

October 2006 Volume 3, Issue 8

THE CHURCH'S MISSION AND WITNESS



What in the World Is the Missional Church?

Page 4

Conservatives, moderates, and liberals are all talking about the so-called missional church. But what exactly is it? Does everyone agree for once?
By Jonathan Leeman



What Is the Missional Life?

Page 12

God invites us to share in his mission to reach a dying world, right next door. The gospel is the most relevant message in all of history, but how do we make it understandable in our culture?
By Eric Simmons



Thinking About Evangelism Means Thinking About the Church

Page 18

Evangelism tends to be understood as what an individual does when he or she leaves church and shares the gospel with outsiders. But that misses so much.
By Ryan Townsend

A 9News Forum

Page 24

We asked a roundtable of pastors and theologians one question:

"What must pastors do to help their members regain a sense of the church's corporate witness, which is so vital to evangelism? What stands in the way of that recovery?"

Answers by Thabiti Anyabwile, John Folmar, J. D. Greear, Dave Harvey, R. Albert Mohler, and Phil Newton





What a Biblical Understanding of Church Membership and the NCLHGA Have in Common

Page 30

Like the Northern California Left Handed Golfer's Association, or any other club or association, the New Testament does seem to teach the practice of formal church membership.

By Mike McKinley



Book Review:

Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views

edited by Paul E. Engle and Gary L. McIntosh

Reviewed by Andy Johnson

Page 34

The Great Divide? Faithfulness vs. Relevance

Some call the pursuit of faithfulness vs. the pursuit of relevance a false dichotomy. The truth is, pastors tend to pursue one or the other. In case you missed the Together For the Gospel weblog, here are Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, Albert Mohler, and C. J. Mahaney weighing in on the question of how pastors should think about pursuing relevance versus pursuing faithfulness.

Page 37



THE ENEMY WITHIN

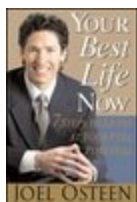


The Greatest Danger Facing the Church Today

Page 42

The greatest threat to the church doesn't always come from without. It can come from well-meaning pastors.

By James M. Hamilton Jr.



Book Review:

Your Best Life Now

by Joel Osteen

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Page 45

In Case You Missed It...

Several years back, Duke Divinity School's Pulpit & Pew project surveyed what pastors are reading these days across eight denominations. The results might explain why Hamilton and Gilbert had to write the articles above. Compared to their Catholic and Mainline Protestant counterparts, "Conservative Protestants list no one who might be considered a professional theologian. Instead, they choose popular authors (some of them successful pastors) who write about ministry and spirituality." Click here for the article "What Preachers Are Reading," by Jackson W. Carroll (not a 9Marks article).

And Now, the Antidote (a quotable quote)

Arnold Dallimore, on why he wrote a biography of George Whitefield:

Nevertheless, this book goes forth with a mission. It is written with the profound conviction that the paramount need of the twentieth century is a mighty evangelical revival such as that which was experienced two hundred years ago. Thus, I have sought to show what were the doctrines used of God in the eighteenth-century Revival, and to display the extraordinary fervour which characterized the men whom God raised up in that blessed work. Yea, this book is written in the desire perhaps in a measure of inner certainty that we shall see the great Head of the Church once more bring into being His special instruments of revival, that He will again raise up unto Himself certain young men whom He may use in this glorious employ. And what manner of men will they be? Men mighty in the Scriptures, their lives dominated by a sense of the greatness, the majesty and holiness of God, and their minds and hearts aglow with the great truths of the doctrines of grace. They will be men who have learned what it is to die to self, to human aims and personal ambitions; men who are willing to be 'fools for Christ's sake', who will bear reproach and falsehood, who will labour and suffer, and whose supreme desire will be, not to gain earth's accolades, but to win the Master's approbation when they appear before His awesome judgment seat. They will be men who will preach with broken hearts and tear-filled eyes, and upon whose ministries God will grant an extraordinary effusion of the Holy Spirit, and who will witness 'signs and wonders following' in the transformation of multitudes of human lives.

Indeed, this book goes forth with the earnest prayer that, amidst the rampant iniquity and glaring apostasy of the twentieth century God will use it toward the raising up of such men and toward the granting of a mighty revival such as was witnessed two hundred years ago.

From Andrew Dallimore, George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival (Banner of Truth, 1970), 15-16.

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What in the World Is the Missional Church?

By Jonathan Leeman

Talk about being behind the curve.

Several months ago, I began noticing how often the words “missional church” kept showing up in evangelical books and blogs. Reading up on the topic since then has left me feeling a bit like Rip Van Winkle, Washington Irving’s colonial American character who dozed off one afternoon as a loyal subject of King George III, only to wake up twenty years later and find that he had a foot long beard and that something called the Revolutionary War had been fought.

I don’t have a beard, but I have woken up to find that planters have planted, reformers have reformed, and now the first generation has turned to training a second in a small army marching under the banner of *missional*.

In this issue of 9News, Eric Simmons does a great job of describing the missional life. Ryan Townsend and Andy Johnson both refer to the topic in their articles. The pastors’ and theologians’ forum on the corporate witness of the church touches on some of the underlying principles of the missional church. Yet in case you’ve been asleep like me, it’s worth poking our heads up and asking, what in the world in the missional church?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DISCUSSION

The term wasn’t coined by Darrell Guder, but this Princeton Seminary professor suggests that the book *Missional Church*, which he co-wrote and edited in 1998, “must be held accountable, it appears, for the rapid spread of the term *missional* in many circles of discussion dealing with the situation of the church in North America.”¹

Guder and the members of his “Gospel and Our Culture” (GOC) team, however, will quickly trace the missional church story back to conversations begun in missiological and ecumenical circles in the 1950s and earlier, about the same time that Donald McGavran’s Church Growth theories were arousing interest among evangelicals in North America.

At a conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1952, Wilhelm Anderson, building on the work of Karl Barth, proposed that both church and mission should be taken up into the *missio Dei*—the mission of God. Missions is not just a function of the church. And the church is not just the outcome of missions. Rather, both are grounded in a Triune God on mission. The Father sent the Son; the Father and Son sent the Spirit; and now the Spirit sends the church. The church has a missionary—we now say missional—nature. Johannes Blauw captured the basic premise in the title of his 1962 book: *The Missionary Nature of the Church*.

Ecumenicals embraced this way of speaking more fully with the merger of the IMC and the World Council of Churches in 1961, followed by Roman Catholics and Vatican II’s pronouncement that “the Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the

¹ Darrell Guder, “The Church as Missional Community,” *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds (IVP, 2005), 114; Darrell Gruder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998).

mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.”² Signaling this shift in thinking among many, the World Council of Churches in 1969 dropped the “s” from its journal *International Review of Missions* to become *International Review of Mission*.³

The Anglican missionary to India Lesslie Newbigin, who was also writing on the church and *missio Dei* in the fifties and sixties, returned from India to Britain in the seventies and found not only a post-Christian society, but a church that failed to distinguish itself from society. Moving into the eighties and nineties, Newbigin increasingly called for a critical reevaluation of the church and its relationship to Western pluralistic and postmodern culture.

Ever since this process of critical reevaluation began, Newbigin and others have generally cast the history of the church and the missionary enterprise over the last several centuries as the story of the church’s capitulation to modernity. David Bosch’s fascinating and thick *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (1991) provides, as best as I can tell, the script from which ecumenicals, emergents, and traditional mainliners all read. Bosch sees liberals and fundamentalists as two sides of the Enlightenment coin. Both privatize Christianity. Both reduce the church to “a place where things happen,” like preaching, distributing the ordinances, and practicing discipline. (The church is not a place, it’s a people.) Both blur their culture with their Christianity, so that missions and “gospel” proclamation become, at best, the Western white man’s condescension to the pitiable, unenlightened native and, at worst, colonial imperialism. Both idolize reason, dichotomize facts and values, and idealize their objective version of reality. Here’s one example of many:

The *subject-object dichotomy* [one attribute of Enlightenment thinking] meant that, in admittedly very opposite ways, the Bible and, in fact, the Christian faith as such, became objectified. Liberals sovereignly placed themselves above the biblical text, extracting ethical codes from it, while fundamentalists tended to turn the Bible into a fetish and apply it mechanically to every context, particularly as regards the “Great Commission.”⁴

As Bosch, Guder, Newbigin, and the rest look out at the world of church and missions, they see a “crisis,” the kind that always precedes a Kuhnian paradigm shift. The symptoms of the crisis may be the stuff of polls: diminishing numbers, the loss of younger generations, biblical illiteracy, and so on. But the real crisis is spiritual and theological, stemming from the church’s failure to understand the postmodern context in which it now dwells. If the church wants to be relevant; if it wants to succeed in its mission, it must give attention to contextualization. It must learn to understand, communicate, and demonstrate the beauty of the gospel afresh. One GOC author writes,

What exactly is the gospel, then? Identifying the gospel is both simple and challenging. No culture-free expression of the gospel exists, nor could it. The church’s message, the gospel, is inevitably articulated in linguistic and cultural forms particular to its own place and time. Thus a rehearsing of the gospel can be vulnerable to the “gospels” that we may tend to read back into the New Testament renderings of it.⁵

The church, then, is tasked with sometimes affirming, sometimes critiquing the philosophies of the day. It thinks and breathes within those philosophies, but it is not of them. The church must explain and display the kingdom of heaven today, now, here. Yet it must do so as a “pilgrim people.” In other words, the church, like its Savior, must “embody,” “enflesh,” “incarnate” the good news that God’s redemptive reign of peace, justice, and healing now extends to all the world through his Spirit and his body, the church.

² *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, in *Vatican Council II: vol. 1, The Conciliar & Post Conciliar Documents*. rev. ed., Austin Flannery, ed. (Costello Publishing, 1987), 813 (1.2).

³ This history is recounted in Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Baker, 2000), 32-36; also, David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis, 1991), 368-362.

⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 342.

⁵ Guder ed, *Missional Church*, 87.

DEFINING THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

To repeat, the basic premise of the missional church is that “missions” is not simply one of the functions or programs of a church. It constitutes the very essence or nature of the church. Drop the “s.” God is a God on mission. And God has sent the church on mission. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus said, “even so I am sending you” (John 20:21).

This is a larger claim than saying that every individual member of a church is a missionary, though this is what the missional church has become in some recent conservative descriptions of it. Rather, the church itself is a *sign* that the kingdom of God has begun on earth, and a *foretaste* of the consummated reign to come. It is also an *agent* and *instrument* of God’s reign, bearing the authority of the keys (Matt. 16:19) and the authority of forgiveness (John 20:19-23).⁶

It’s not the case, at least according to the writers we’ve been following, that you can have a non-missional church on one block and a missional church on the next block. Rather, the church *is* missional (it *is* what it does, says Craig Van Gelder). The Spirit creates the church as the body of Christ in the world, and the church then “incarnates” or “enfleshes” the continuing work of bringing the justice and peace of Christ into all the cultures of the world.⁷

It doesn’t exist to draw people to itself and merely perpetuate its own institutional life, as was professedly the case throughout the history of “Christendom.” Rather, the church exists to proclaim the kingdom of God among men and women. By the same token, the unbiblical and church-centered language of “expanding” or “building” the kingdom of God is dropped, and the more biblical, God-centered language of “seeking,” “receiving,” or “entering” God’s kingdom is adopted.

Conversion is not just a profession of faith in Christ. Salvation is not only the rescue of the individual’s soul from the threat of God’s retribution. The gospel is not merely the news of what God has done in Christ to pardon individual sinners.⁸ Rather, the gospel, salvation, and conversion are construed much more “holistically” or “comprehensively,” with ethical implications for every dimension of life and the message of reconciliation, justice, peace, healing, liberation, and love for the entire world: “and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20, NRSV).

THE CONSERVATIVE TAKE-OVER

I have no idea when exactly conservative evangelicals co-opted the term “missional.”⁹ My guess is that conservative writers and pastors in the emerging church movement like Mark Driscoll, after tromping through some of the same fields as their liberal counterparts, reached down, pulled up the missional plant by the roots, and then transplanted it into conservative soil.

Take an hour to troll the blogs of liberal-leaning Emergent websites, and you find the authors discussed above recommended prominently. Flip to the endnotes of books by conservative authors, and you will find the same authors quoted liberally.

⁶ Guder ed, *Missional Church*, 101.

⁷ Van Gelder, 32.

⁸ Intriguingly, descriptions of the missional church in the ecumenical, mainline streams I am presently tracing almost always (I have never encountered an instance otherwise) refer to more conservative formulations of the gospel, conversion, or salvation with the language of “not just” or “not merely” and so on. They don’t explicitly denounce a conservative understanding of the gospel; they habitually minimize or marginalize it. Read David Bosch’s 500-plus-page *Transforming Mission*, for one of many examples, and be amazed by how—as if following a script—he does this in chapter after chapter, like a verbal tic. Emergent writers today often do the same.

⁹ Craig Van Gelder suggests evangelicals began to incorporate certain aspects of a missional view in the seventies and eighties. Yet the only concrete example he cites is a report on “Evangelism and Social Responsibility” (No. 21) from the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, *Essence of the Church*, 34, 188.

Ed Stetzer, for instance, frequently cites Newbigin, Bosch, and the GOC gang in his book *Planting Missional Churches*. Yet where a GOC writer will say something like “missional communities are cultivated through participation in particular social or ecclesial practices,”¹⁰ Stetzer will ask, “What does the Bible require for church?”¹¹ It’s probably unfair to say that conservatives like Stetzer want to build on a biblical foundation, whereas the ecumenicals don’t. It’s probably kinder to simply say that Stetzer sees *the Bible* as authoritative for the church’s mission, where as someone like Newbigin, drawing on the fiduciary epistemology of Michael Polanyi, will say that *Jesus* is the authority for its mission. What does this mean? It means that Newbigin does not want to give the Bible unqualified approval as Jesus’ inerrant word, so he pits Jesus and his word against one another.

