Emerging Missional Movements: An Overview and Assessment of Some Implications for Mission(s)

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In contemporary interchanges in the United States on the theology of the church and praxis of ecclesiology, “missional” has become a code word for a claim to the moral high ground. But what does it mean to be genuinely missional, to have the missio Dei, or mission of God, as the core to the identity of the church? Are there varieties of missional church today? If so, what are their distinctive? Is the missional shift in ecclesiological discussion a harbinger of a missional shift in structures and practices, especially in relation to the church as it is found in the West? Or is it just another conversation that helps to sell books and to make a new group of leaders and writers prominent but that will leave little lasting change in its wake? In this article, which builds on my previous study of the topic, I suggest a fuller typology of missional church and raise critical issues that must be addressed if these emerging missional streams are to endure and to have a lasting impact.1

What does it mean to be missional? In a recent book Craig Van Gelder suggests the following four theological distinctives that mark missional churches (in italics; the comments on each in regular type are mine):

• God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world. This sending is rooted in the sending by the Father of the Son and the sending by the Father and the Son of the Spirit. This action of God takes place within the very being of the Trinity. This sending energy or force is part of God’s identity. The church is the people of God indwelt by the presence of God, and so this sending DNA is constitutive of the identity of the church. The church should not be seen as having a missions program or component. Instead, God’s mission has a church. The church in its core identity is simultaneously sent and sending.

• God’s mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God. This reign encompasses all that God has planned since the beginning for extending his rule through human beings to the entire earth, begun in Genesis 1, challenged in Genesis 3 and 11 with the declaration of human autonomy from God’s rule, pursued by God through the election of Abraham and Israel, inaugurated through Jesus’ death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit, and fulfilled in Jesus’ return and in a city in which nature and culture are blended, completed, and filled with the presence and glory of God.

• The missional church is an incarnational (versus attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context. The missional church is not just a Western church, either. In its many global and glocal expressions, the church engages its context incarnationally and contextually.

• The internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission. The church is not only the gathered church but is also the scattered church, infiltrating every sphere of society, every geographic and economic location in a community, and every node and network in an interconnected world.2

The difference in orientation between the missional church and attractional churches is fundamental, though the two outlooks are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Churches can and should be scattering and gathering. But missional churches move toward challenging the secular, individualistic, consumer-oriented, therapeutic-style, business-imitating, market-driven, building-dominated church of the West. They seek to model an alternative kingdom community oriented toward service and mission and to be the incarnation-like extension of Jesus’ ministry, values, and presence into the world. In contrast, the attractional church of the West tends to think of people as consumers, reinforcing the pervasive practice of church shopping and turning pastors into commodities paid to provide the religious goods, services, and experiences that congregants can consume.

Emerging Missional Movements: A Typology

The impulses finding expression in the missional church have given rise to a new generation of torchbearers for missional theology and practice. The most recent expressions include at least five streams, which I think will be dominant in the first decades of this century. To the four identified by Tom Sine in The New Conspirators—the Missional Stream, the eMerging Stream, the Multiethnic Stream, and the Neo-Monastic Stream—I add a fifth, the Multiplying Stream.3 I identify each one briefly, giving examples of leading spokespersons and often a representative publication.

The Missional Stream. Influenced by the writings of Lesslie Newbigin,4 a group of Christian scholars founded the Gospel and Our Culture Network and began calling for a missional and prophetic engagement with Western culture. This stream’s books The Church between Gospel and Culture and especially The Missional Church have stimulated missionaly oriented renewal in many mainline churches.5 Its leaders include Darrell Guder (Princeton Theological Seminary), George Hunsberger (Western Theological Seminary), Lois Barrett (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary), Craig Van Gelder (Luther Seminary), and Alan Roxburgh (The Missional Network), each of whom has written additional books building on the foundation of The Missional Church that have deepened and extended the influence of this network or stream.6

This missional stream has influenced the other four streams of this typology in a profound way, though the influence has not always been direct.7 At the same time, different ecclesiasti-
cal traditions are adapting missional-church ideas to their own traditions, creating a new synthesis that both reinforces their tradition and also expands it in somewhat new directions. The more the traditions lean toward conservative and evangelical perspectives, the more the missional emphasis is on evangelism. The more the traditions lean toward mainline and liberal perspectives, the more the emphasis is on justice and the betterment of society. Some observations:

- While conservative evangelicals emphasize attractive strategies for evangelism, they are becoming more focused on how to extend evangelism through their members into the world as a result of the missional conversation. Nevertheless, their focus remains firmly on the priority of evangelism in the mission of God.

