

IT'S TIME! ...an Urgent Call to Christian Mission

*A mission study based upon the book by Daniel Vestal, Coordinator,
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IT'S TIME!... FOR CHURCHES TO FULFILL THEIR GOD-GIVEN MISSION

Lesson 3

Genuine fellowship is grounded upon a negative; it is grounded in what men lack. Precisely when we realize that we are all sinners, do we in reality perceive that we are all brothers. (Carl Barth)

Introduction

- Carl Sandburg was once asked, "What is the ugliest word in the human language?" Sandburg strained in his deliberation and finally answered with these words, "The ugliest word in the human language is...exclusive."
- How does this relate to being a missional church?
- How do we take this common experience that we call church and mold it with a common purpose to achieve that uncommon experience of God's ideal for us as his church?
- In essence, the question begs itself, "**What are the marks of a missional church?**"
- *Missional churches are ones that see their purpose for existence as incarnating the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and thus extending the mission of God. (Vestal, p. 19)*

1. Marks of a Missional Church - Acts 2:42-47

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

- What are the marks of a missional church as pointed out in this classic text?
 1. They devoted themselves to the fellowship.
 - These early believers gave themselves to the task of common life, of common community, to the fellowship.
 2. They devoted themselves to breaking of the bread.
 3. They were all filled with awe
 - With that awe came miraculous signs and wonders.
 - With that awe all believers were together and had everything in common.
 - With that awe came the voluntary selling of everything for the common good.
 - With that awe came the gift of inclusion, not the sin of exclusion.
- It has often been said that the hardest thing for the church today to unlearn is exclusiveness.
- Our world and its value system constantly stress to us the sin of exclusion.

- You have to be “correct” to be accepted.
- You have to have just the right political correctness, just the right social correctness, just the right educational correctness, and sadly today in many churches, you have to have just the right theological correctness.
- If you are not correct—you are isolated and excluded.
- Harold Kushner makes the point that “our emphasis today on personal independence and individualism has left our society with an atmosphere of lonely competitiveness, whereby we see others as rivals or our enemies.”
- Joel Block, the noted psychologist, stated in a survey that he conducted that only one in five Americans had a real friend with whom they can confide.
- The world’s value system has geared itself in such a way that this cycle will never be broken.
- Hence, the need for true community exists within the church.
- Hence, the need expresses itself for the church to model true acceptance.
- Hence, the need for the church to model true forgiveness is mandated.
- No one ever has to be lonely again.
- As one has said, “When I became a Christian, I found the boat in which I thought I was very alone, to actually be very crowded.”
- A cord of three strands is not easily broken.
- We need each other in community.
- What we hold together *in common* is far greater than that which will ever separate us and far greater than anything we could ever hold in difference.
- So what will we do with this experience that we call church?
- Will we dare to be different?
- Will we dare to commit ourselves to practicing our love inside and outside the church until we get it down perfectly?

“People are looking for imperfect people who will not quit practicing until they get their love down perfectly.” (George Mason, Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas)

- Will we bind our lives together so that the cords will never be broken?
- Beginning the Journey
- How does a church move from being a mission-minded church to being a missional church exemplifying the characteristics set forth in Acts 2?
- “We become the missional church by moving with the cloud and following the fire.” (David Hughes, Pastor, First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, NC)
- “Knowing where you are going is the first step to getting there.” (Ken Blanchard)
- In other words, we must be very *intentional* in knowing our destination in becoming the missional church.

2. The Journey

- We must be very intentional in knowing our destination in becoming the missional church.
- But the journey will be filled with challenges along the way because, in essence, we are becoming the incarnational presence of Jesus Christ as we journey together.
- In reality, isn't it true that all "mission" is incarnational?
- "Participating in the mission of God means leaving our place of security, to travel to the place where others are. This is the heartbeat of incarnation... Mission is always in the direction of the other, away from ourselves." (Michael Riddell)
- Perhaps that is why so many churches today cannot accept the call to be missional.
- They are so consumed with themselves that they cannot truly see the lost and dying world right outside their door.
- But, in reality, this call is not optional.
- We are indeed to be the transforming presence of Jesus Christ in our world every day.

3. The Contexts of a Missional Church

The Cultural Context

- The United States was established as a "nation of Immigrants."
- We now find ourselves in a time that Vestal describes as "post-Christian." (p. 19)
- A study completed by the Barma Group in 2009 indicated that "half of Americans believe the Christian faith no longer has a lock on people's hearts."
- What were once "foreign religions" and foreign faiths" are no longer so...they are here
- The Contexts of a Missional Church

The Denominational Context

- In the past, when most people determined their theological and moral points of view, the alternatives from which they chose were exclusively of Christian options - e.g., the Methodist point of view, the Baptist perspective, Catholic teaching, and so forth.
- Today, Americans are more likely to pit a variety of non-Christian options against various Christian-based views.
- This has resulted in an abundance of unique worldviews based on personal combinations of theology drawn from a sampling of world religions including Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam as well as secularism.
- Further, a study by the Barna Group in 2008 indicated that a majority of adults now believe that there are various biblically legitimate alternatives to participation in a conventional church.
- All of this, and we have not even discussed fragmentation, realignment, and redefinition regarding "established" denominations.
- The Contexts of a Missional Church

The Congregational Context

- Vestal described ten missional trends directly related to congregational life.
- Hopkins examined these trends and provides a good analysis/summary.