In addition to beginning with a different doctrine of Scripture, conservative writers begin with a different understanding of the gospel than the ecumenicals. Both will explain the gospel in terms of the advancing kingdom of God as well as in terms of Christ’s work on the cross. Yet where conservatives unashamedly embrace Christ’s work of substitution as the center of the gospel, ecumenicals downplay, if not altogether jettison, the latter explanation.¹² Like I said, the soil is different.

Still, the plant is similar. Stetzer criticizes the Reformers as defining the church as a place where things happen. This degenerated during the Enlightenment, so that the church became a vendor of religious goods and services, epitomized in today’s technique-driven seeker churches. Both explanations, Stetzer says, miss what the church fundamentally is: a people sent on mission. “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17).

Now that Christendom has come to an end, the church must recognize that it’s no longer chaplain to the culture. Christians are as foreign in the post-modern West as they are in unevangelized lands overseas. They must therefore exegete their Bibles and their cultures both. Here’s Stetzer approvingly quoting Van Gelder:

We need to exegete...culture in the same way the missionaries have been so good at doing with diverse tribal cultures of previously unreached people. We need to exegete...the themes of the Rolling Stones... , Dennis Rodman, Madonna, (and) David Letterman...We need to comprehend that the Spirit of the Living God is at work in these cultural expressions, preparing the hearts of

¹⁰ Guder ed, *Missional Church*, 153.

¹¹ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That’s Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture* (B&H, 2006), 158.

¹² D. A. Carson’s critique of N. T. Wright applies to the ecumenical, emergent, and traditional mainliners treatment of the gospel almost word for word. The following quotation is long, but it bears worth reading because the reductionism Carson observes is amazingly common today: “We have repeatedly seen how the ‘story’ of God’s advancing kingdom is cast in terms of rescuing human beings and completing creation, or perhaps in terms of defeating the powers of darkness. Not for a moment do I want to reduce or minimize those themes. Yet *from what* are human beings to be rescued? Their sin, yes; the powers of darkness; yes. But what is striking is the utter absence of any mention of the wrath of God. This is not a minor omission. Section after section of *the Bible’s story* turns on the fact that God’s image-bearers attract God’s righteous wrath. The entire created order is under God’s curse because of human sin. Sin is not first and foremost horizontal, social (though of course it is all of that): it is vertical, the defiance of Almighty God. The sin which most consistently is said to bring down God’s wrath on the heads of his people or on entire nations is idolatry—the de-godding of God. And it is the overcoming of this most fundamental sin that the cross and resurrection of Jesus achieve. The most urgent need of human beings is to be reconciled to God. That is not to deny that such reconciliation entails reconciliation with other human beings, and transformed living in God’s fallen creation, in anticipation of the final transformation at the time of the consummation of all things. But to speak constantly of the advance of the kingdom without tying kingdom themes to the passion narrative, the way the canonical Gospels do, is a terrible reductionism. To speak a couple of times of the cross in terms of the *Christus Victor* theme, as Wright does (though without using that expression), is unexceptional; to do so without burning with Paul’s “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2), and to show how this is tied in Paul’s thought to the setting aside of God’s wrath, and to the reconciliation of alienated rebels *to their Maker*, is irresponsible,” found at http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/May_2006/Shelf_Life/Shelf_Life/181/vobld__2926/pm__434/

men and women to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹³

(Keep in mind, the two authors mean something slightly different by “the gospel of Jesus Christ,” even though one is quoting the other to make his point.¹⁴)

Stetzer rejects the “attractional” and “extractional” church, which attempts to *attract* non-Christians with traditions or technique and to *extract* them from their cultures. Churches should focus instead on being “missional” (moving outward) and “incarnational” (moving deeper into the culture). As Mark Driscoll puts it, churches should help new believers remain within “their tribes,” whether that tribe is punk rock, a ghetto block, or yuppie stock, just so long as they don’t sin.

Stetzer supports the work of church reform. As one notable example of reform, he points to the work of J. D. Greear, who helped to transform Homestead Heights Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, into a missional church called The Summit. (Click here to read Greear’s answer to our pastors’ and theologians’ forum question on the corporate witness of the church.)

Yet in general, missional church thinking tends to veer toward church planting, and it’s not difficult to see why. Picture a missionary entering foreign land, like Adoniram Judson traveling to Burma in the nineteenth century. How does he begin a church? He moves into the culture. He learns the language. He makes friends on Burmese terms. He explains the gospel in a way they can understand. Years might pass before someone converts, but when an individual does, Judson does not pull him or her out of Burmese culture. He equips them to be fishers of men inside of Burma. And so, gradually, the church is built.

This, I take it, is the missional church-planting mission.

Now, Western Christian, apply this lesson in New York, Los Angeles, Florence, or Stockholm. Learn the languages of nihilism, cynicism, or spiritualism. Befriend the natives and equip them to reach others.

Furthermore, there’s no model or template to follow. Megachurches and house churches should both be missional. So should emerging hip and rural plain. Stetzer writes,

Indigenous churches look different from culture to culture. You expect a biblically faithful, indigenous church to look different in Senegal from an indigenous church in Singapore. You also expect an indigenous church in high-tech and blue-state Seattle to look different from one in apple-pie Sellersburg, Indiana.¹⁵

IRONIES, ISSUES, AND INSTRUCTIONS

At the very least, I hope I have accomplished the primary purpose of this article—describing what the so-called missional church is. Different writers have different emphases. The theologians sound a little different than the practitioners. The group I have been generically calling the ecumenicals sound a little different than the evangelicals. But common themes run throughout the discussion.

Let me conclude by observing three ironies, five issues, and four areas of good instruction.

Three Ironies

1) If I may be permitted to brush in very broad strokes, I find it ironic that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the ecumenicals have proposed **a more biblically faithful ecclesiology** than all the

¹³ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 34

¹⁴ Craig Van Gelder’s understanding of the gospel can be found in *Evaluating The Church Growth Movement: 5 Views* (Zondervan, 2004), 97-99. It also surfaces from time to time in his ecclesiology, *The Essence of the Church*.

¹⁵ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 31.

evangelicals enamored with Church Growth. Missional church theology is not perfect, but it attempts to be biblical. The pragmatism of Church Growth, at its worst, sets the Bible aside.

2) At the same time, I find it ironic that some ecumenicals simultaneously **lose missions** from the mission, and the evangel from evangelism. Consider, for instance, how the GOC team characterizes “preaching” the gospel. Preaching in the New Testament, the reader is told, means “to announce” or “to proclaim publicly.” This is not so much done on Sunday morning, as it is done in the community at large—publicly. Does that mean the GOC team envisions preachers standing on park benches and bus stops proclaiming the gospel of sin and forgiveness? No, it means bringing the reign of God to bear in every aspect of public life:

For a more benevolent government, that may mean legislation that benefits the poor or the marginalized. For a bank, it might mean granting loans in formerly redlined neighborhoods. For a public school, it might mean instituting peer mediation among students.¹⁶

This, apparently, is “preaching” the “gospel.”

3) I find it ironic that evangelicals have **co-opted the storyline** of the ecumenicals—complete with plot and characters (though I don’t find it ironic that they have been putting it to better use). I do wish, however, that the evangelicals would take greater care in transplanting some of these ideas, as the failure to do so leads to the following issues.

Five Issues

1) I take issue with the **historical revisionism** that characterizes both ecumenicals and evangelicals. It’s striking how almost every one of these authors begins by retelling the history of modernism and postmodernism (one finds the same thing in emerging church literature. Think of Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*). Why do they all do this? Because, like Bill Clinton’s political advisor James Carville demonstrated so clearly in Clinton’s 1992 campaign against George H. W. Bush, he who establishes the terms of the debate wins the debate. At Clinton campaign headquarters, Carville famously hung the sign, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Clinton convinced the country that the election was about the economy, and not about the first Iraqi War. This helped him win the election, because Americans were feeling an economic squeeze at the time.

The crisis in our churches today, each one of these authors tells us, is about the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Really? I suppose it is if you accept the terms of modernism in the first place, which Bosch explicitly does:

it is futile to attempt nostalgically to return to a pre-Enlightenment worldview. It is not possible to “unknow” what we have learned...The ‘light’ in the Enlightenment was real light and should not simply be discarded. What is needed, rather, is to realize that the Enlightenment paradigm has served its purpose; we should now move beyond it...¹⁷

The problem, in my opinion, is that Bosch and others have capitulated more completely to the philosophies of this world than they realize, even as they accuse fundamentalists of doing the same. (It almost feels like a number of mainliners are looking for a way to explain their dying denominations, and can’t help but draw those rigid inerrantists into their malaise.) I should unpack all this much further, but I’ll leave it at that.

2) I take issue with the **reductionism** which results from this revisionism. Since the conservatives adopt the historically revisionistic storyline of the ecumenicals almost wholesale, they fall into some of the same reductionism. Both emphasize the fact that the church is a people, and not a place. That’s absolutely correct. But answering the question “Where on earth will we find the church?” requires us to fall back on

¹⁶ Guder ed, *Missional Church*, 136.

¹⁷ *Transforming Mission*, 273-74.

the three marks of the Reformers—preaching, practicing the ordinances, and practicing discipline. As Mark Dever likes to say, three Christians who bump into each other at the grocery store do not comprise a local church.

Both emphasize the fact that the nature of the church is “missional,” that is, defined by the fact that the church is “sent.” True enough. But we must also define the nature of the church as the blood-bought, new covenant people of Christ. We’ve been sent because we’ve been bought. And the people of God will *worship, obey, and go* as they increasingly identify themselves by that amazing purchase. Don’t overlook it.

Along these same lines, the conservatives writers should take care to define “attractional” more carefully when they pit it against “missional.” The church should be attractive. In fact, this new covenant, Holy Spirit indwelled community of love, holiness, and unity should be the most attractive people of all!

I know that’s not what Stetzer is getting at when critiques the “attractional” church. He’s talking about fancy programs, not a holy people, and he’s right on. But let me state for the record that the most attractive church—one that images its Savior through faithfulness to his word—will be the most missional church. Interestingly, the ecumenical crowd does a better job of being explicit on just this point whenever they emphasize the church as a *sign* and a *foretaste* of God’s kingdom.¹⁸

3) I take issue with the **ambiguity of terms** when moving back and forth between different authors, particularly over the all-important term, the “gospel.” When conservatives co-opt ecumenical themes, they need to take greater care, I believe, in defining exactly what they mean by such essential terms. After all, the content of the soil will inevitably affect the plant.

4) I take slight issue with the term “**incarnational**.” I understand and appreciate the impulse to see that our hands and feet, eyes and tongues, *do and live and put on* our creed. Yet it’s important for us to recognize that, historically, the term “incarnation” has referred to the unique, once-in-history event of God becoming man. No, the term is not a biblical one, but there are good reasons to preserve the uniqueness of the term in our usage. First of all, equating what the divine Son did in becoming Jesus the God-man with what I do when I imitate Jesus downplays the ineffable wonder of that one-time event. It might even be said to make the divine Son a little smaller and me a little bigger.

More significantly, the primary purpose of the incarnation, I believe, was for the Son to offer his life as the perfect sacrificial substitute in order to assuage the wrath of God against eternally damnable transgression. Yet when I make the incarnation primarily about something else, something that I can emulate in my own life, I risk shifting the focus away from Christ’s wonderful, astounding, amazing work of wrath removal.

5) Finally, I take slight issue with the **equation between ethnicity and worldviews**. The Mandarin and Cantonese languages are morally neutral. Nihilism and materialism are not. Bobo-ism, hip-hop, and Valley are not. It’s one thing to remain in the Cantonese tribe. It’s another to remain in the hop-hop tribe. I’m not saying one shouldn’t. I’m saying that the equation is not so clean cut. Frankly, I haven’t thought through all the implications of these differences. I’m simply suggesting that we should think them through.

Four Instructions

Those issues aside, I believe advocates of the missional church instruct us in at least four very helpful ways.

1) I am especially grateful for the emphasis the ecumenicals give to the **witness of the corporate body**. One author writes,

In North America, what might it mean for the church to be such a city on a hill? to be salt? to be a

¹⁸ For example, see Guder ed, *Missional Church*, 103-04, 128-29.

light to the world? It means, first of all, that the inner, communal life of the church matters for mission.¹⁹

Amen! This author goes on to emphasize the importance of love, holiness, and unity. The content he fills into these three words might be a little different than the content an evangelical pours in, but the trajectory is a good one. Conservative writers on the missional church tend to emphasize the mission of every individual member to share the gospel. That's excellent. But let's emphasize the importance of our corporate witness as well. Our churches should be attractive. They should be foretastes.

2) I'm grateful to be instructed by Stetzer and others to adopt more of a **missional posture**. We too easily fall into complacency in our "resident" status, as Eric Simmons' reminds us. We need to hear Newbigin's reminder that we are a "pilgrim people."

I spent a month in a former Soviet republic two years ago, living with a missionary family. The entire month I strategized to pour myself out for the kingdom. For instance, I developed a friendship with one non-Christian man who wanted to attend an American business school and then return to his country and help it economically. He had spent a year studying for the GMATs, but could not yet afford to pay the registration fee. I forget what the fee was—\$200 maybe? On an American income, that's nothing. On my friend's income, it would have cost him three or four months of labor. So I happily paid the fee for him (and congratulated myself on doing so). Praise God, my friend is presently at business school in the United States, and has now been baptized as a believer by a local church. I was not the principal witness in his life, but I trust that God used me to play one small part.

