

Why I Am Not Missional

by

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While doing research for my book on the resurgence of the social gospel in evangelical circles,¹ I kept bumping into this peculiar word *missional*. Some writers use it to generate greater concern for reaching the impoverished and suffering elements of humanity.

Despite the praiseworthy intentions of those writers, bad theology seemed attached to *missional*. The term has a distinctly liberal origin.²

It may seem unusual for a missionary with decades of service to question such a pervasive concept, assumed to be orthodox, especially since we spent much of that time among the rural populace in Latin America.

The dubious theology appears to revolve around one theme: A redefining of the mission of the church by adding elements not found in the Great Commission.³

The core

As this fad evolves, the term *missional* is becoming increasingly ambiguous. Yet like all ambiguities, it has a core sense around which the secondary meanings revolve. Dangers within it need to be addressed.

Missional does not mean *commitment to missions*. A church that evangelizes and sends out missionaries is doing missions but is not necessarily *missional*.

The core denominator, as I found it in various publications, is this: For a church to be *missional*, it must be committed to adding material benefits of some kind to unbelievers as part of its understanding of the church's mission. In this view, the church is not doing its job fully, unless it is meeting the material needs of humanity equally with the spiritual.

This may include poverty alleviation, social justice causes or other material benefits. If this assumption is not the core value in *missional*, then no reason exists for another word than *missions*, or *evangelism*.

Such a view of missions is just plain false doctrine. Not only false, but ultimately dangerous to the spiritual health of the church.

Therein lies the problem I have with the term *missional*. According to the Great Commission, the church has one mission only: Make disciples, plus nothing. The means to the end is equally clear: Preach, teach and baptize ... period.⁴

Compassion, yes

In most literature where *missional* is used, the writers extol the importance of compassion on suffering humanity and contend that Christians should be motivated to help in material ways.

That is absolutely true. It is also irrelevant.

In the act of making disciples, we inevitably encounter suffering humanity. Christian compassion compels us to help when we can. Such aid, however, must never be included in the definition of the church's purpose in the world.

The moment we add *anything* to the definition of the mission of the church other than making disciples, we generate a false doctrine. This is true even if we are personally called to mercy ministries, such as medical work or poverty alleviation. Such ministries are laudable, frequently necessary or even commanded. Yet these must never define the mission of the church.

The apostles were not missional

The obvious danger in adding to the mission of the church is that it risks diluting gospel proclamation into an also-ran. In the declaration of the Great Commission by Christ and the modeling of it by the apostles, we notice they were careful to put nothing at all on a par with the proclamation of the word of God. By the standards of some today, the apostles would be regarded as unbalanced in their understanding of missions.

The term *missional* therefore seems to be more of a distortion and weakening of the Great Commission than a fulfillment of it.

I have noticed other dubious theologies associated with *missional*, such as *kingdom now*, *social gospel* and *creation-redemption*.⁵

Key concern

My concern is that the word *missional* may inadvertently plant seeds in the minds of the unwitting and germinate errors that distort the mission of the church or even the gospel itself.

As the fad continues and the term evolves, *missional* may lose its dubious associations. When I become convinced the term represents orthodoxy, I may include it in my vocabulary. At that time, however, I will evaluate whether the word needed to exist in the first place.

Those who liked this essay may also like our book,
[The New Evangelical Social Gospel: A critique](#)

¹ [The New Evangelical Social Gospel: A critique.](#) Also available in [Kindle format.](#)

² For a good explanation of the origins of the word, see <http://www.9marks.org/journal/what-world-missional-church>

³ The President of New Geneva Seminary, Colorado Springs, notes this also. *“...the term “missional” has been co-opted and influenced by a number of theological views that are contrary to an Evangelical/Reformed view. ...missional is a combination of classical liberalism, which promotes a social gospel; Neo-Orthodoxy, ...and the hermeneutics popularized in the New Perspective on Paul. These influences are so deeply rooted in the term “missional” that it makes it counterproductive to use it in churches that do not affirm these views; it has the effect of creating cognitive and theological dissonance.”* Dr. Dominic Aquila, July, 2009, Aquila Report

⁴ Mt.28:19-20

⁵ A fuller explanation of these is found in my book, [The New Evangelical Social Gospel: A critique.](#)