- Church-growth-oriented evangelicals integrate their emphasis on church growth with an emphasis on every member being a missionary and every social and geographic location and network being a mission field. These groups, influenced by Australians Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost (coauthors of the influential book The Shaping of Things to Come), are also doing more to come to terms with the increasing social marginalization and political pressures the church is facing. They go beyond conservative evangelicals by emphasizing holistic ministry and impact, but they still maintain a very strong accent on church growth as a crucial result.

- Mainline groups tend to emphasize the compassion, relief, and justice aspects of the mission, rooted in a theology of the kingdom of God that is open to a strong focus on social activism. These traditions are being influenced by the missional conversation toward more intentional witness in the world, but maintain their social and systemic focus.

- Academic leaders press the theological agenda of developing an adequate theology of the Trinity and of the missio Dei as the root of any and every particular expression of missional ecclesiology and practice in the world. These leaders also emphasize God’s agency as primary and have worked to develop this idea in richly theological directions. They keep the activists in the broader missional conversation from becoming human centered and exclusively pragmatic. At the same time, as the primary initiators of the missional conversation, they have needed to respond to the questions of practitioners, supplying models and principles of practice in order to be heard more broadly and to have an impact on how churches and Christians actually live.

The Emerging Stream. Since the early 1990s, a group first of young British and now increasingly U.S. and Australian leaders have engaged postmodern culture. They are relational and experiential, involved in the arts, more inclined toward narrative theology than propositional theology. They are also focused on local and incarnational expressions of mission. Leaders include Brian McLaren (author of the initial influential book A New Kind of Christian), Tony Jones (blogger and theologian in residence at Solomon’s Porch, a church in Minneapolis led by Doug Pagitt), Dan Kimball (pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California, and author of They Like Jesus But Not the Church), and Spencer Burke (creator of the influential blog site TheOoze). Separately, a more Reformed and less theologically radical stream of emerging churches stands as a case by itself. Mark Driscoll’s Mars Hill Church in Seattle and the Acts 29 national network of churches is an expression of this Neo-Reformed tributary. Telling its story adequately and assessing its importance would require a separate article. Initially part of the Emergent group of leaders, Driscoll helped to propel all things “emerging” into prominence.

The emerging church has fragmented into three streams with different trajectories: Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists.

- Relevants are theologically conservative but culturally innovative and liberal. Dan Kimball and Mark Driscoll would tend to embrace this stance.

- Reconstructionists are seeking not just to redefine strategy, but to redefine ecclesiology, often emphasizing the church as alternative community in a more Anabaptist direction, or the church as a community being restored to its biblical roots as illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles. Darrel Guder (Princeton Seminary) and George Hunsberger (Western Seminary) have championed the more Anabaptist direction, and Michael Frost (Morley College, Sydney) and Alan Hirsch (Forge International) have championed combining missional incarnational ideas with church growth and church multiplication ideas, emphasizing restoring the church to its roots as pictured in Acts.

- Revisionists are rethinking the basic theology and ethics of the church, using more postmodern, socially constructionist epistemologies and operate with greater awareness of issues of social location and social power. Brian McLaren (author and speaker), Tony Jones (theological blogger), and Nadia Bolz-Weber (House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver) would tend to champion this approach. This revisionist stream has been the most frequent object of criticism by conservative evangelicals. I acknowledge that the revisionists are asking fundamentally important questions but hold that they are also drifting away from primary Protestant and evangelical understandings of atonement, the cross, and the authority of Scripture.

The Multiethnic Stream. A growing number of multiethnic, urban-oriented churches are embracing a Gospel based on the theology of the kingdom that sees evangelism, justice, and reconciliation as core to the Gospel. Leaders include John Perkins and Wayne Gordon (coleading the Community Christian Development Association), Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson (authors of the Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture), Erwin McManus (Mosaic Church in Los Angeles), Brenda Salter McNeil (Seattle Pacific University), and David Gibbons (founding pastor of New Song Church in Los Angeles). Though they can overlap somewhat, two smaller streams are tributaries to the multiethnic stream.

- The tributary that I call Community and Leadership Development Churches focuses on developing leaders from within the community who contribute toward the spiritual, economic, social, and physical growth and well-being of their neighborhood and community. They pursue activities as diverse as preaching the Gospel, growing the church, rehabbing and selling homes,
starting businesses, launching health clubs and health clinics, and running drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers. John Perkins and Wayne Gordon (cofounders of the Community Christian Development Association), and the late Glen Kehrlein (Circle Urban Ministries in Chicago) have been key leaders for this tributary.