Yet here's the point, and the question you should ask me: Jonathan, have you ever randomly given \$200 to a non-Christian friend in the United States as a display of friendship and Christ's love? Sadly, the answer is no. Too much of the time, I'm just a resident, not a missionary, more interested in buying books, cds (no, I don't have an ipod), a nice dinner, and just a little bit more automobile or house. Yet imagine how the non-Christians around us would respond if we Christians became known for regular acts of generosity? We shouldn't do it for the world's favor; we should do it *accompanied by a verbal explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ*.

Also, go read Eric Simmons' article in this issue of 9News, as well as Tim Keller's article here: <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf>.

3) We do well to heed the instruction of missional church writers to **exegete our culture**, because studying it, ironically, helps us to distance ourselves from it. Learning about the culture should remind us that we are sojourners, and do not finally belong to any one time and place.

4) Finally, we do well to be instructed by the **passion** of missional writers like Ed Stetzer to be **biblically faithful** in planting churches and **reaching the lost**. I have offered the five critiques above *not* because I think he and others are on the wrong path, but because I think they are on the right path. They inspire me. My critiques are offered in the attempt to help the cause.

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October 2006
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¹⁹ Guder ed, *Missional Church*, 128.



What Is the Missional Life?

By Eric Simmons

Welcome to my neighborhood. Here's what it looks like:

- the lady ringing up my order at Panera Bread who is a lesbian;
- the neighbor with everything that life seems to offer—the big house, the Lexus, the beautiful wife, the straight-A kids;
- the guy next to me in the gym who is committing adultery and destroying the lives of himself and his family;
- the guy who works in the bike shop with whom I am pursuing a friendship;
- Phyllis, the 78-year-old woman who just lost her husband of 54 years.

Keep looking and you'll find just about everyone. The atheist. The mocker. The scoffer. The intellectual. The ignorant. These are people that need Jesus. These are the people that I have been called to reach. They are my mission field.

What does your mission field look like? I'm sure the faces are different, but the state of their soul before God is not.

Pastor, God has called you to more than just the people in your church. He wants to mobilize you and your people to reach another people. The people next door. Your little culture.

Many Christians have been giving a lot of attention to places like the "10/40 window," for which we should praise God. We should also keep praying that the Lord would send more workers into overseas harvest fields. But in our own post-Christian society in America there is an emerging unreached people-group. They're not in a foreign country. They live right down the street.

Sometimes I think the most unreached people-group in the world are the ones next door.

The primary mission field for most of us is not far away, it's in the routine of our daily lives. God doesn't save us to be passive spectators. He saves us and then sends us out into the world to tell other people about Jesus. Each of us is called to play a part in God's mission to save sinners—the same sinners we meet on a daily basis.

God's kingdom—his inbreaking, redemptive rule—is advancing all around us. Paul says in Colossians 1, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (vv. 13-14). What an incredible picture. God is doing the work of transferring people from the clutches of Satan and this world into a new kingdom. His kingdom.

Don't you want to be involved in that? God invites you and your church to be involved in this glorious process of bringing people into his kingdom. We get to play a small part in what God is doing. How? By living like missionaries who are sent by God. We are not just going, we are sent.

We don't just go to the gym. We don't just go to Panera Bread, or the bike store, or the neighborhood

barbeque. We don't just go to work or the classroom. We don't even just go home for Christmas. Thinking *missionally* changes our perspective. It reminds us that God, the sovereign ruler of this world, sends us to each of these places. He sends all those who belong to him into this world to help usher people from darkness to his kingdom of light.

Our job as pastors is to help our church members see that God has a heart for the non-Christians all around them, and that his divine hand has brought these non-Christians directly into their every-day communities with this purpose of mission. Sunday's are assuredly for hearing the preached word and caring for one another. But Sundays should also be *sending* days for the church—a day to remember that the mission is not over, that we are being "sent" as missionaries into the world to reveal God's glorious kingdom.

So how do we teach the members of our churches to be effective missionaries? God instructs us in Colossians 4 that we must teach our people *to pray, to live, and to talk*.

Continue steadfastly in prayer being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time pray also for us that God may open to us a door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ on account of which I am in prison that I may make it clear which is how I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person (Col. 4:2-6).

TEACH THEM TO PRAY

First, we must teach our churches to pray. Paul says in verse 2 that our prayers should be steadfast and watchful. God wants us to understand that our communion with him through prayer is the key to mission work. In other words, effective evangelism begins with diligent, watchful prayer. God wants us to talk to him before we go out in the world and talk about him.

Paul then transitions from this teaching on prayer to asking for prayer. Specifically, he asks the Colossian church to "pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ." Paul is in prison, but he does not ask them to pray that the prison door be opened so that he could be released. No, he asks for the door of opportunity to be opened so that he can tell of the mystery of Christ. Paul basically says, "I might be in jail, but the word can never be imprisoned. Christ must be preached—even in jail. So please pray that, as I reach out to these people in this jail, the door of their hearts would be opened."

Do you see what vision for God's kingdom and mission can do? It takes jail time and turns it into opportunity! Paul loved being a part of the kingdom, because he loved the King. And he was so radically changed by salvation that he was more concerned about the life and eternal destiny of the jailer holding the key to his jail cell than about getting out of jail himself!

Paul believed that he was sent. Rome didn't put him in jail. God did. Why? Because God wanted his kingdom to be revealed in a Roman prison. To Paul, this was opportunity.

What can we learn? Effective mission work begins with appealing to the King for opportunities to tell people about his kingdom and the gospel that makes a relationship with him possible. We must model and teach our people that effective mission work begins with faith-filled prayers and petitions for opportunities. Every day that we wake up and go to work or go to the gym is an opportunity to share the gospel. So encourage your people to pray for opportunities in their lives.

But this point needs a warning label underneath it: *enter at your own risk*. If you pray for opportunities, they will happen. And often they will happen at the most awkward, inconvenient moments. Remember, Paul received his opportunity in jail. So teach your people that often it may be the very circumstances that are inconvenient and interruptions to their normal lives that are the opportunities that God is giving them

to share his gospel! So teach your people to be watchful.

Around the time I began wrestling with the concept of mission and kingdom and praying diligently for opportunities, a friend named Andrew and I were driving across the country. We tried getting into Rocky Mountain National Park to go camping, but God decided to send ten inches of snow—even though it was June.

So we holed up for the night in Grand Lake, Colorado. We were dead tired, we were starving, and the only place open was...the Saloon. I kid you not: the Saloon. When Andrew and I walked through the double doors it felt like the record player scratched to a stop. Everybody turned to look at us, and I think they knew that we were not from around those parts.

Andrew and I hurried over to the corner, doing our best not to make eye contact. Near us was a group of about six people. They probably had twenty shot glasses on their table (that means they were drunk). And they were toasting, one shot at a time. One of the gentleman toasted, "To Jesus Christ, and to Satan, his brother."

I had prayed that morning for an opportunity to share the gospel. But this was not what I had in mind.

I looked at Andrew and said, "You know what? I have no clue what to do. I just know that he toasted Jesus and Satan, and I know that I just prayed about an opportunity this morning." I had a tract in my pocket, so I walked over. "Hey, how are you?" I said, making as little eye contact as possible. "You know, I heard you toast Jesus, and this is about Jesus. You might want to read it. I'll be over there. If you have any questions, come on over."

I hurried back to our table, almost jumped into my chair, and started shoveling food into my mouth so that we could exit as quickly as possible. But sure enough, Kevin—the guy—and his girlfriend came over, and we started talking about Jesus. Kevin was belligerent, angry, and aggressive. But his girlfriend was open. She asked sincere questions about Jesus.

God used my prayers from that morning! He sent two idiots to Colorado, made it snow in Rocky Mountain National Park in June so that we couldn't camp, led us to a saloon, and created an opportunity for us to tell this lady about Jesus. We got to pray with her that night as she professed Jesus. We left that saloon in awe.

So teach and model such prayer for your congregation. Start in private and let your public prayers be an overflow of that private passion for mission. Then publicly share stories of how God answered those prayers in your own life. Share stories of your failures and stories of God's powerful work. As you share, the faith of others will be inspired, and they will step out in their mission to reach the world next door.

TEACH THEM TO LIVE

Second, we must teach our people how to live. Remember this: *effective missionaries live distinct lives among a specific culture of people*. God tells us, "Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the best use of the time."

There's a huge assumption in this passage: that you and I live among people who don't know Jesus (the outsiders). What is Paul implicitly telling us to do? Be where the non-Christians are. Go to where those on the outside of the family of God are. Be missionaries to them. Live where they live. Be friends with them.

Think about it for a moment. What kind of missionary would go to a foreign city, find a place to live, find a source of income, find where to buy food, maybe find a hobby and a wife, and then kick back and enjoy his surroundings, never befriending the locals. We wouldn't call him a missionary. We'd call him a

resident.

Some of us have lost the fact that all of us are missionaries, and we have taken up residency.

More explicitly, Paul tells us to live wisely toward outsiders so as to make good use of the time. That means living a distinctly different life. I think Paul is applying Colossians 1:10—"Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord fully pleasing to him"—to evangelism. In other words, as we live our lives in relationship with people who do not know Jesus, the world should get a glimpse of Jesus and his character from the way we live. Our people should know that they are billboards for Christ—billboards that reveal how worthy Christ is. That he is worthy of all of our life.

When a person who does not know Jesus scratches the surface of our life and witnesses our actions, our motives, our decisions, as well as how we handle our money, our time, our energy, our pleasure, and, most importantly of all, our sin, that person should be struck by how glorious Jesus is and how amazing the salvation he offers is. A transformed life through the Spirit's power is one of the most strategic and effective tools for evangelism. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, self-control—all of these things will provoke outsiders. A joyful Christian walking through testing and trial will provoke people who are watching.

Does your church understand this? Do they understand why obedience and the fruit of the Spirit are so important? Obedience is not about winning points. It's about looking like Jesus and imitating him. And as pastors this must start first with our own lives. Does your church understand how holiness has a greater end than just an "abundant" life? A holy life is God's proof to a dying world that his kingdom really exists and living in his kingdom through Christ is far more satisfying than any life this world has to offer.

"Okay," you ask, "So, what about being relevant?" The topic of cultural relevance is thrown around a lot these days, and I am glad it is. It's an important conversation to have when it comes to our mission. We need to know our surrounding area and the people that inhabit it, so that we can understand what conversations they're having, and what conversations we should have with them.

But *relevance* is a packaging for truth. It is important, but it is certainly not as essential as the truth itself. The truth is essential.

Not only that, godliness and the fruit of the Spirit are far more important than "being relevant." Honestly, it's easy to be relevant in our culture. Get a tattoo, get a nose ring, wear tight pants, and listen to the band Coldplay. Okay, great! Now you're ready for the mission. You're relevant and everybody around you is going to get saved, right?

Tight pants and a nose ring don't compare to the power of the Spirit. If you own a Coldplay t-shirt and have a nose ring, that's great. We need all kinds of people working in the kingdom, and I mean that sincerely. It's very important not to moralize our preferences when it comes to appearance. It can turn people off to the gospel very quickly. But we do need to emphasize in our churches where the power resides for evangelism. It's not the package, it's the truth inside the package. It's not the clothes that give us power, it's the changed life that has been radically altered by Jesus.

We need to keep what is primary, primary. When those things that are secondary start pushing out what is primary in evangelism, danger is near. The emphasis should never be more on the shell and the packaging than on the message itself.

I love packaging. I really do. I still have the box from the iPod I got three years ago. It's a brilliant piece of packaging: Smooth lines. Simple graphics. Pieces that fit perfectly together. Secret compartments. I could play with it for hours.

Packaging is great. But if the unbelievers around you open the package and see nothing different inside then there's a problem. Your life has compromised the mission. Jesus Christ died on a cross so that what is on the inside of the package would be radically different.

If an unbeliever gets to know you—opens the package—and finds love, joy and humility, it will open up a whole new world for them. That's relevant. As you talk to them about the grace of Jesus Christ as shown on the cross and how his grace changed you; and as you talk to them about what you were, about your anger, your pride, and how those things manifested themselves in your life; and as they get to know the real you changed by Jesus, grace will become amazing to them.

Teach your church that missionaries live distinct lives in a specific culture.

TEACH THEM TO TALK

We pray, we live, and thirdly, we talk. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."

How can you be an effective and relevant missionary? Simple. Have conversations with unbelievers. Share your life with them. And in time share the gospel of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross with them. And make sure when you share you speak so that they can understand.

A few years ago, I was talking on the phone with my uncle, whom I love, but who does not yet know Jesus. We were talking about my dad, and I said to my uncle, "You know, my dad is so relational and relatable." There was silence on the other end of the phone. Then I heard my uncle say, "What the heck does that mean? Did you just say 'relational and relatable'?" I responded, "Oh, that's bad pastor talk. I'm sorry. You know I've got that pastor hat on sometimes." And I asked him to correct me every time I talk like that.

We Christians need to learn how to communicate. Sometimes what works in our church doesn't necessarily translate out there, as with terms like "relational and relatable." When that happens, we can just look at our non-Christian friends and say, "I'm sorry. That's just Christian talk, here's what I mean..."

But that does not mean that we accept the culture's language in its entirety. There are certain elements that need to be rejected outright. Someone once told me that he curses around unbelievers because it makes non-Christians feel more comfortable. Now I'm grateful for this man's evangelistic zeal. But cursing around non-Christians is not right, because Scripture clearly tells us, "Let no unwholesome speech come out of our mouth." Our lives and words must be distinct from the culture around us.

At times, I become concerned when the whole thrust of our churches' teaching on evangelism is "be bold." I am all for being bold. Sharing your life and Jesus with unbelievers takes boldness. But in our desire to be bold, we can sometimes be arrogant. Scripture teaches us to be bold *and* to be humble. Every time you speak to an unbeliever, concentrate on how you say things. Concentrate on your attitude and your motive. Let the words you speak be marked by a humble—not arrogant—orthodoxy. Remember our motive needs to match our message.

