

WHY I AM MISSIONAL

(excerpted from *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian McLaren)

The term *missional* arose in the 1990s, thanks to the Gospel and Our Culture Network (www.gocn.org). It was popularized by the Network's important book called *The Missional Church* (Darrell L. Guder, et al., Eerdmans, 1998).

The term, as I understand it, attempts to find a generous third way beyond the conservative and liberal versions of Christianity so dominant in the Western world. The conservative version is preoccupied with the “personal Savior” gospel we discussed in the previous chapter, and the liberal version has lost something vitally important in their engagement with modernity (see Chapter 8).

The term also reflects the important impact of missiology (the study of missions) on Christian theology in recent decades. Thinkers such as David Bosch of South Africa and Lesslie Newbigin of India and England and Vincent Donovan of Tanzania and America began to convince people that, rather than seeing missiology as a study within theology, theology is actually a discipline within Christian mission. Theology is the church on a mission reflecting on its message, its identity, its meaning.

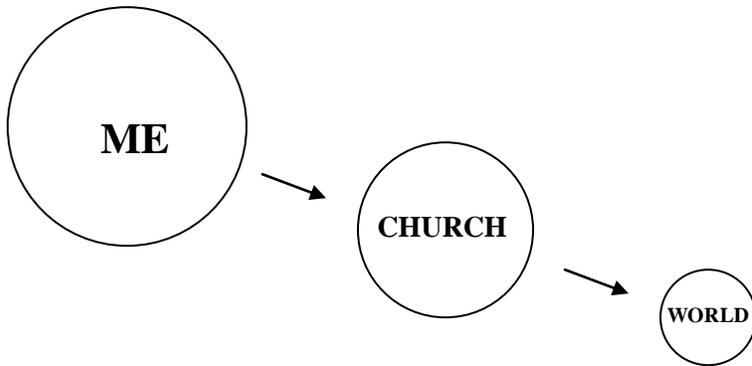
In addition, the term probably reflects a kind of post-colonial embarrassment about the term missionary, which has too often been associated with a colonial version of Christianity that inadvertently (one hopes) exported (and imposed) Euro-American culture right along with the gospel of Jesus.

A story from my publishing life illustrates what is unique about missional Christian faith. My first book was entitled *Reinventing Your Church*. (I wasn't thrilled with the title, but that's another story.) Several years later after its initial release, I suggested to my publisher that we re-release the book under a new title, and that I be allowed to add one chapter and revise some others. My publisher kindly agreed, and we reverted to the title I had originally hoped for, *The Church on the Other Side*.

I especially wanted to revise the chapter on mission. I'm a bit embarrassed to say this now, but in the early edition I defined the church's mission as “more Christians and better Christians.” I thought I had been very forward-thinking to join the two with “and,” rather than to prefer one over the other. But something didn't sit right with me about that mission statement. I rewrote it as follows: “To be and make disciples of Jesus Christ,” a phrase I believe I picked up from my friends at International Teams. Since *Christian* can mean just about anything, I felt this was an improvement, and the *being* and *making* covered *better* and *more*. But this was still horribly individualistic. So I tweaked it further: “To be and make disciples of Jesus Christ *in authentic community*.” A step in the right direction, but there was something still missing.

Then I added six words: “To be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community *for the good of the world*.” That last phrase brings the essence of missional into the equation.

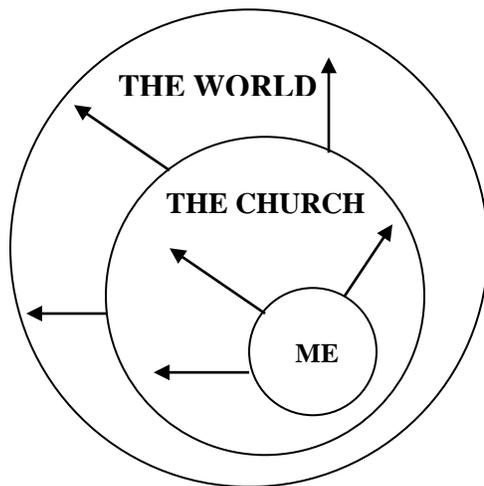
It says that Christians are not the end users of the gospel. It says that the gospel of Jesus is not “all about me.” Two diagrams may help show the difference between Christianity as we know it and missional Christianity.



In this diagram, my largest concern is me, my soul, my personal destiny in heaven, my maturity, and my rewards. Occasionally, after “winning” people based on personal interest, churches can entice people to care a little about the church – but is it any surprise that people “won to Christ” by self-interest come to the church asking, “What’s in it for me?”

Is it any surprise that with this understanding of salvation, churches tend to become gatherings of self-interested people who gather for mutual self-interest – constantly treating the church as a purveyor of religious goods and services, constantly shopping and “trading up” for churches that can “meet my needs” better? Is it any surprise that it’s stinking hard to convince churches that they have a mission to the world when most Christians equate “personal salvation” of individual “souls” with the ultimate aim of Jesus? Is it any wonder that people feel like victims of a bait and switch when they’re lured with personal salvation and then hooked with church commitment and world mission?

The following diagram shows a radically different alternative:



In this diagram, Jesus comes with saving love for the world. He creates the church as a missional community to join him in his mission of saving the world. He invites me to be part of this community to experience his saving love and participate in it.