- Multiracial churches focus on issues of racial reconciliation. These churches, often located in urban settings near universities and businesses, frequently consist of young urban professionals. They tend to choose locations where they can have some community development ministry and can easily attract diversity. Mostly educated and middle class and consciously focused on diversity issues, these congregations are often predominantly Asian American and white American, though some of them focus more on the African American/Anglo divide in society. David Anderson (Bridgeway Community Church in Maryland), Mark DeYmaz (Mosaic Church, Arkansas), and David Gibbons are key leaders in this tributary.13

**The Neo-Monastic Stream.** More diverse in age and ethnicity than the other four streams, the Neo-Monastic stream is presently being fueled by the growing interest of young people in global justice issues. For instance, Scott Bessenecker, in *The New Friars,*14 deals with the rapid increase of youth movements presently being fueled by the growing interest of young people in global justice issues. For instance, Scott Bessenecker, in *The New Friars,*14 deals with the rapid increase of youth movements focused on more radical and communal involvement with the poor, such as among the communities connected to the Cairo garbage dumps. These groups take their inspiration from past monastic movements. They are forming communities that adopt a rule of life and often live among the poor. Leaders include Shane Claiborne (The Simple Way in Philadelphia), John Hayes (Inner Change in London), and Pete Greig (24/7 prayer and boiler rooms in the United Kingdom, United States, and spreading elsewhere).15

The main differentiation to be made between various expressions of this stream derives from when they were founded.

- Several communities were founded in the 1950s as part of a post–World War II rethinking of the relation between Christ and culture, including the L’Abri community (founded in Switzerland in 1955, L’Abri had significant impact in the United States) and Reba Place Fellowship (founded in Evanston, Illinois, in 1957).
- Many communities were founded around the time of the Jesus Movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. Most of these communities no longer exist, but the Jesus People USA (Chicago) and the Word of God community (Ann Arbor, Michigan, and elsewhere through the Sword of the Spirit association of churches) are two examples of communities that live by a rule of life, share possessions in common, and seek to be engaged in the neighborhoods that surround them. They have survived and at points even thrived. The movements founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s tended to suffer from skepticism toward previous leaders and earlier movements. Often they were unable to accept lessons that leaders of earlier movements had learned through experience and could have shared, contributing to a high level of unsustainability and failure.
- Newer communities—especially those connected with the 2004 meeting in Durham, North Carolina, where an agreed-upon rule of life entitled the “Twelve Marks” was written for use by new monastic communities— are not tied to a particular model of sharing possessions and purses but are driven by a desire to create various forms of community and to be engaged in significant ministries of compassion. Some emphasize community more, some emphasize social engagement more. The community oriented ones are often more pastoral, sectarian, and stable; the social engagement oriented communities are often more immersed, prophetic, and fragile.16 Rutba House and Simple Way are two examples of this newer wave of communities, and their leaders, Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, have been the most widely influential within the movement. These communities have tended to be far more open to learning from leaders of earlier movements, and that openness has contributed to greater potential for longevity and sustainability.

**The Multiplying Stream.** This stream displays considerable continuity with the seeker church (Bill Hybels and Willow Creek Church) and purpose-driven church (Rick Warren and Saddleback Church) movements, though many in this stream define themselves in opposition to their “parents.” More than the seeker church movement, the Multiplying Stream focuses on multiplying congregations through reproducing leaders. Though many in this group demonstrate theological continuity with traditional evangelical theology, they are influenced by postmodern culture in their understandings of leadership, team, and the power of the Internet for communicating ideas and distributing resources. For example in relation to team,

New Life Church in Chicago (led by Mark Jobe, one church with seventeen campuses) gathers its many site preachers weekly to prepare Sunday messages in community. Also, although some of these groups are trying to grow megachurches through videocasting their services (such as Lifechurch.tv in Oklahoma City), many are emphasizing that small is better by focusing on the multiplication of churches and sites rather than attracting people to a single church location. Leaders, among many others, include Craig Groeschell (Lifechurch.tv), Mark Driscoll (Mars Hill, Seattle), and Dave and Jon Ferguson (Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois).