Paul also says to let our conversations be seasoned with salt. Do you know what "salty" means? It means "witty and full of life." Let your conversations with unbelievers be witty and full of life. Let your joy come forth, so that they can see it.

There's a young man in our church named Mike. He is one of the most joy-filled missionaries I know. One day Mike was supposed to lead an evangelistic Bible study at a local college campus. But when he entered the room he had reserved, there were about eight gamers sitting around. Gamers are the types who like to wear black—black trench coats, black eye makeup, black fingernails, black everything.

Mike walked in, and said in a friendly tone, "Hey guys, it's our turn. Can I have the room?"

In response, a tall man in a trench coat screamed, "No!" He ripped his shirt open and bared his chest, and his girlfriend came over and stuck a pin in his chest.

Then he stood up, looked at Mike and said, "I wanna eat your soul." (I'm not exaggerating; this really happened.)

Here was Mike's Spirit-led salty remark: "Well, don't fill up on soul, because we've got plenty of free pizza."

Immediately, the man's buddies started falling over themselves with laughter. That salty remark defused a scary situation. And the gamers? They all stayed for the Bible study.

Why does Jesus want our conversations to be salty and gracious? Because most of the time God intends for us to be seed-sowers rather than reapers. And God wants every encounter with one of his children to be a moment where that unbeliever experiences grace and wit and joy. So let's do the next Christian a favor and not ruin it for them by being arrogant.

There was a young lady named Colleen that I and a number of other from our church were reaching out to at Starbucks. She didn't know Jesus, but she loved to be a part of our campus planning meetings. I would say to her, "Colleen, come on over and tell us what we Christians are doing wrong. We need your input. We're just trying to save you anyway."

And she loved it. She loved the people, and she loved hanging out with us. We got involved in her life. We gave her money to participate in an AIDS walk. It was a genuine friendship. But eventually she moved away to New York. I didn't see her get saved, and it broke my heart.

Three years later, I was greeting people at the door of our church, and I saw Colleen walk in. Previously, she would never have set foot in a church. But there she was walking toward me with a huge smile and tears in her eyes. She was 8 months pregnant and unmarried.

She said, "Eric, I've heard that it takes a person 85 times to hear the gospel before they're saved. Well, it took 86 for me. Thank you for telling me about Jesus."

I didn't lead Colleen to the Lord, but I was part of it. One more person transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Amazing grace.

Whether your church is in Dallas, Texas or Sydney, Australia, Philly or New York, La Paz or Orlando, God has strategically placed you and the members of your church in that place. He has radically converted you and called you to be missionaries. Why? Because he wants his kingdom to be revealed, he wants the lost to be saved. And your church gets to play a part in it. What a mission!

Eric Simmons leads the singles ministry at Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, MD. Along with Joshua Harris, Eric also leads New Attitude—a conference for young Christians seeking to promote Humble Orthodoxy. For more information go to www.newattitude.org.

October 2006
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Thinking About Evangelism Means Thinking About the Church

Part 1 in a series on evangelism

By Ryan Townsend

Preface to the 9Marks Series on Evangelism

The aim of this series of nine articles is to provide a biblical, God-centered framework for understanding and doing evangelism. The main idea in this series of articles is that biblical evangelism begins with the church. To put it another way, *the local church itself is the best and biblically-prescribed “evangelism program.”*

This series of articles hopes to add value to the study of evangelism in two particular ways. First, it seeks to provide a biblical framework of evangelism that accurately captures the *corporate* and *individual* nature of witness in Scriptures. Second, therefore, it seeks to address and equip primarily *pastors* and *church leaders*, since these are the people principally responsible for training local churches.

Go to the end of the article for good resources for a pastor’s toolbox.

The Church is the mirror, that reflects the whole effulgence of the Divine character. It is the grand scene, in which the perfections of Jehovah are displayed to the universe. The revelations made to the Church—the successive grand events in her history and, above all, the manifestation of “the glory of God in the Person of Jesus Christ”—furnish even to the heavenly intelligences fresh subjects of adoring contemplation. - Charles Bridges [1]

I love the church. And I take great encouragement in God’s love for the church. It amazes me that God loves his church so much that he calls it his bride and uses it to display his glory (Eph 3:10; 5:23ff; Rev. 21:2, 9).

My love for the church is relatively new. I wasn’t impressed with God or his church growing up. I grew up attending a Unitarian church. I did know several impressive, godly Christians, but none of these individuals were able to impress me with the grandeur of Jesus Christ and the gospel. This was particularly true the few times I visited a Christian church with them. What I saw in these corporate gatherings was not compelling, because I didn’t see any difference between the folks at church and my friends who didn’t attend church.

Then, at age 23, right after college, God saved me. And he did it through the corporate witness of one local group of redeemed sinners. These brothers and sisters shared the gospel with me by proclaiming its message against the backdrop of their lives together as a family. Like all families, they were far from perfect, but something made them different. There was a distinct aroma. The Lord used them to confront me with his holiness, my sin, the justice and love of Jesus Christ, and the call to repent and believe.

Many Christians today think of evangelism and missions almost exclusively in individualistic categories. Evangelism tends to be understood as what an individual does when he or she leaves church and shares the gospel with outsiders. And missions tends to be understood as what an individual does when he or she leaves church, moves overseas, and meets with people who don’t know the gospel.

The New Testament, however, offers a perspective that focuses at least as much on the *corporate* nature

of Christian witness. It does not disregard the individual's witness. Indeed, churches are made up of individuals. But God, who is passionate about displaying his glory to the world, means to carry out the mission of displaying his glory through individuals gathered together in local churches. Hence, our understanding of evangelism and evangelistic activity must begin here—with God, his church, and what he's told us in Scriptures concerning the nature and activity of mission and witness.

OVERVIEW OF THE EVANGELISM LANDSCAPE: 4 POPULAR APPROACHES

Before we jump into the biblical evidence for the above assertions—which we will do in the next articles in this series—it's worth pausing to consider how evangelicals tend to conceive of the relationship between evangelism and the local church. Most evangelism strategies, methodologies, and programs in North America assign some role to the church in the practice of evangelism. But that role changes as the underlying conception of the local church changes.

We can get a high level overview of the church landscape in evangelicalism by looking at four dominant approaches to church and evangelism in today's churches.

Liberal

The liberal or accommodationist church is the farthest away from orthodox, evangelical beliefs. Yet it bears mentioning because of its influence on evangelicals over the past 200 years. This approach to church can be summarized by the motto, "If it feels right, believe it!"

In an accommodationist church, biblical theology and the historic doctrines of Christianity are often left to the side as these churches seek to "save Christianity" by "being relevant" and in sync with contemporary times and thinking. An accommodation approach, at its worse, can create "Christian" churches that do not hold to the teachings and beliefs of Jesus Christ and the Bible.

What does this mean for evangelism? Evangelism becomes the mechanism used by such churches to address whatever they perceive as most wrong with human beings. Is poverty and physical want humanity's greatest enemy? Then the church evangelizes by addressing physical needs. Is political oppression our worst foe? Then evangelism means offering spiritual hope and political change. [2]

In the process, of course, such leaders deprive the church of the very things that distinguish it from any other social organization or society, and so weaken the church's purpose for existing. This approach can accommodate the gospel to the prevailing cultural ideas of the day and lead to a marginalized church. In the end, we are left with no true "evangel" in our evangelism. The gospel—which addresses our greatest need of all: guilt before God—is gone.

Revivalist

The revivalist church, on the other hand, rightly perceives the church's primary task to be proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ's propitiatory death on the cross. But the task of proclaiming the gospel falls almost exclusively on the preacher, and the task of responding to the gospel is often reduced to a mere decision on the part of the listener. The revivalist church might be summarized with the motto, "If it yields a decision, say it!"

On the one hand, the revivalist church is involved in evangelism. Christians might bring their non-Christian friends to hear the preacher preach. But the Christian who belongs to the revivalist church tends to rely entirely on the church—or the preacher, really—to do the evangelizing, and largely through his altar calls. Souls are considered "won" as soon as "decisions" are made and a prayer is prayed.

On the other hand, the revivalist church is *not* involved in evangelism, in so far as it yields false decisions

and doesn't pay sufficient attention to discipling all those "decision-makers" to Christian maturity. And it's the life-together of increasingly mature Christians—we will see in the next articles in this series—that give rise to the church's corporate witness.

The sincerity, zeal, and love for the lost in many revivalist churches are commendable. Yet the practice of "decisionism" is the result of a meager conception of the local church, a shallow conception of sin, and a weak understanding of conversion. The psychological, manipulative techniques tend to shame or guilt people into a false, temporary decision that leaves individuals very much like the seed that sprouts up, but quickly withers (Mark 4:3-8). Sadly, the weaknesses of this model often show up in the countless secular novels and movies that use such churches for their punch-lines and parodies.

Pragmatic-Seeker

If the revivalistic approach to church was more common half a century ago, and increasingly common kind of church today must be the "pragmatic-seeker" church. This pragmatic-seeker approach is often driven by the desire to "meet people where they are at." With great evangelistic motives, churches regularly plan and structure their corporate gatherings with a focus on "what works" for attracting as many "seekers" as possible. The pragmatic church abides by the motto, "If it works, go for it!"

Like revivalistic churches, pragmatic-seeker churches both *do* and *don't* involve the church in evangelism. The church *is* involved in that its services and many of its programs are geared toward the unbeliever. The church *is not* involved *in so far as* evangelism is not perceived as a product of the church's corporate witness—in spite of best intentions—but of the leaders offering the right programs and playing the right music. In a sense, the pragmatic-seeker church is just a more sophisticated version of the revivalistic church. Instead of the single preacher giving an altar call, there's a "worship team" and a "leadership team" offering a whole host of incentives.

In the process, unfortunately, a church culture of "theo-tainment" can emerge as the dominating ethos, and the doctrine of "what works" can eclipse many biblical doctrines that characterize the Christian life, such as repentance (turning away from sin). The astonishing visible growth of these movements speaks to the success of their practices. Yet while these organizations start with Scripture, they often add "business best practices" to the Bible in order to achieve their goals.

A pragmatic approach frequently works well in the short-run. Yet if history is a reliable teacher, it can produce compromised churches over the long run that reflect the culture rather than shape it.

In recent years, the pragmatic-seeker church has borne a very unhealthy child—the optional church. If the motto is "If it works, go for it," what happens when an individual decides that the church itself doesn't work? According to the optional-church model, the church is no longer regarded as essential for Christian discipleship, evangelism, and other aspects of the Christian life. George Barna's argument in his book *Revolution* embodies this increasingly popular attitude. Barna writes on behalf of disheartened "revolutionary" Christians who yearn for a more robust, authentic spiritual experience than what his or her local church offers. Barna's prescription is truly revolutionary:

Being in a right relationship with God and his people is what matters. Scripture teaches us that devoting your life to loving God with all your heart, mind, and strength and soul is what honors him. Being part of a local church may facilitate that. Or it may not. [3]

Barna's call to abandon the local church (or not – whatever is best for you) suggests a growing attitude in American evangelicalism that primarily understands the heart of Christian discipleship and evangelism as personal and individualistic. Emphasis falls on Christ's coming to reclaim individual sinners and reconcile them to God.

On the surface, such an individualistic focus on discipleship and witness offers an attractive alternative to

the superficiality and boredom of many local churches. But such individualism also raises fundamental questions about the warp and woof of biblical Christianity and its corporate nature and mission.

Parachurch organizations can also unwittingly contribute to the optional church problem if believers begin to think all their spiritual needs can be met through this or that organization and then dismiss the role of the local church. Many evangelical parachurch ministries helpfully recognize the need for biblical theology to inform Christian thinking and living. These ministries can do an excellent job educating pastors and individual Christians with good theology. However, this approach does not always go far enough. Sometimes they miss the biblical argument for the centrality of the congregation in the individual believer's life as one of the most crucial components for evangelism and for growing as a Christian.

Missional

The newest and most distinct approach to church and evangelism is the "missional" approach. Their understanding of the church could be summarized with the motto, "The church itself is on mission!"

Craig Van Gelder provides a good, nutshell description of the missional church:

This view considers mission to be inherent with the very nature of the church...With this understanding, mission shifts from naming a function of the church to describing its essential nature...According to this view, church and mission are not two distinct entities. They speak about the same reality... Ecclesiology and missiology are not separate theological disciplines, but are, in fact, interrelated and complementary. They start at the same point, with the Triune God in mission to all of creation. [4]

It's difficult to provide a single characterization of the relationship between evangelism and the church among advocates of the missional church, since writers from both conservative and liberal circles—each with their respective "gospel"—will endorse the so-called missional church model. What advocates from both circles seem to share, however, is an emphasis on the need for every member of the church to carry the "good news" of Jesus to their communities and neighborhoods. Yet not only should Christians speak this message, they should "incarnate" it with their lives. Ed Stetzer explains that

the movement defines itself by the mission and incarnation of Christ...proponents of this way of planting churches let their incarnation of Christ drive the mission in their community and beyond; and the church emerges out of that journey...They pray and move intentionally as God moves to see people come to Christ in their various contexts – work, neighborhood, social circles, etc. They aim for new faith communities to spring up naturally, birthed out of relationships. [5]

There is much in the missional approach that I can promote as part of a biblical understanding of evangelism, and there is a sense in which this series will endorse the idea of the missional church. Every member should be evangelizing in word and deed. Nevertheless, to limit the nature of the church to mission is reductionistic and risks driving the church towards an unbiblical, social gospel direction that is more liberal than biblical. [6] Also, writers on the missional church tend to miss the importance of the church's holy and loving life-together as witness to outsiders.