This missional approach changes everything. In fact, I don't think I realize how much it changes me yet because I'm still getting used to it.

Among other things, it eliminates old dichotomies like "evangelism" and "social action." Both are integrated in expressing saving love for the world. Those who want to become Christians (whether through our proclamation or demonstration), we welcome. Those who don't, we love and serve, joining God in seeking their good, their blessing, their shalom.

This approach gets rid of distinctions like *ministry* (what we do in the church) and *mission* (what we do outside it), since ministry is for mission from the start. For example, I seek to develop virtues not just for my own benefit, but so I can inflict less damage and more blessing on the world. I seek to better understand Scripture not just for my own sake, but so I'll be better equipped to serve God and my neighbors.

It also gets rid of terms like *missionary* and *mission field*, since now every Christian is a missionary and every place is a mission field.

Perhaps most profound and yet most troublesome, it gets us beyond the us-them thinking and in-grouping that lead to prejudice, exclusion, and ultimately to religious wars. It opens up a third alternative beyond exclusive and universalist religion. Exclusive religion says, "We're in, and you're out." Good news for us, bad news for you. Understandably, universalist religion reacts and says, "Everybody's in!" That's good news for everyone at first blush until you ask, "Why is there so much injustice then? Why are so many sad, cruel, harassed, and helpless? If everybody's in – is this as good as it gets?" Saying that "everybody's in" can too easily lead to complacency about injustice here and now and can create a kind of nice, relaxed, magnanimous apathy. This magnanimous apathy may be better than the narrow antipathy often associated with exclusive religion, but I think we need a better alternative.

Missional Christian faith asserts that Jesus did *not* come to make some people saved and others condemned. Jesus did *not* come to help some people right while leaving everyone else to be wrong. Jesus did *not* come to create another exclusive religion – Judaism having been exclusive based on genetics and Christianity being exclusive on belief (which can be a tougher requirement than genetics!).

Missional faith asserts that Jesus came to preach the good news of the kingdom of God to everyone, especially the poor. He came to seek and save the lost. He came on behalf of the sick. He came to save the world. His gospel, and therefore the Christian message, is Good News for the whole world.

The idea that the Christian message is universally good news for Christians and non-Christians alike is, to some, unheard of, strange, and perhaps heretical. To me, it has become natural and obvious. Let me explain.

Jesus was a Jew and so saw himself as one of Abraham's descendants. Abraham's original contact with God involved a kind of identity statement or mission statement: *I will bless you*, God said, *and I will make you a blessing to others. I will make your name and nation great*, God said, *and through you, all nations will be blessed*.

Lesslie Newbiggin, one of the theologians who has helped me most (and whose first name often misleads people regarding his gender), used to say that the greatest heresy (false, destructive, divisive belief) in monotheism results from taking the first half of God's call to Abraham (I will bless you, I will make your name and nation great) and neglecting or rejecting the second half (I will make you a blessing, all nations will be blessed through you). Do you see the tragic difference? Any form of Christianity that takes the first part of God's call to Abraham more seriously than the second is not missional, as I'm using the term here. Neither is it generous or truly orthodox!

One of my mentors once said to me, "Remember, in a pluralistic world, a religion is valued based on the benefits it brings to its nonadherents." This surprised me, and I thought about it for days. Many people think the opposite of what my mentor said: that religions offer benefits to adherents and catastrophic threats for nonadherents. This offer/threat combination motivates people, they assume, to become adherents out of fear of catastrophe and desire for benefits. I think the missional way is better: the gospel brings blessing to all, adherents and nonadherents alike (I'm *not* saying it brings equal benefits to both. Nor am I saying that all Christians avail themselves equally of the benefits). For example, if Jesus sends people into the world to love and serve their neighbors, their neighbors benefit, and so do the people sent by Jesus, since it is even better to give than to receive. Or imagine a medical analogy: if followers of Jesus are like hospital employees, the sick who come to them benefit by their care, and the hospital employees benefit by being part of the hospital staff, which is rewarding in many ways.

How did he do it? The Gospel tells us. He selected 12 and trained them in a new way of life. He sent them to teach everyone this way of life. Some would believe and become practitioners and teachers of this new way of life, too. Even if only a few would practice this new way, many would benefit. Oppressed people would be free. Poor people would be liberated from poverty. Minorities would be treated with respect. Sinners would be loved, not resented. Industrialists would realize that God cares for sparrows and wildflowers – so their industries should respect, not rape, the environment. The homeless would be invited in for a hot meal. The kingdom of God would come – not everywhere at once, not suddenly, but gradually, like a seed growing in a field, like yeast spreading in a lump of bread dough, like light spreading across the sky at dawn.

It wouldn't be easy. Suffering, misunderstanding, even martyrdom were guaranteed. But the resurrection of Jesus gave this missional band confidence that death was only a comma, not a period, and that God's good and kind desires would prevail. They could be steadfast and immovable, knowing that their labors were "not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58)...

I've been a Christian for many years, but I've been a missional Christian for only a few – although perhaps I actually was one long before I realized it. Perhaps the same is true of you.

Purchase the book Generous Orthodoxy at Amazon.com: http://www.amazon.com/Generous-Orthodoxy-Contemplative-Fundamentalist-Depressed-yet-Hopeful/dp/0310257476/ref=pbbs_sr_2/105-4653522-2326008?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1180638082&sr=8-2