These multiplying movements have only recently become connected to the missional conversation, but Alan Hirsch (Forge), Michael Frost (Morley College, Australia), Hugh Halter (Missio in Denver), and several others have been important for bringing missional theology, vision, and agenda into these multiplying movements. For instance, the Exponential Conference, held in 2011, with 5,000 church planters in attendance and shaped by leaders of the largest U.S. multisite churches, was focused entirely on becoming missional, featuring several of the most influential voices in the missional church conversation. In the subsequent
two years, the conference has grown in attendance (5,400 church planters in 2013, with 40,000 more connected via webcast) and maintained a strong focus on missional leaders and models. Three tributaries join to form this last major stream.

- Church planters form the largest number of leaders, with church planting emphases and church planting resources and conferences increasing in number and impact for many denominations and groups. Many of these leaders are being influenced toward becoming missional through the largest church planter conferences, such as Exponential Conference (www.exponential.org) and Verge (www.vergenetwork.org).
- Multisite leaders are an influential group within this larger stream because they have developed a model and methods for growing their churches through the multiplication of sites and leaders. The multisite, multileader model avoids some of the barriers to building large megachurches, such as funding for immense buildings, finding land, and negotiating zoning issues. Younger leaders embrace multisite models since they provide oversight, mentoring, and resources for planting new works. In other words, they provide a context of church planting “with the training wheels on,” as some younger planters like to say.
- Leaders embracing a vision of exponential growth call for reproducing not just churches but networks of churches through the leadership of “apostolic” people. These leaders cast a compelling vision of networks, attract younger leaders, are gifted church planters themselves, and communicate well. Neil Cole (Cell Church) and Dave Ferguson (New Thing Network) are just two examples.17

Implications for Mission(s)

What are the implications of these fresh expressions of church and mission for missionaries, mission agencies, sending denominations, and sending congregations? What new forms of mission must be developed? How can mission boards attract the most creative emerging leaders to work with them in cross-cultural mission?

Emerging leaders are flowing to the fresh expressions of church and of mission, but they are generally not as avid to serve with established mission boards and agencies. Established (or perhaps “legacy”) boards and agencies tend to attract young people who have grown up in conservative churches, attended Christian schools, and too often are somewhat isolated from the most creative expressions of church and mission today. Mission boards, however, that are able to attract the brightest among emerging leaders are the ones that will have the creative capacity to reinvent and renew mission thinking and practice for the furtherance of the Gospel in the coming fifty years. At present, even the word “missionary” and the image evoked by traditional mission definitions of their own background in evangelical churches, mission agencies, denominations, and parachurch movements. The stance of being in reaction against a circumscribed evangelical past is met frequently within all the missional streams, but it is especially clear in Revisionist Stream leaders (see, for further explanation, Deep Church, by Jim Belcher).18 At present, these leaders from an evangelical background are exercising a disproportionate level of influence throughout the missional conversation, and generally their outlook regarding the role of historic mission boards and leaders is reserved or negative.

In addition to challenging mission boards (which need, where appropriate, to embrace the newer missional insights and language), I wish to challenge the emerging missional leaders in the various streams to seek for balance in their reaction to their past. Can new syntheses that transcend past and present debates be found that will better prepare mission boards and their leaders and missional church leaders and the various emerging missional streams to collaborate with God in his mission in the world?

Overcoming dichotomies. In the past century, evangelicals overemphasized verbal proclamation and underemphasized deeds of love and signs of God’s presence and power. Nineteenth-century evangelicals, in contrast, wed words and deeds well (though they were not necessarily attentive to signs of God’s power). Under the influence especially of Latin American evangelicals Samuel Escobar and René Padilla at Lausanne in 1974, evangelicals in general have been gradually recovering integration of word and deed (if not of sign). Contemporary missional leaders, sometimes in response to their evangelical past, tend to overemphasize acts of compassion and mercy and underemphasize boldly challenging people to enter the kingdom and trust and follow Jesus. Only the Multiplying Stream avoids this tendency, but even the Multiplying Stream can be seen to jettison the word “evangelism” so as to escape its historical baggage.

We need to get beyond the evangelism/social action (or word/deed) dichotomy, rooted as it is in Enlightenment polarities such as spiritual/material, sacred/secular, and private/public, and to embrace an integrated holism in which the church lives its faith and shares its life instead of treating these two as though they were separable, dichotomized activities. Mother Teresa, with her prayer to be given “souls” (of the dying) and “saints” (of the serving) as she cradled the dying in her arms, resonates with this generation more than does Billy Graham.

