations are concerned, McNeal does not want to see the dissolution of classical Christian theology: "The church has the apostolic function of exercising doctrinal oversight."⁸ However, churches and their workers are no longer perceived as the community of Christ in their essence but, rather, are sought only for their utility in a new program.⁹ In any case, McNeal incorrectly invokes David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, and the concept of *missio Dei*.¹⁰

Even if nowadays the "emerging church" movement uses the term 'missional' as a trademark and emphasizes the incarnational character of all mission and community, it should be noted that perhaps the earliest exponent of the term was Tim Keller,¹¹ a Reformed pastor of an innovative church in New York, Redeemer Presbyterian Church. The

⁵ Ibid, 177.

⁶ Ibid, 148: "We need to change the conversation about the church from 'what is it?' to 'who is it?'"

⁷ Ibid, xiv.

⁸ Ibid, 150.

⁹ Ibid, 148–52.

¹⁰ Ibid, 21–24.

¹¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missional>, version dated July 7, 2010, ascribes the greatest influence in the spread of the term to be Tim Keller.

church is theologically very close to the approach recommended in this book.¹² The Lutheran World Federation likewise used the term “missional” in its 2004 declaration on mission¹³ and declared: “Mission is the essence of the church, not only an activity of the church in addition to others. That is the basic message of the Lutheran World Federation’s declaration entitled *Mission in Context*.”¹⁴

Meanwhile, *missional* continues to mean a lot of things and even to have contrasting meanings. Some understand the word to denote a church that completely adapts incarnationally to its environment, whereas others understand just the opposite, a church offering an alternative community as an alternative draft of what society can be. Some understand *missional* to express a postmodern flexibility in questions of doctrine for the benefit of real relationships between people. Others presuppose an orthodox understanding of the mission of God in Christ leading to everything being placed in the light of this mission and to everything being subordinated to it.

I would like to state it in the following way: I am very reluctant to think that a new term alone can do something new, and I seldom find anything in the literature advocating missional churches that has not already been said correctly and well for centuries. However, I am sympathetic to the content of what has been understood by the term, and the content is completely consonant with the reflections expressed in this book: mission is not an activity among others but constitutes the very essence of God and the church. It is what characterizes us individually and in community, and it extends from the incarnation of the Son of God through inner transformation of the individual to increasingly greater and more visible circles up to the transformation of the entire creation. I have documented this point extensively in a recent article.¹⁵ For instance, when David Putman describes at length how one becomes a “missional follower of Jesus,”¹⁶ I cannot relate to the undercurrent demonstrating a distinction between this and earlier notions. However, I can agree with what appears to be a somewhat reformulated version of what pietists wrote on the topic of “true sanctification” or what was understood in the 1960s by the term “true discipleship.”

Francis M. DuBose wrote as early as 1993 in his book about the sending God, “Mission as sending has taught us that mission is not a type of Christian work. It is instead the work of God. For that reason, it is our work, the call upon our life.”¹⁷ Or, conversely: “There is no call to a Christian life separated from a call to mission.”¹⁸

¹² See above all “The Missional Church,” 2001, at <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf>. All publications and sermons by Tim Keller are listed at http://www.stevekmccoy.com/reformissionary/2005/07/tim_keller_arti.html.

¹³ See Jürgen Quack, “Verwandeln, Versöhnen, Bevollmächtigen—Der Auftrag der Kirche in der Welt: Zur neuen Missionserklärung des Lutherischen Weltbundes,” *Interkulturelle Theologie* 34 (2008): 313–14.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 305.

¹⁵ Thomas Schirrmacher, “Das biblische Mandat, die Welt zu retten—innerlich wie äußerlich—ganz privat und ganz global” (The Biblical Mandate to Save the World—Internally and Externally—Completely Personal and Completely Global) in *Transformierender Glaube*, ed. Andreas Kusch (Nürnberg: VTR, 2007), 19–34.

¹⁶ David Putnam, *Breaking the Discipleship Code: Becoming a Missional Follower of Jesus* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2009).

¹⁷ DuBose, *God Who Sends*, 102.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 103.

For instance, “12 Thesen zur missionalen Theologie”¹⁹ (12 Theses on Missional Theology), published by IGW in Zürich, forgoes any polemics against others and simply describes how theology can only be understood as a setting out in a missionary sense. I can heartily agree with this. These authors argue almost exactly what I argued in my 30 theses entitled *Biblical Reasons for Evangelical Missions*, originally published in 1994.²⁰ That work was written at a time when the term *missional* was not yet in vogue.

Long before the term ‘missional’ became known and famous and missional principles were formulated, Emil Brunner in 1931 described the missional life of the church well in his *The Word and the World*.

“The Word of God which was given in Jesus Christ is a unique historical fact, and everything Christian is dependent on it; hence every one who receives this Word, and by it salvation, receives along with it the duty of passing this Word on; just as a man who might have discovered a remedy for cancer which saved himself, would be in duty bound to make this remedy accessible to all. *Mission work does not arise from any arrogance in the Christian Church; mission is its cause and its life. The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission, there is no Church; and where there is neither Church nor mission, there is no faith. It is a secondary question whether by that we mean Foreign Missions, or simply the preaching of the Gospel in the home Church. Mission, Gospel preaching, is the spreading out of the fire which Christ has thrown upon the earth. He who does not propagate this fire shows that he is not burning. He who burns propagates the fire. This ‘must’ is both things - an urge and a command. An urge, because living faith feels God’s purpose as its own. ‘Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel,’ says Paul. Necessity is laid upon him. But also he ought to preach; with the gift he receives the obligation. ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel’.* Whether Christ’s command was uttered just in these words, we do not know exactly. But there can be no doubt that He had sent out His disciples with the strict order to preach the gospel of the Kingdom to all the world. Even if Jesus had not done that, it would still be a divine command for every one who receives the message; for he knows that the divine remedy must be made accessible to all. The classical expression for this propagating activity is not doctrine but kerygma, i.e., the herald’s call. The herald, the keryx, is a man who in the market-place of a city promulgates the latest decree of the king. He is the living publicity organ of the sovereign’s will. The herald makes known what no one could know before: what the king has decreed. It is just this that the Apostles meant by kerygma. They brought not only good tidings, but new tidings as well.”²¹

¹⁹ IGW International, “12 Thesen zur missionalen Theologie,” <http://blog.igw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/chre02-12-thesen-missionale-theologie-igw.pdf>.

²⁰ Thomas Schirmacher, “Biblische Grundlagen evangelikaler Missiologie: 30 Thesen,” *Evangelikale Missiologie* 10, no. 4 (1994) 112–20. This document has been reprinted and translated; it is available in German, Dutch, and English as MBS Texts 55, 64, and 65, respectively, which can be downloaded at <https://www.bucer.de/ressourcen/mbs-texte.html>.

²¹ Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1931), 108, emphasis added.