CONCLUSION

Evangelicals may be accustomed to discussing the topic of evangelism separately from their discussions about the local church. But it's my basic contention that this is an illegitimate divorce. We must think about evangelism and church together for at least two reasons. First, our understanding of church will necessarily shape how we think about evangelism, as I hoped to demonstrate above by viewing the whole landscape.

Second, we need to think about evangelism and church together because the New Testament teaches

that evangelism, missions, and discipleship are best accomplished corporately through a congregational "body life" that's committed to growing in godliness through the word of God and the power of the gospel. Such an approach is the best program and prescription for evangelism, missions, and discipleship today. In parts 2 and 3, we'll turn to consider this proposal more carefully.

Ryan Townsend is the 9Marks lead writer on evangelism.

Resources on Evangelism

By Ryan Townsend

This series of articles will not cover some of the basics about evangelism that others have already done a better job of doing anyway. Get these resources for your pastoral toolbox and use them with your church.

- Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth* – the best book I've read on evangelism.
- J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* – this is an incredible book. It is a simple, wonderfully theological and immensely practical study on evangelism as it relates to the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.
- Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*
- Mark Dever, *Deliberate Church*
- Mark Dever, *Promises Kept*
- Mack Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus* – along with Will Metzger's and Packer's books, this is a must read.
- Two Ways to Live – the best, most biblical gospel tract I've seen.
- Christianity Explained (workbook), Scripture Union – the best evangelistic Bible Study I've seen. God used this study to convert me!
- W. Oscar Thompson, Jr., *Concentric Circles of Concern: Seven Stages for Making Disciples*
- John Mark Terry, *Evangelism, A Concise History* – a useful, readable, short history of evangelism in the past 200 years.
- Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*
- Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided* – this is a thoroughly biblical, indicting, and helpful survey of evangelicalism in the past 200 years. There are goldmines of application here for not just evangelism, discipleship, and missions, but the whole of evangelical Christianity.
- David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers* – this is a must read for pastors today. It is an excellent overview of Christianity in a pluralistic, postmodern society, and points out the practical implications for preaching, ecclesiology, missions, evangelism, and discipleship.

Footnotes:

1. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry, with An Inquiry into the Causes of its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 1.
2. Here I am merely adapting B.B. Warfield's argument concerning different theories of the atonement. Every theory of the atonement, he argued, presents the solution to whatever it regards as humanity's fundamental problem. If ignorance is the problem, the cross enlightens us to God's love. If guilt is the problem, the cross removes that guilt. And so forth. From "Modern Theories of the Atonement," in *The Works of B. B. Warfield, Vol. 9 Studies in Theology*. (Repr. Baker, 2003), 283.
3. George Barna, *Revolution* (Tyndale, 2005), 37.
4. Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 30-31.
5. Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 163.
6. Michael Green helpfully explains the distinction of evangelism and the mission of the church: "Evangelism is not the same as mission. Mission is one half of the reason for the church's existence. Worship is the other. In these two ways we are called to display what it means to be 'a colony of heaven.'

But the mission of the church is, of course, much broader than evangelism. It embodies the total impact of the church on the world: its influence; its involvement with the social, political and moral life of the community and nation where it is placed; its succor of bleeding humanity in every way possible. This mission includes evangelism. The greatest thing we can do for anyone is to bring them face to face with Christ who died for them. But it is clear that evangelism is one aspect, and one only, of the total mission of the church.” Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 9.

October 2006
Ryan Townsend

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Pastors' and Theologians' Forum

"What must pastors do to help their members regain a sense of the church's corporate witness, which is so vital to evangelism? What stands in the way of that recovery?"

Answers from

- [Thabiti Anyabwile](#)
- [John Folmar](#)
- [Ryan Fullerton](#)
- [J. D. Greear](#)
- [Dave Harvey](#)
- [R. Albert Mohler Jr.](#)
- [Phil Newton](#)



Thabiti Anyabwile

Pastors must teach their people that the corporate gathering of the church is not a setting for mass individual devotions. We're not fundamentally assembled so each individual can "engage with God" in a way that fits his or her personal tastes or predilections. Rather, we are a people assembled by God, united to his Son, adopted into his family, and governed in our worship by his word. The Lord God is seeking a people, not merely individuals, to worship him in spirit and in truth.



This has implications for our preaching. Our preaching should draw attention to the corporate aspects of Christian life and counter the self-centeredness and autonomy found in so many Christian circles. We have to apply God's word in a way that makes evident the centrality of relationships both to God and to one another. The plural or corporate emphasis of 1 Peter 2:9-10 must inform at least some of our illustrations and applications. Otherwise, our people will read and hear the scriptures as though they sit alone before the pulpit and the Bible.

Pastors should also consider actively using documents like a church covenant or statement of faith to succinctly remind members of their relatedness to others in the body. We should encourage active hospitality among both the leaders and the membership, where we encourage each other in testimony and fellowship. And we should pray that our love, stirred up and manifesting itself in good deeds, would be evident and convincing to all.

Several factors are impediments to recovering a healthy sense of corporate witness, but perhaps none so troubling as "privatism" and individualism. Far too many Christians hold that their lives are their own, to live as they wish, protected by an inalienable right to privacy. The New Testament's call to follow Christ is diametrically opposed to this way of viewing church membership. The Lord and his apostles teach that our lives should be open letters read and circulated among all, edited in brotherly love by others.

*Thabiti Anyabwile is the senior pastor of the First Baptist Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands, and the author of the forthcoming *The Faithful Preacher: Recapturing the Vision of Three Pioneering African-American Pastors (Crossway, 2007)* and *The Decline of African-American Theology: From Biblical Faithfulness to Cultural Captivity (IVP, 2007)*.*

John Folmar

I came to know Jesus in large part through the *corporate* witness of a local church. To be sure, the gospel was explained to me in a one-on-one setting, and I benefited from personal, one-on-one friendships. But the gospel was "enfleshed"—it was made real—through a network of multi-generational relationships in the gathered assembly. I longed for the joy that I observed in the church. It was there that I saw the gospel portrayed, and I was drawn in. I heard in the church a true echo of what I was confronting in the Scriptures about God's holiness, my own need, and Christ's bountiful provision for us.



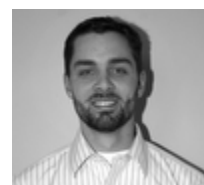
Nowadays, following Jesus is generally considered to be individualistic: from quiet times to Bible study to personal evangelism. Rarely are we told that true godliness shows itself in the rough-and-tumble of community life. How often do we even hear *corporate* applications in sermons? (For example, a preacher who says, "How should we *as a church* respond to this truth?") But Jesus and his apostles strongly emphasized the distinctly corporate aspect of our lives together without neglecting individual disciplines (Matt. 5:13; John 13:35; 1 Peter 2:5, 3:8).

Most of us, sadly, have never been a part of churches where a robust community has existed, so it helps to know other pastors who are blessed to be shepherding churches that do enjoy a healthy corporate witness. Whenever we can, we should visit and learn from churches that are known for their corporate priority. Second, we should preach in line with the apostolic emphasis on body-life. It's unavoidable. Just read John's epistles on loving our neighbors, or Paul's injunctions concerning humility. They were all writing to churches! Third, we should cultivate an atmosphere of thriving community, both through our personal examples and through encouragement. Become a master at matching people up, and winsomely suggesting that, say, Jim get to know Biju, because the two of them live in the same neighborhood and could be mutual sources of encouragement. Work to master-mind relationships in the church, and then teach others to do the same. And don't neglect prayer. At the end of the day, only God's Spirit will create the atmosphere of love and service which is distinct from what the world outside is offering.

John Folmar is the pastor of United Christian Church of Dubai, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Ryan Fullerton

The church in our day has the idea that people's negative ideas about Christ and Christians are primarily formed by what they read in the newspaper or watch on television. In truth, many of our neighbors are turned off from the gospel because of what they have seen in our churches. The media may be biased, and Hollywood may be blasphemous, but if the non-Christian guy at the office uses the name of Christ as a swear word, it is largely our fault. When the people of God are hypocritical, the scripture comes true, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles *because of you*" (Rom 2:24).



As pastors, we must help our congregations see that the state of our churches is primarily responsible for our culture's perception of Christ. Our churches can give the gospel a black eye, or they can be used by the Holy Spirit with magnetic effect to draw people to Jesus. The believers we serve must understand that our churches were meant to powerfully reinforce and to attractively adorn our evangelistic message.

Think about what we want people to learn through evangelism. We want them to believe that Jesus was really sent by God. Well, Jesus prayed that Christians would be united, so "that the world may believe that you [God] have sent me" (John 17:21-23).

In evangelism, we want people to believe that we are really following Jesus, and not some cult leader. Well, Jesus says that "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34).

In evangelism, we want people to give glory to God. Well, Jesus told us "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Lives of sacrificial, loving good deeds will be used by the Holy Spirit to convert people into God glorifiers.

In evangelism, we want people to realize that they are in danger of hell. Well, Paul tells the church in Philippi that their fearless unity amidst persecution is "a clear sign to them [unbelievers] of their destruction" (Phil 1:28).

When our lives together are divisive, unloving, selfish, and fearful, Christ and Christians look about as believable as the tooth fairy. Yet when our lives are united, loving, sacrificial, and fearless, our verbal witness to the cross of Christ becomes weighty. For many, our witness will become believable. As pastors, we need to help our congregations make this link.

Ryan Fullerton is the pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Louisville, KY.

J.D. Greear

John 17 has always been a haunting passage for me. Is Christ's prayer that the world would "know him through us" being fully answered in our church? Clearly, he intended for the world to see his Trinitarian glory in the corporate witness of the church I serve, the Summit Church.



God has led our church to ask three questions in this regard:

1. Do the lives of our members demonstrate the beauty of holiness? We have begun to see the issue of church discipline as a matter of evangelism. The holiness of Christ is beautiful and attractive for those who are "being saved." Tolerating sin in our midst blunts the gospel, because an unbeliever must see holiness in action before his heart will be convicted of sin. In other words, an unbeliever must learn what sin is before he can learn grace.

2. Does our city know that we love it? It is said that when Philip preached the gospel *and* healed people in Samaria there was "much joy" in the city. We want our city to rejoice that we are in it. We don't want simply to stand in our pulpit and shout "peace, be warm and full!" to the hungry outside of our doors. We must feed them.

3. Are we known primarily as the people of the gospel? As churches and denominations grow large, we seem tempted to use our "corporate power" in pursuits other than the spread of the gospel and the planting of churches. Without question, social justice and political activism are the duty of Christians who possess a comprehensive worldview, and we need committed Christians to enter those areas as full-time vocations. But these worldly areas are not the domain of churches or organizations of churches. These affairs distract us from excelling in our one, unique calling and distract the world from hearing that one message they can only hear from us.

Perhaps one word of caution is in order: I do not think that an effective corporate witness necessarily means that the world will laud us for our "goodness." Sometimes, they will call our righteousness "judgmentalism." For many, the beauty of Christ's glory will be the "savor of death." The secular world took the head of John the Baptist, and it has systematically killed the prophets. Such might be our fate.

But when they speak against us as evildoers, they will, through our good works, have a chance to glorify God on the day of his return.

J.D. Greear is the lead pastor of the Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina.

Dave Harvey

We pastor people steeped in a culture that treats the gospel as incomprehensible and the church as irrelevant. But hope grows as more pastors see the sacred center of their work "to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).



The potency of the church springs from the clarity of our message. Without an authentic gospel—one that calls for our purity, grounds our witness, and inspires our vision for evangelism—we are indistinguishable from special interest groups that merely trumpet the latest cause. An obscured message or subtle cultural accommodation trivializes God's people and silences the church's witness. Without the gospel, the church just makes no sense.

How do pastors help churches regain their witness?

1) *Use the pulpit to steer the ship.* The charge issued to pastors is splendidly summarized to Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

Pastors serve by preaching relentlessly, courageously, and patiently, executing their charge as ones who steward the very words of God. Through their faithful exposition, they navigate the church away from error and towards the safe shores of gospel clarity. Gospel clarity from the pulpit functions in two ways: it equips church members with the essential message for their personal evangelism, and it allows unbelievers to encounter the saving message of the cross applied to the realities of daily life.

2) *Connect the dots between the gospel and godliness.* Getting the gospel right is a great start, but applying it leads to lasting change. Good pastors move from information to application, beginning with their own lives. Paul tells Titus,

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age (Titus 2:11-12).

Grace arrives with an agenda. It targets ungodliness and worldliness and trains us how to say "no," and mean it! Then it works powerfully to replace carnal impulses with godliness. Changed lives and godly living—the fruit of the gospel—become a powerful witness to a dying world.

3) *Spread the news: the gospel moves us outward.* The gospel is a restless power. It challenges our comfort and prods us beyond the settled Christianity of an affluent society. With sound, expository preaching which explains the implications of the gospel, the church-going Christian looks beyond the walls of the church to the world. The result is an impassioned, risk-taking, church planting, gospel-proclaiming group of Christians that delight in their call to be salt and light.

Dave Harvey is the senior pastor of Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, PA.

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

The church's corporate witness is one of the missing concepts of twenty-first century Christianity. I speak specifically of evangelical Christianity in North America, which has adopted the autonomous individual as the primary focus of attention and has minimized ecclesiology for decades.



In this postmodern world, persons have grown sufficiently sophisticated to tell the difference between presentation and reality. This presents the church with a significant challenge at several levels. As a local congregation, the church is to represent the fellowship of the redeemed—a representation of true community. The superficial fellowship and lack of accountability and engagement among members stands as a stark contradiction to the kind of community we believe the church is called to be. When evangelical churches satisfy themselves with a low level of authentic community, the church's corporate witness suffers.

Of course, the corporate witness of the church also suffers when the congregation is in any way unclear about its convictions and commitment to the gospel. As the redeemed community, the local church is to stand as a picture of a coming kingdom. That is why the New Testament gives such urgent attention to an issue like church discipline, where the essence of true Christian community is seen as members hold each other accountable under the authority of the word of God.