Missional churches and leaders that proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom of God in word, deed, and sign toward the transformation of whole people in their whole social context will have far more cachet with the emerging generation than will evangelistic groups that distinguish strongly between “saving souls,” “healing bodies,” and “redeeming communities.” More important, groups that are more holistic in outlook will also be more biblically balanced and therefore more holistic in impact.

Relating to culture. Evangelicals in the past century and missional movements in the present century tend to embrace monolithic views toward whatever is the dominant culture.19 In the past century, evangelicals embraced the rationalistic and empirical orientation of modernity, seeking to prove the existence of God and to develop logico-propositional formulations of the Gospel, defenses of the faith, and systems of theology that were put forward as being as authoritative as the Scriptures. Conversely, some contemporary missional leaders show themselves able to...
embrace a philosophical postmodernism that dissolves truth into experience, word into imagination, and conversion into community. At times, some Multiplying Stream leaders pursue a pragmatism that is more reflective of philosophical perspectives articulated by Richard Rorty than they might realize or intend.\textsuperscript{20} Contemporary missional leaders need to reflect more deeply and with discernment on the culture in which they minister and the degree to which that culture has coopted their paradigms and practices.

Many religious conversations about culture have tended to be monolithic, one-size-fits-all, rather than being discerning and responding to specific cultural trends and practices on a case-by-case basis. Rather than responding to cultures monolithically—whether they be modern, postmodern, or post-Christendom—we need to embrace a nuanced and integrated vision of the ways Christianity and cultures interpenetrate.\textsuperscript{21} Missional stream leaders such as Guder, Hunsberger, and Van Gelder have understood this necessity, but others have yet to address adequately the need to relate to cultures in discerning ways.

Seeking epistemological humility. Twentieth-century evangelicals often claimed epistemological certainty about their objectivity and grasp of the truth, extending at times to minute theological and subcultural distinctives and details. Such certainty was often the basis for splitting churches and movements. But no person has a God’s-eye view of reality or of the Scriptures. In contrast, some missional and emerging leaders, especially emerging revisionists, embrace a theological and ethical relativism and a thoroughgoing perspectivalism that undermines any passionate conviction about even the most basic truths of the Gospel (e.g., that God’s kingdom has been decisively inaugurated, that Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins, that he was raised bodily for new life, and that Scripture is an authoritative word for all times and all peoples in all cultures). At the same time, many of the missional movements, including some Reconstructionists and Neo-Monastics, tend to underemphasize propositional kinds of truth and overemphasize ethical obedience to Jesus as the primary critical mark of faithfulness to the Gospel.

We need to get beyond the conservative/liberal split regarding epistemology that pervaded the church in the West during the twentieth century. George Lindbeck, in his influential book The Nature of Doctrine, characterized this dichotomy as the contrast between the cognitive propositional approach of the conservatives and the experiential expressivist approach of the liberals.\textsuperscript{22} Instead, we need not only to recognize with humility the particularity of the cultural linguistic worlds in which we live and interpret and understand truth, but also to embrace a confidence in the canon of Scripture that can guide our interaction with our tradition and shape our communicative truth so that our word is not just true for us alone but is truly a word for the world.

Affirming basic convictions. Twentieth-century evangelicals emphasized Jesus’s birth, death, and resurrection, drawing on the Pauline epistles for their interpretation, while minimizing their focus on Jesus’ life, teachings, and ethics in the formation of their theology. Conversely, missional church leaders today—sometimes in reaction to their conservative past—tend to emphasize Jesus’ proclamation of God’s kingdom, his ethical teachings, and his missional lifestyle, sometimes giving minimal emphasis to Jesus’ death and resurrection and to the Pauline and historic theological interpretation of these events. We need to get beyond the Paul-versus-Synoptic-Gospels dichotomy that is prevalent in emerging and missional church debates, and to embrace an overarching eschatological framework that integrates the Christ of Paul with the Jesus of the Synoptics. Emerging missional movements have wondered how the proclaimer (Jesus) became the proclaimed, and how a person (again Jesus) became so many propositions. They want to recover his fresh and radical commitment to forging a community in which he restored God’s rule to the blind, lame, poor, least, and lost. They wonder how a church that proclaims Jesus and his death and resurrection seems in its life and ethic and in its forms of mission to look so little like Jesus. The doctrinal language about Jesus has become for many younger leaders dead language because it seems so often not to result in lives that look like Jesus.