In our society of quick and easy joining and leaving, the idea that the local church is a place where one would invest one's entire life is a largely foreign concept. Nevertheless, the development of strong congregations, based without equivocation upon the word of God and the power of the gospel, is the necessary corrective to the unfortunate impression given by many churches—that they are franchises of the Christian corporate chain. We should pray for a recovery of true ecclesiology in our time – and know that it will come only through the corrective power of the word of God.

R. Albert Mohler is the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has contributed to numerous books. More of his work can be found at www.albertmohler.com.

Phil A. Newton

Several years ago, the U.S. Army produced a catchy new recruiting slogan: "An Army of One." Rather than the "Be All that You Can Be" emphasis on self-development, the new slogan turns to the narcissistic worldview so common in America—*life is all about me*.



Perhaps the Army developed its strategy by observing the role narcissism plays in the church. For several decades, churches have trended toward sermons, music, worship styles, programs, and activities favoring self-enhancement rather than emphasizing the corporate nature of the church. Highlighting a few church *all-stars* takes precedence over developing the body into "a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). How do we change this unbiblical practice? Pastors don't need new programs to recover the church's corporate witness. Rather, they should make effective use of normal pastoral ministry, e.g. preaching and teaching, church covenant, and pastoral care.

Through preaching and teaching, remind the church of its corporate nature. Pastors have ample biblical texts to expound and apply this corporate picture. The Scripture does the work; the pastor need only open the texts. My own sermon files yield scores of examples in expositional series from Old Testament

historical and prophetic books, as well as every New Testament book that I've preached through.

Regular reading of the church's covenant serves as a confessional means of stressing the corporate nature and responsibilities of church membership. We read the church covenant monthly while observing the Lord's Supper, which is yet another reminder of the church's corporate devotedness to Christ.

Membership care by pastors, elders, and deacons must encompass the entire church. This involves teaching, nurturing, exhorting, admonishing, and disciplining. Tolerating absenteeism or sinful patterns among members hinders, and sometimes nullifies, the church's witness to the gospel's power. By emphasizing the role of the corporate body bearing testimony to the gospel's transforming work, church leaders find an appropriate trajectory for their labors with the body. The church, then, bears evidence of gospel effects, demonstrating biblical Christianity to the community.

The key to regaining the corporate witness is not by pastoral creativity, but through faithfulness to the details of pastoral ministry.

Phil Newton is the pastor of Southwoods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, and is the author of Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership (Kregel, 2005).

October 2006
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What a Biblical Understanding of Church Membership and the NCLHGA Have in Common

By Mike McKinley

In our previous article, we traced the theme of inclusion and exclusion throughout redemptive history. From the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem, God promises to create a people for himself. This new people should be distinct from the rest of the world, both in their confession and in their conduct. Ultimately, we concluded that church membership was consistent with how God has worked through redemption history.

Now it remains to be seen whether the contemporary practice of church membership accurately reflects the New Testament pattern for the life of the church. By church membership, I mean the formal agreement between an individual and a congregation to be committed to one another in life and discipline.

If we conclude that church membership is consistent with the Bible's commands for the church, we are obligated to pursue it in our churches. To that end, we will consider two main questions in this article: First, was church membership practiced by the apostles and the New Testament church? Second, is church membership required by the commands of Scripture?

WAS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP PRACTICED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

Was church membership practiced by churches in the New Testament? Scripture gives us indications that the answer to this question is "yes." While none of these examples are overwhelming on their own, taken as a whole they form a substantial argument. Let's look at three.

1. *Those Reluctant "to Join" the Church*

In Acts 5:12-13 we are told,

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.

In the wake of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, fear gripped both believers in the church and the non-believers who heard of the events. The trepidation was such that many did not dare "to join" the church [1], presumably for fear that they would suffer a similar fate.

What does the word translated "join" in the English Standard Version mean? The Greek word is *kollaô*, the semantic range of which includes "to bind closely," "to join together," and "unite." This same word occurs in 1 Corinthians 6:17 to refer to the union that occurs between a believer and Christ. At the very least, the use of the word "join" in Acts 5:13 refers to more than casually *showing up*, as you or I might speak of "joining the dinner party for dessert." It indicates some sort of formal connection, more like joining a club.

2. *The List of Widows*

In 1 Timothy 5:9-12, Paul gives Timothy a set of instructions for enrolling widows on the list of those receiving support from the church. He writes:

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works...But refuse to enroll younger widows...

The verb translated "enroll" (*katalageô*) can be either specific ("to put on a list") or general ("to consider as part of a certain group"). The former meaning would make the point more marked in that the church was clearly keeping an accessible list of widowed members. Yet even the latter meaning would mean that the church was distinguishing between people in a way consistent with the practice of church membership.

Why mention the widow's list? It's difficult to imagine the church keeping a list of widows but not keeping a list of members. If it didn't keep the latter list, what group of widows would even be considered for inclusion on the former list? Any widow in the entire city of Ephesus? The widow who showed up three times four years ago? Of course not. The church would have some specified pool that it was drawing from.

3. The Punishment of the Majority

In 2 Corinthians 2:6, Paul refers to the discipline the church inflicted on an individual as the "punishment by the majority." While we will think of church discipline more in just a moment, it's worth observing for now that the existence of a "majority" means that there was a defined set of people from which the majority is constituted. There cannot be a majority of an unspecified group; it must be a majority of *something*.

Was it the majority of people who happened to be present the day the vote was cast? Could non-Christians then vote? Could any Christians who happened to be visiting from another city who didn't know the situation vote? The most natural assumption to make is that Paul meant the majority of an acknowledged membership of the church.

Among other pieces of evidence, these three examples suggest that participation in the life of the church body wasn't casual or easily dissolved. It was a relationship that one entered into (joined) and that came with responsibilities (determining punishment) and privileges (support for the widows). It is hard to imagine how this was accomplished without a clear sense of the membership of the church.

IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP REQUIRED BY SCRIPTURE?

The Westminster Confession of Faith states that "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture." [2] Since scripture does not expressly set down the practice of church membership (in the contemporary sense), we are left to investigate whether the Bible assumes church membership in any of its commands. Is it a "good and necessary" deduction from the biblical evidence? Again, let's look at three examples:

1. Church Discipline

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul instructs the church on how to deal with a man living in open and scandalous sin. For the sinner's good and for the health of the church, the congregation is told to exercise church discipline against the man by "delivering the man to Satan".

In verse 2, he tells them that rather than letting the man remain among them, they should "Let him who has done this be removed from among you."

There are a few things for us to notice from this passage:

First, this punishment is described in verse 2 as removing this man "from among you." The result of the church discipline is the removal of the sinner from the congregation. This necessarily implies the presence of a formal membership. How else could someone be removed if they did not belong in a formal sense in the first place?

I cannot be removed from the Northern California Left Handed Golfer's Association because I have never been a member of such an organization. Now according to their website, the NCLHGA *will* remove people from membership for several reasons (like right-handedness, perhaps?). But I am in no danger of being subject to such an action, because you can't kick a person out who was never a member to begin with.

Second, the church's discipline is to occur when "you are assembled together" (vs. 4). For our purposes, simply note that there was a definite and formal assembly of the church, and they knew who to expect when it gathered.

Third, Paul means for the church to discipline only those "inside" the church (vs. 12). Obviously, the church knew who was an insider and who was an outsider. Proper church discipline is impossible without defined church membership.

2. Accountability to Leaders

The New Testament warns church leaders to discharge their responsibility for oversight diligently. In Acts 20:28, Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to "Take heed to yourselves, and to *all the flock*." In Hebrews 13:17, the church is told to respect elders since "they watch over your souls, as those who must give account."

Who constitutes the flock over which the elders watch? For whom must the leaders of the church give account? The citizens of their city? Anyone who ever attends their church? Of course not. They must be accountable for the members of the church, those whom everyone recognizes have been committed to their care. Church leaders cannot function properly without church membership.

3. Metaphors for the Church

The New Testament makes use of several metaphors to describe the local congregation. We've seen in Acts 20:28 that the church is referred to as a flock. In 1 Corinthians 12:12, it is compared to a body. In 1 Peter 2:5, the church is pictured as a building.

In each of these metaphors, there is an obvious relationship between the individual and the congregation as a whole. The individual Christian is a member of the body and a sheep in the flock. The individual believer is, in Peter's words, "a living stone" in the spiritual house.

Each of these word pictures, so vital to our understanding of the church, demand more than a casual commitment from the individual. There are no informally connected stones in a building. They are cemented together unambiguously. Sheep do not hop from flock to flock; rather, the shepherd knows exactly how many sheep he has in his care. Body parts do not relate to each other informally; they are intricately connected to each other and are mutually dependent. Surely, we best reflect these metaphors when we formally tie ourselves to a local congregation.

CONCLUSION

Church membership is a thoroughly biblical concept. There is strong circumstantial evidence that it was practiced in some form by the New Testament church. More compellingly, the Bible prescribes a certain

organization and inter-relation within the church that is inconceivable without formal church membership.

In our next article, we will consider the relationship between church membership and the ordinances.

Mike McKinley is the lead writer on church member for 9Marks and the pastor of Guilford Baptist Church in Sterling, VA.

Footnotes:

1. It is grammatically possible that the “them” of verse 13 refers not to the church but rather to the Apostles. The context of these verses, however, demands that we understand Luke to be referring to the church.

2. Westminster Confession of Faith, I.iv

October 2006
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**Book Review: *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views*
Edited by Paul Engle & Gary McIntosh**



Reviewed by Andy Johnson

Contributors: Elmer Towns, Craig Van Gelder, Charles Van Engen, Gailyn Van Rheenan and Howard Snyder.

Zondervan, 2004, 295pp., \$16.99

A friend recently read me a letter from a prominent Texas church that had just planted a satellite campus in Florida. The letter was addressed to pastors, and described the church's strategy for getting Floridians to the new campus. Their approach? Direct mailings, free giveaways, good parking, friendly waving greeters, gourmet coffee, nicely polished wood tables, and excellent signage.

The writer was enthusiastic, even giddy, to be sharing his church's experience as an encouragement to other pastors who longed to see their own churches succeed.

Yet that's all he said. Not a word regarding teaching, prayer, or holiness in the lives of church members. Knowing what your consumers wanted was the first step, and finding the techniques to meet their desires was the second.

Welcome to what many call the outcome of the Church Growth movement!

If you've been in an ecclesiological comatose state for the past fifty years and somehow missed the Church Growth movement, let me briefly recount its history. The term "Church Growth" (CG) refers to the theories of Donald McGavran who used social research methods to discover how to grow churches. Most of his writing flowed out of work done among churches in India during the 1930s and 40s, and it became influential in the North American context in the 1950s to 80s.

Yet criticism of CG's focus on numerical growth and its pragmatic approach to building churches has become so common that one might wonder about the need for another book. Lots of folks, maybe most, would say that the high tide of CG's influence is past. The evangelical church in North America has moved on.

The letter my friend read to me, however, says otherwise. And I don't think this Texas church's approach is uncommon.

In their book *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views*, editors Paul Engle and Gary McIntosh provide us with an analysis of the CG movement from five different authors. If you have not read any books from the popular multiple-views genre, the concept is simple: several authors offer an essay on the same topic, and then each author comments briefly on the others' essays. The whole thing is assembled together like a debate in print, with each essay followed by the comments of the others. If that sounds complex, you should try writing a summary review of a book like that some time!

Elmer Towns begins the book with a straightforward apologetic for classical CG methodology. He argues that we need to employ the research methods of the social sciences to discover how to grow churches.

Craig Van Gelder briefly quibbles with CG thinking, then mainly sidesteps the issue so that he can expound the "Gospel and our Culture" view, the name taken by a group of theologians who promote the "missional church."

Charles Van Engen steps in with a supposedly "centrist" view; but, if anything, he seems to espouse

relying on CG to a degree that most advocates would not—using CG as a tool to form one's theology.

Gailyn Van Rheenan's polite but incisive critique of CG presuppositions points to the damage that CG's rampant pragmatism does to the authority of Scripture.

Howard Snyder rounds out the volume with an essay that calls for kingdom of God thinking instead of CG thinking. The latter, he says, leads to neglecting the social implications of the gospel.

First of all, let me suggest that one of the obvious weaknesses of this book is an exclusivistic reliance on authors whose last names begin with "Van." Not everyone can have a cool name like Van Engen, Van Gelder, or Van Rheenan, all of which make the book sound like its been translated from Dutch. I hope the series editors will be more diverse and inclusive toward authors with non-theologian sounding names in the future.

More seriously, but maybe analogously, I didn't come away from the book feeling like I had received a balanced and useful critique of the CG movement as a whole. I found the critiques offered by several of the authors helpful, but I was also uneasy with the perspectives from which these critiques were coming. I fear that some of the authors might have a view of Scripture's authority that will ultimately do more harm than CG pragmatism.

Consequently, I found myself conflicted in my sympathies. I agree with some of the critiques, yet I am also keenly aware of being thankful for many areas of agreement I have with CG proponents like Elmer Towns. Van Rheenan notes this too as he kindly articulates the strengths of the CG movement, including a focus on personal ministry, a missionary imperative, emphasis on evangelism, and an intention to rely on the authority of Scripture.

Put more bluntly, I disagree with Elmer Towns' CG views, but he would be the brother I would want sitting with me in a prayer meeting or in sharing the gospel. I'm thankful to God that we agree on the inerrancy of Scripture and the necessity of repentance and faith in Christ. Those are not insignificant areas of agreement.

Interestingly, it's Charles Van Engen, the supposed CG centrist, who provides the most shocking comments in the book, as when he suggests that we use CG theory as the lens through which we should interpret the Bible itself. He writes,

We need to give careful thought to the loci or concepts of theology itself and ask how the theological assumptions they represent need to be rethought in light of Church Growth theory. I would call this a "Church Growth theology." In what follows, I will suggest an outline of a Church Growth theology that redefines and rearticulates some of the basic biblical and theological loci and concepts of theology from the point of view of a Church Growth paradigm. That is, I am seeking to do theology "with Church Growth eyes" (125).

I appreciate Van Engen's honesty about how he views the authority of the Bible relative to the authority of CG theory, but the implications of his thinking are breathtakingly bad. You can't claim to be guided by Scripture if you only use it to support a theory you have already decided upon.

Van Engen's misguided proposal aside, it is finally the anthropocentric (or man-centered) focus that is the root problem with CG theory. Van Rheenan comes closest to addressing the root of CG pragmatism when he notes its anthropocentric focus, concluding correctly that "An anthropocentric approach is by its very nature pragmatic."

That, I think, is the key takeaway from this book. If you start with man, you won't rise above man-made theories. At the end of the day, I walked away from *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* informed

but mildly disappointed. The question of what churches should view as the true authority for doctrine and practice was helpfully articulated by Van Rheenan, but the other writers never seemed to fully engage with his critique.

It is at this point of the question of the source of authority for the church that the importance of clarity on the subject of Church Growth struck me hardest. Amidst all the comments and counter comments, I did distinguish outlines of two visions for the growth of churches. One view begins with man and his wisdom, ideas, efforts, and sciences. The other view begins with God—his character, his purposes, and his instructions as given to us in his self-revelation.

The CG movement is just one in a long line of movements that recommend "doing church" beginning with man. Sadly, they all end up in the wrong places. There are plenty of newer products and variations of this man-centered theme on the market. In our fallen human state, their attraction is seemingly endless.

At the end of the day, this book reminds us that we need to be constantly vigilant to look away from ourselves and toward God's word as the only faithful guide for his church. Why does that always surprise us?

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October 2006
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The Great Divide? Faithfulness vs. Relevance

By Mark Dever, J. Ligon Duncan, C. J. Mahaney, and R. Albert Mohler

In case you missed the conversation from the Together For the Gospel weblog, here it is!



ASSUMPTIONS AND PURSUITS

By Mark Dever

Having attended a number of meetings of pastors in the last few months, and having read everything from Rob Bell's *Velvet Jesus* to John MacArthur's *Fool's Gold*, I have been able to give a lot of thought to the colloquiums, conferences, alliances, and denominations that bring pastors and churches together. What is bringing pastors together? What are they grouping around?

I think the most basic practical division among evangelical pastors today does not occur between the Calvinists and the Arminians; it occurs between *those who pursue faithfulness and assume relevance* and *those who pursue relevance and assume faithfulness*. Surely, both camps will claim to value both faithfulness and relevance. But attend the conferences and read the books of the "pursuers of faithfulness," and you will hear a lot about "faithfulness in preaching the gospel" or "building your church on the Word." Attend the conferences and read the books of the "pursuers of relevance," and you will hear about "understanding *today's* generation" and "communicating to *today's* culture."

Imagine a spectrum with "faithfulness" at one end and "relevance" at the other end. Most of us would recognize that locating ourselves at either extreme is wrong. At the far end of the faithfulness side of the spectrum we have a Greek Orthodox-like church that uses untranslated Greek in the church's gatherings, as if physical proximity to the inspired language changes people like some sort of magical force. The power of the words is unrelated to people's comprehension of them. As long as the content is correct, the church can set aside all worries about relevance!

At the other end of the spectrum is a church that wants so badly to relate to the world that it begins to value what the culture values, scorn what the culture scorns, even think in the philosophical categories the culture insists we think within. They quickly point to Paul's example in 1 Cor. 9:19-23—"...I have become all things to all people..."—as their explanation for what, in the end, amounts to the erasing of all distinctiveness between them and the culture.

Of course, all of us intend to be at the middle of the spectrum, striking just the right balance between an utter faithfulness to the gospel and a piercing relevance in its presentation. I also suspect that most of us believe that we do strike this balance, or else we would alter our location.

What has struck me amidst all these conferences and colloquiums is that a church leader's or a writer's position on this particular spectrum has become more meaningful to his associations than where he sits on the Calvinist-Arminian theology spectrum. Suppose, for example, that we have four individuals:

Jake (Arminian and seeker-sensitive),
Wes (Arminian and faithful),
Phil (Calvinistic and seeker-sensitive),
and John (Calvinistic and faithful).

When it comes to the actual practice of doing ministry, it may be that John has more in common with Wes than he does with Phil, his fellow Calvinist. And it may be that Jake actually has more in common with Phil than he does with Wes, his fellow Arminian.

So Calvinistic Phil believes in the gospel and in Reformed soteriology. But he assumes that everyone understands what he means when he refers to the "gospel," and so he spends all his time and energy attempting to be creatively relevant. On the other hand, Arminian Wes, who is self-consciously anti-Calvinistic, does not assume that everyone truly understands what the gospel actually is. Therefore, he spends most of his time in the pulpit emphasizing salvation through Christ alone, penal substitutionary atonement, the need for repentance in response to the gospel, as well as things like Scripture's inerrancy and God's exhaustive knowledge of the future. Wes is even willing to admit that the gospel is offensive to the carnal man, and so he doesn't try to make excuses for it. Instead, he builds his church on this gospel by preaching it week after week.

While I would have some challenges working with either Phil or Wes, my guess is that I could more easily work with Arminian Wes, even though we disagree about the relation of the death of Christ to the non-elect.

I once took a walk with Don Carson on which he remarked, to paraphrase, that "the first generation has the gospel, the second generation assumes the gospel, and the third generation loses the Gospel."

I am concerned that too many people who understand the gospel well are lazy with it. They are compassionless. And they are not sufficiently motivated to spread it. I fear that this indictment lands on me. So pray for me and Capitol Hill Baptist Church in this regard.

On the other hand, I am concerned about those who, in the name of evangelism, alter everything in their churches' services to make the non-Christian feel more at home, all the while, ironically, assuming that everybody sufficiently understands the gospel. In other words, they don't preach the whole counsel of God, and they do not speak week after week about God's holy character, his holy wrath, his love made all the more astounding in light of his holiness, and his remarkable act of substitution on the cross. Like I already said, read their books and attend their conferences and you learn that they apparently think that knowing how to "be relevant" is the church's major challenge. Holding onto the gospel, it would seem, is comparatively easy.

Consider what might *actually* be happening to the gospel message when all our effort goes into changing the "presentation" until we successfully yield a response from carnal man. Might we not actually be at risk of changing the message itself?

Pursue faithfulness and relevance. Know that the gospel is always relevant. Never assume the gospel is safely protected or understood.

(originally posted June 17, 2006)

RELEVANCE CUSTOMER NEEDS, AND FAITHFULNESS

By J. Ligon Duncan

Mark, thanks for the thought-provoking post on relevance and faithfulness.

I was immediately reminded of David Wells' *No Place for Truth* when I read your thoughts. Remember how he starts off the preface? "those who are most relevant to this world are those who are judged most

irrelevant." This instructs us that faithfulness is always relevant, even if our contemporaries don't think so.

But, as you note, all the problems don't lie with those who discount faithfulness for the sake of relevance. Among those who emphasize the importance of faithfulness, one problem is that we sometimes confuse faithfulness with adherence to some tradition or practice from the past that holds great meaning for us, but is not inherent to the faithfulness the Bible requires for gospel ministry. Thus, we judge holding fast to this tradition or practice which has not been commanded by Scripture as faithfulness in our day. Our relevance then sinks.

The problem in this case is not our desire to be faithful, but our confusion over what faithfulness entails. True faithfulness is never a hindrance to real relevance, only to false relevance.

When we aim for relevance, on the other hand, there is the danger of thinking that being relevant requires us to upgrade God's prescribed message and methods for the work of the gospel. One problem with this tendency is that we confuse *is* and *ought*; we confuse what people want and what people need; we confuse the opinions of our contemporaries with what God tells us in his word. The seeker-approach, for instance, will always be vulnerable to the problems entailed in the prevalent consumer mindset of our culture. The phrase "the customer is always right" points to one such instance. (From the standpoint of a Christians appropriation of that idea for evangelistic purposes, there are problems with both the subject and predicate: "sinners" does not equal "customers," and they're certainly not always right, whatever we might learn from them).

That's where a famous German grocer can help us. Karl Hans Albrecht (born in 1920 in Essen, Germany) founded a discount supermarket chain and is among the richest men in the world. Albrecht says: "Customer needs have an unsettling way of not staying satisfied for very long." It is the combination of "give them what they want" and "they've changed their minds about what they want" that poses the threat of irrelevance to those most doggedly determined to be relevant. Faux relevance is trying to hit a moving target (and will generally trail the bull's-eye by about twenty years).

(originally posted June 29, 2006)

THE CUTTING EDGE HAS NO EDGE

By R. Albert Mohler

Looking back farther than I would like to remember, I recall as a seminary student reading an article by Richard John Neuhaus (he was still a Lutheran then) on the issue of relevance in ministry. In essence, Neuhaus argued that the churches determined to be relevant at all costs were destined to be the least relevant of all. Making an idol of relevance is a form of self delusion. Authentic relevance is represented by the transforming gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the faithful witness of the church throughout time.

Mark, I really appreciated your words concerning "assumptions and pursuits." I think you are absolutely right in suggesting that the big division among evangelical pastors today is between those who pursue faithfulness (assuming that faithfulness will produce relevance) and those who pursue relevance (hoping that faithfulness will emerge out of that quest). You have provided a wonderful description of how this is realized in the ministry of the local church.

So many of the issues we deal with today seem to focus on those who, in their own way, argue that we should pursue relevance by taking our churches to the "cutting edge" of ministry. If going to the cutting edge of ministry means taking every opportunity to extend a faithful witness and ministry in the name of Christ, then count me in.

Regrettably, ministering on the edge often becomes a rationale for doing something very different. Repeating that slogan, many pastors and churches, along with an array of parachurch ministries, push themselves into modes of ministry that are based more on cultural analysis and pragmatism than on a clear biblical and theological understanding of the nature and purpose of the church—and the integrity of the gospel.

The other problem with the "cutting edge" is that it really has no edge. The culture is moving at warp speed in so many different directions that absolute relevance is a mirage. Faithfulness to the gospel produces the only relevance that matters. Of course, we use forms of language and mechanisms of communication that others can understand, but the basic structure of our ministry and the substance of our beliefs are unchanged and unchanging—and still ever relevant.

Those who push themselves ever onward toward the cutting edge will find themselves falling off the edge.

(originally posted on June 30, 2006)

CROSS-CENTERED RELEVANCE

By C. J. Mahaney

Mark, Lig, and Al, your biblical insight on this topic of faithfulness and relevance is critically needed in the church today. Thank you for serving us.

The most effective way that I can serve is to post excerpts from my favorite article on this issue: "The Power of the Gospel in the Church Today" by our friend Ray Ortlund, Jr. Check out Ray's theologically informed discernment on what it means to be relevant in ministry, written with remarkable foresight nine years ago:

We might get the wrong impression from Paul, when he writes in 1 Corinthians 9:22 that he has become 'all things to all men,' that he might by all means save some. Paul was not unbending in meeting people as they were, where they were. He was widely adaptable. But we might get the wrong impression from this passage, if we read it in isolation from Paul's other statements about ministry, as if 1 Corinthians 9 were the whole of his mind. The fact is that Paul was not infinitely flexible in his outreach strategies. He had limits, and in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 he explains one of his boundaries:

"When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God, in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (RSV)"

Paul deliberately chooses ('I decided') not to meet the culturally conditioned expectations of his hearers....The most embarrassing aspect of the gospel—a crucified Savior, a loser Messiah—was the very thing Paul concentrated on. Paul is here exposing to view the controlling center of his ministry strategy. 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' was for Paul, the ultimate criterion for what we today call 'relevance.' And with his typically refreshing outlook, the apostle defined relevance not as we tend to do. For him, relevance had to be defined not in terms of meeting audience expectations but in relation to the centrality of the Cross. His preaching agenda was set by that theological center, not by his audience....

Now, what lessons may we preachers today learn from this amazing passage of Scripture?

First, a biblical preacher critiques his methods, his forms of contextualization, his adaptations to culture, his style, not primarily by the standard of culture but by the superior standard of the gospel itself....The message of the Cross must discipline and control us—indeed, limit us—even though that puts us at a disadvantage in winning an audience.

What one observes in evangelicalism today is that, while many preachers can declare allegiance to all the right doctrines, their theology makes little difference in their preaching beyond drawing the widest, most amorphous and seldom alluded-to boundaries. Their formal credentials may be in order, but the theology they affirm sits very lightly on their actual practice of ministry. It is invisible to their people. Such ministers demonstrate little doctrinal specificity or even discernment—intentionally so?—in their message and style. The biblical gospel may be formally obligatory, but it is personally uninteresting and strategically incidental. Such ministers may be exacting in their methodology, but they are vague in their theology—a curious arrangement of priorities! For Paul, such thinking would have been completely alien to his soul. For him theology reigned supreme in every aspect of his ministry. Theology for him, energized him, cheered him, emboldened him. It was his ministerial fountain of youth. One wonders how far we may drift from Pauline ministry and still retain a plausible claim to biblical authenticity in our work (*Trinity Journal* 18, NS, no. 2, Spring 1997).

I could go on and on with more great stuff from this article. I recommend every pastor obtain and read it for yourself, and apply it to the leadership and preaching of your church. Assign the article to your pastoral team or eldership and together evaluate your church in relation to the content of this article. We must do more than nod our heads as we read, we must make application to our pastoral ministry in very specific ways.