As we recover the ethics and mission of Jesus, we need, however, to stay rooted in the profound theological and eschatological reflections on the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection that especially Paul explored for us. Let us not forget that Paul and Jesus lived in very similar ways, with the result that Paul’s proclamation about Jesus was never severed at all from his call to live like Jesus, counting others better than himself, looking to their interests, reaching needy people everywhere. Similarly, Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom always looked forward to his death and resurrection to ransom the world and to inaugur-ate the life of the age to come. Both Jesus and Paul preached a radical Gospel of the rule of God, inaugurated in Jesus, carried on by the Holy Spirit, and fulfilled in the return of Christ. This eschatological lens helps us integrate Jesus and Paul, story and proposition, life and word. We need healthy theological integration of soteriology and eschatology. We need to work out our salvation on the basis of the eschatological work that God has uniquely accomplished in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and in the gift of the Spirit. These are all end-times events that have been inaugurated in the middle of God’s anticipated rule over all of history.

Renewing ecclesiology. In recent decades evangelicals, influenced by church-growth thinking, have emphasized attractional ministries based on substantial resources, paid clergy, and access to buildings and land. In contrast, missional leaders tend to emphasize incarnational forms of ministry, no professional clergy, and the church scattered rather than gathered. Here missional leaders are providing a way forward for all of us. We need to get beyond our pervasive Christendom forms and patterns of church, with their emphasis on buildings, political influence, resource control, cultural imposition, Western leadership styles, and Western expertise. In place of these we must seek to become a movement of exponential growth, led by local apostolic and evangelistic leaders filled by the Holy Spirit.

Mission leaders in every generation need to come to terms with their own inevitable obsolescence, with the necessity of devising lower-cost models of mission that put power in the hands of local leaders sooner rather than later, and with fostering multiplying movements of cells and churches under the direction Most younger leaders are concerned that mission boards and leaders are not flexible enough in their thinking and planning.
ultimately of the Holy Spirit. The new models called for will not just emphasize the scattered church but will also suggest new forms for the gathered church that are not dependent on the West or on immense resources and elaborate buildings. In addition, we need some mission leaders to engage with the accelerating marginalization of the Western church in Western society so as to show a new future in which the Western church will operate without all the economic and political power it has previously held. We need to become less supportive and aligned with the powers that be and more adept at prophetic engagement. This lesson from the Neo-Monastic movement is drawing the attention of many young people today and is modeling biblical forms of alternative community that can survive and thrive in situations in which the church finds itself marginalized.

At the same time, missional movement thinkers can too easily embrace a naive Restorationism, claiming an ability to foster forms of church that skip back over centuries of diverse cultural, linguistic, and theological traditions that necessarily have shaped the church and contextualized the Gospel in diverse and often good ways. We cannot erase twenty centuries of the Holy Spirit’s (and the enemy’s) work in and through the church—and we ought not to want to. Instead, we must seek to reappropriate the diversity of ecclesial traditions and practices and to reorient them in accord with a core missional identity, leading to a multiplicity of contextualized missional expressions and impact. Indeed, God’s mission does not have a one-size-fits-all restorationist church that can be cut whole cloth from the early pages of the Book of Acts. Instead, God’s mission has a multitude of churches from almost every cultural-linguistic family on earth, each hammering out theology and practice on the anvil of its unique physical and cultural environment.

As mission board and emerging missional stream leaders together pursue these syntheses, instead of living in the inherited dichotomies set up by our modernist past and our overreactions to that past, they have the opportunity to collaborate with God in renewing our evangelistic witness and our missional impact. Mission leaders can anticipate a harvest of laborers raised up from among the cream of the crop of emerging adults. As we pursue an integral holism of word, deed, and sign, as we nuance our responses to the cultures with which we are engaged, as we combine epistemological humility with canonical confidence, adopt an eschatological (kingdom) lens in our soteriology, and embrace a contextualized diversity of more missional and more modest models of church structure, resources, and power, the potential for a new Reformation of the church in which the ministry of the Gospel is truly carried forward by all the people of God becomes ever more imaginable. May God make it so!

Notes

7. Seeking to trace this influence, Van Gelder and Zscheile have suggested a typology in Missional Church in Perspective based on the way different groups imagine God’s presence to work in and through the church. Several of the people the authors describe (e.g., Alan Hirsch; personal conversation) do not agree fully with Van Gelder and Zscheile’s characterizations of them.
11. See, for instance, D. A. Carson, Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), and Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, Why We’re Not Emergent: by Two Guys Who Should Be (Chicago: Moody, 2008).
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