How about your pastoral reading list—is it more focused on the latest pragmatic pastoral fad than the cross of Jesus Christ? Are there more books on your desk from the business section of Barnes & Noble than there are the great works of Calvin, Edwards, Owen, and Spurgeon? Let us not be numbered among those for whom "theology...sits lightly on their practice of ministry" or pastors who are "exacting in their methodology, but vague in their theology."

May it never be said of our pastoral ministry that the gospel was "formally obligatory...but personal uninteresting and strategically incidental." Instead, by following the example of Paul, let "theology reign supreme" with the message of "Jesus Christ and him crucified." May this be the "the controlling center" of our preaching content, the structures and practices of our church and our evangelistic strategy. Then, and only then, will the church be truly relevant to our culture.

(originally posted on July 5, 2006)

October 2006

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The Greatest Danger Facing the Church

By James M. Hamilton Jr.

The greatest danger facing the church is probably not what most of us expect. We expect some sort of direct challenge from without, but it probably comes from within. In our day, it may well come from well-meaning pastors.

How could well-meaning pastors pose the greatest threat to evangelical churches today? Do they deny the truth?

No, the pastors who pose the greatest threat to the church today will confess belief in the right things. They will confess the authority and inerrancy of the Bible, that Jesus saves, and that he is the only way of salvation.

So how can these guys who mean well and make the good confession pose such a threat to the church?

THE NATURE OF THE DANGER

They are a threat because, in spite of their confession, their words and actions treat Christianity as nothing more than the best form of therapy. They treat it as self-help. They treat it as the path to better marriages, better parent-child relationships, better attitudes and performance at work, and on and on.

Christianity is about success here and now. That, at least, is what you might conclude by listening to their sermons and observing how they do church. What "works best" guides their decision-making.

But Christianity is not *primarily* about any of that. Christianity is primarily about the gospel—about a holy God, rebels who deserve his wrath, a divine Son who takes the punishment rebels deserve, and the promise of forgiveness for all who repent and believe.

Christianity is about telling this true story in the words of the Bible so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, people come to see God, the world, and themselves correctly.

Christianity is about the triune God and the two natures of Christ.

Christianity is about the Holy Spirit supernaturally causing people to be born again so that they love this story and find in it their hope and joy.

Christianity is about trusting the word of God with all our hearts and not leaning on our own understanding—or on our own ideas about what works or what is relevant.

Christianity is about longing for the return of Christ, who, when he comes, will set up his kingdom, which means that this is not our home.

Pastors who present Christianity as therapy and self-help do not present Christianity. They are like the liberals that J. Gresham Machen denounced. Machen said that people who don't believe the Bible should

be honest and stop calling themselves Christians, because they have in fact created a new religion that is not to be identified with Christianity. Similarly, the promoters of the American religion of self-help and therapeutic pop-psychology ought to be honest: they don't believe the Bible is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16).

If they believed that the Bible really does contain everything we need to be saved and to live lives that are pleasing to God, they would preach the Bible from their pulpits. Not only would they preach the Bible, trusting that God has revealed what he thinks his people need, trusting that God knows better than they do what is relevant, they would organize their churches according to the dictates of the Bible rather than the dictates of the market and the corporate world.

AVOIDING THE DANGER

So how do churches avoid winding up with a pastor who will harm them by turning Christianity into the American religion of self-help therapy?

1) Look at the biblical qualifications for men in the ministry (1 Tim 3:1–7; Tit 1:5–9), and ask pastoral candidates direct questions about whether they meet these qualifications. Ask the man's references whether he lives up to these statements. Do not assume that every candidate will meet these qualifications, and don't assume that every candidate understands these qualifications. Ask him to explain the qualifications.

2) Since the feature that most distinguishes the qualifications for an elder (pastor) from the qualifications for a deacon is that the elder be "apt to teach" (1 Tim 3:2), pay close attention to his teaching. Seek to discern whether this man "holds firmly to the trustworthy word as taught," whether he knows enough theology "to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Tit 1:9, ESV).

3) Based on what you have heard of his preaching, ask yourself these questions:

a. Was the main point of the text he was preaching the main point of his sermon? (If he did not preach a text, remove his name from consideration.)

b. Does God rest heavily upon this man? Is it evident that he fears God? Can you tell that he knows that "teachers will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1)? Does he "tremble at the Word of God" (Isa 66:2)? Is the Word of God like a burning in his bones that he cannot hold in (Jer 20:9)?

c. Does he think that his main task is the explanation of the Bible, which is useful and relevant (2 Tim 3:16), or does he think that he needs to organize the Bible according to his wisdom in order for it to be useful and relevant?

d. Is the man going to help the church understand and live on the great truths of Christianity?

e. Is the man a theologian, or is he a just a gifted speaker with a good heart?

f. Do you trust this man's ability to interpret the Bible and tell you what it means?

4) Consider also what you understand the calling of pastoral ministry to be:

a. Is pastoral ministry about "the ministry of the Word and prayer" (Acts 6:4), or is it about building a large corporation successful by worldly standards?

b. Is pastoral ministry about the power of the Spirit of God through the Word of God, or is it about

"persuasive speech" and slick presentations? (cf. 1 Cor 2:1–5).

- c. Is the great commission (Matt 28:18–20) about notching "decisions" on our belts or about making disciples who have been taught all that Jesus commanded?
- d. Are Jesus' instructions about church discipline (Matt 18:15–18) to be taken seriously or is he not going to practice church discipline since it might be bad for business?
- e. Is church membership mainly about a big number for us to report, or should church members really take the "one another's" in the New Testament seriously?
- f. Are the main tasks of pastoral ministry prayer, teaching, and shepherding souls, or is pastoral ministry more about growing the business and managing a conglomerate of campuses?
- g. What are his plans for doing evangelism?
- h. What are his plans for doing discipleship?
- i. What are his plans for praying for the members of the church?

Paul told the elders (or pastors) of the church in Ephesus that wolves would arise from within their ranks to destroy the flock (Acts 20:29–30). Likewise, Jesus said that the false prophets would be like wolves dressed in sheep's clothing (Matt 7:15). It might be hard to recognize these well-meaning pastors as wolves, but Jesus said we would know them by their fruits (Matt 7:16–20).

Let me add, not every pastor who doesn't preach the Bible and who organizes the church according to a business model rather than a biblical model is *intentionally* trying to destroy the flock. Yes, some are evil. Some are in the ministry for their own advancement. But what do we say about well meaning pastors who propagate an un-Christian, un-biblical, worldly kind of Christianity? I think the words that Jesus spoke about those who corrupted the Old Covenant are fitting: "Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matt 15:14, ESV).

OUR CALLING

Let us therefore heed the words of Jesus about what a good shepherd does—"the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Only Jesus can lay down his life for the sheep in the way he did at the cross. But his under-shepherds can lay down their lives for the sheep as they take up their crosses and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, loving, teaching, discipling, evangelizing, praying, and protecting the sheep from the wolves. No servant is greater than his master (John 15:20).

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October 2006
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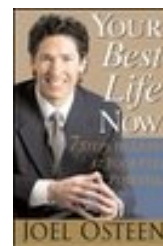
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**Book Review: *Your Best Life Now*, By Joel Osteen,
Reviewed by Greg Gilbert
Faith Words, 2004, 320 pages. \$21.99**

Someone might legitimately raise the question why we are reviewing this book. After all, the pattern here at 9Marks has been that we review Christian books.

I suppose we must be branching out now, because Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now* is decidedly not one of those. Open the book to any random page, and you will likely find some mention of God or even a reference to Scripture. Yet that is just window-dressing.



When you wring the book out, what you end up with is nothing more than the soggy old self-help pop-psychology that people have been lapping up for a generation—with the word "God" thrown in every once in a while for good measure.

It was Benjamin Franklin, not Jesus, who said, "God helps those who help themselves." That is Osteen's message, too, only it is more like "God helps those who think well of themselves." Imagine yourself to be a winner, and someday you will be a winner! Visualize yourself in a big house or a Lexus, and one day you will find yourself with both!

As Osteen puts it, "God wants to give you your own house. God has a big dream for your life" (35). The key to realizing that big dream is to follow Osteen's seven steps to living up to your full potential:

1) *Enlarge your vision*. Believe that God will make you successful—not saved, not redeemed, not forgiven. Just successful. Expect God to do good things for you. "Perhaps you're searching for a parking spot in a crowded lot," Osteen sympathizes. "Say, 'Father, I thank you for leading and guiding me. Your favor will cause me to get a good spot'" (41).

Also, expect other people to do good things for you. "I've come to expect to be treated differently," Osteen says. "I've learned to expect people to want to help me. My attitude is: I'm a child of the Most High God. My Father created the whole universe. He has crowned me with favor, therefore, I can expect preferential treatment" (39). And don't think for a second that he's kidding.

2) *Develop a healthy self-image*. After all, just like in the case of Gideon, "God sees you as strong and courageous, as a man or woman of great honor and value." So stop thinking of yourself as a loser with a bad job, a small apartment, and a lemon of a car. Start believing that you can become what God says you can become. Take Sarah, for example. It took a long time for God to fulfill his promise that she would become pregnant. Why so long? "The key to the promise coming to pass was that Sarah had to conceive it in her heart before she was able to conceive it in her physical body" (80).

And we all have promises from God, don't we? "I wonder how many great things God is trying to do in your life. We're just like Sarah. We can't conceive it. We're not in agreement with God, so we're missing out on His blessings" (80). So start believing. "God didn't make you to be average. God created you to excel." Therefore, "if you will start acting like it, talking like it, seeing yourself as more than a conqueror,

you will live a prosperous and victorious life" (82-83).

3) *Discover the power of your thoughts and words.* If you think negative thoughts all the time, how can you expect God to bless you? But "when you think positive, excellent thoughts, you will be propelled toward greatness, inevitably bound for increase, promotion, and God's supernatural blessings." "The Bible tells us that we need to 'transformed by the renewing of our mind.' If you will transform your mind, God will transform your life" (108).

4) *Let go of the past.* You can't live successfully and with "God's favor all over you" if you are bitter and disappointed all the time. "You can't unscramble eggs," so just "fill your horn with oil," like Samuel did—which Osteen apparently does not realize was to anoint the king—and be happy (175, 181)!

5) *Find strength through adversity.* "God wants you to be a winner, not a whiner" (191). So take challenges in your life head-on. Don't back down from them, because "God has promised that He will turn your challenges into stepping-stones for promotion" (217).

6) *Live to give!* Be compassionate, empathetic, and kind. God has created you to give, and whatever wealth, possessions, and success he gives you, he intends for you to use for the good of other people. Besides, if you plant seed in other people's lives, God will cause there to be a great harvest sometime down the road. So when a waiter offers to pay for your breakfast in a fancy hotel—even when the breakfast is included in the price of the room and would be free anyway—don't tell him! No, no! Better to leave the poor guy in the dark. For, as you whisper sagely to your wife, "We can't rob him of his blessing. He's planted a seed by doing something good for us. We don't want to pull his seed out of the ground and give it back." So let him spend forty bucks for no reason, because you know "that when he planted that seed in the ground, God was going to multiply it back to him." (255)

7) *Choose to be happy.* Happiness is a choice. So smile a lot. God will bless you if you do. Also, become a person of excellence. "God doesn't bless mediocrity. He blesses excellence." (282) So do you want a new car? Then wash the one you have. You want a bigger house? "Keep it looking nice. Make sure it looks like a person of excellence lives there." "If you will start taking care of what God has given you, He'll be more likely to give you something better." (283) God has great things in store for you, so start living with some enthusiasm. If you will do all these things—follow these seven steps—then "God will take you places you've never dreamed of, and you will be living your best life now!" (306)

What exactly does one say about all this? A few things, actually.

First, even if you take Osteen's book for what it really is—one more self-help manual focusing on the power of positive thinking—it simply doesn't work. Thinking highly of yourself is not a pathway to success. Most of the time, it's a pathway to having your office colleagues talk about you behind your back. You don't believe me? Then try this: The next time you go into the office, try Osteen's tactic of demanding "preferential treatment" because you're a child of God. See how far that gets you.

More importantly, though, it should be noted clearly and widely that there is nothing Christian about this book. Yes, Osteen talks about God throughout, but it is not the God of the Bible he has in mind. Osteen's God is little more than the mechanism that gives the power to positive thinking. There is no cross. There is no sin. There is no redemption or salvation or eternity. Even Jesus himself is mentioned only two or three times in the book, and one of those is as the punch-line of the story about the little tree who has a bad self-esteem until he figures out he's being turned into the cross on which Jesus is to be crucified. That story may have Jesus' name in it, but it's not a story about Jesus. It, like the rest of the book, is a story about feeling good about yourself.

If Joel Osteen wants to be the Norman Vincent Peale of the twenty-first century, he has every right to give it a shot. But he should stop marketing his message as Christianity, because it is not. You cannot simply make reference to God, quote some Scripture, call what you're saying "spiritual principles," and pass it off

as Christianity. That's the kind of thing that will have people "enlarging their vision" and "choosing to be happy" all the way to hell.

The really frightening thing is that 5 million people have bought *Your Best Life Now*, and a good portion of those have probably walked away thinking they have read the Christian gospel. They think they understand the message of the Bible, and it is *me*. My success. My self-esteem. My house. My car. My promotion.

If that is what is passing for Christianity today, then the need for true gospel preachers is more than severe. Someone needs to tell these people—even if they are not inclined to hear; even if it's over the heads of their own "pastors"—that the gospel is not about collaborating with God to make yourself successful. It is not about getting more stuff and being more prosperous. It is about God forgiving people for their sin through the death of his Son, bringing them to life from the spiritual dead, and conforming them to the image of Jesus Christ. Whether Joel Osteen preaches those truths in his church of thirty-thousand, I have no idea. But he certainly has not written about them.

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October 2006
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