- That summary essentially describes the difference between an ***institutional congregation*** and a ***missional congregation***.
- Institutional congregations focus on ***programs***, missional congregations focus on following Jesus as a ***lifestyle***, not just on Sunday but every day.
- Institutional churches have a ***delegated*** approach to missions; missional congregations have a ***participatory*** approach to missions.
- Institutional churches have what Daniel Vestal calls a “***fragmented***” approach to the gospel– I might use the word “selective;” Missional churches understand that Jesus had a ***holistic*** approach to ministry.
- Institutional churches assume a ***prescriptive*** posture in missions; missional churches understand the importance of *dialogue* in doing missions and ministry.

4. The Text for a Missional Church

“I believe the only way the Church of the 21st century will have any impact in the culture is to recover the wonder and awe, the romance and passion, the amazement and indescribable joy of the biblical message.” (Daniel Vestal, p. 22)

- For most of us who are professing Christians, the foundation for our witness is the Gospel itself.
- So the fundamental question is, “What is the Gospel?”
- Vestal cites John 3:16 and Luke 4:18-19 as exemplary statements related to the question.
- Another perspective relates to how we perceive the Kingdom of God.

Vestal suggests another scriptural reference for guidance in pinpointing our understanding of “the Gospel”:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:16-21)

- Paul says that God’s mission is to reconcile the world– every human being– to reconcile every person to God through Christ.
- When that happens to us, when we are reconciled to God through Christ, Paul says, there are three effects in our lives.
 1. Forgiveness: or to use Paul’s words, our trespasses are no longer held against us (v. 19).
 2. Renewal: the old self, the old life, passes away, and you become a new creature, a new creation (v. 17).
 3. We become partners in God’s mission.

And this partnership, our involvement in God’s mission, is so significant that Paul describes it in four ways in two verses (vv.19-20).

1. We are ambassadors for Christ, a metaphor which suggests that we share Christ's authority and responsibility for carrying out God's mission.
 2. God is making this divine appeal "through us"— we are the agent, the means, by which God's mission is to be carried out in our world.
 3. God has entrusted to us the **message** of reconciliation; it is our task to spread the message.
 4. God has given us the **ministry** of reconciliation; it is our job to carry out that ministry.
- There is not much in any of that which has to do with being **institutional** or **maintaining the status quo**.
 - So, if Christians and churches are going to be missional, if we are going to return to what the New Testament says, if Christians are going to move beyond status quo thinking, and if churches are going to move beyond institutional thinking, what would that entail?
 - Please refer again to the ten congregational trends identifies on pages 21-22.

Conclusion

- Let's begin to apply the term missional to our church.
- First, a definition of being missional as a church:
 - It is the church carrying out the Great Commission in the manner that best uses the capabilities, cultural uniqueness and resources of its members.
 - It may be in an organized, purposeful endeavor or it may be the collective results of its members as they put their faith to work individually.
 - Christ gave us no directions for how to carry out the commission...he simply said do it.
 - He gifts us in ways that will allow us to choose the how in response to the cultural situation in the time in which we live and the milieu in which the church is working.
 - That may mean that we let go of cherished beliefs and practices.
 - We must pay attention to the fact that neither the phrase "we've always done it this way" nor the phrase "we've never done it that way before" is in the Bible— or even the liturgy of the early church.
 - What worked in the past may not and, in this age, probably won't work in the future.
 - Definition of insanity: **doing what you have always done and expecting something to be different**.
 - I think that the pastor's role is to **help** the church discover and do *God's* will— not the pastor's will, not the Church Council's will, not the will of the Deacon Fellowship, but *God's* will.
 - Thus, we should be committed **not** to maintaining the status quo or ensuring our own comfort.
 - More rightly, as a missional congregation, we should be open to the **probability** that God is going to lead us into places we on our own could never conceive of going.
 - **We want to find the mission God has for the First Baptist Church Radford, and we want to carry out that mission in the name and love of Jesus Christ.**

Missional ministry is more about living out one's calling than participating in a program, more about a journey than a destination. Missional ministry is more about saving the lost and growing disciples than drawing a crowd. Missional ministry is more about being on mission than just doing "missions." The world has changed, the gospel has not. Ways of transmitting the message have changed; the message has not. (Bo Prosser, Coordinator of Congregational Life, CBF)

Benediction

Lord help me live from day to day
In such a self-forgetful way
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayer shall be for – Others.

Others, Lord, yes others
Let this my motto be
Help me to live for others
That I may live like Thee.¹

AMEN



Resources

- *A Primer on Today's Missional Church* - This is an article but also a web site that contains a host (literally) of readings and resources on missional churches and congregations. <http://jrwoodward.net/2008/11/a-primer-on-todays-missional-church/>
- *The Missional Church Network* exists to provide resources and encouragement to those who desire to see the church recapture its missionary nature and once again be sent into the world to participate in God's mission. <http://missionalchurchnetwork.com/>
- *Leadership Network* fosters church innovation and growth through strategies, programs, tools and resources consistent with our far-reaching mission: to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact. http://www.leadnet.org/LC_MissionalRenaissance.asp
- The Missional Challenge is dedicated to aligning every believer with the mission of Jesus. <http://www.missionalchallenge.com/>

¹ Excerpt from “**Others**” By Charles D. Meigs (written sometime between 1890 and 1902)

Bob Roberts on church and mission:

9 Things I'm Learning and Unlearning

I'm learning ... that mission begins with Christology not ecclesiology. Following Jesus leads us to mission, which leads to churches gathering.

I'm unlearning ... my assumption that starting churches naturally leads to mission. It doesn't. Churches default to self-focus unless a commitment to be like Jesus in the world comes first.

I'm learning ... that being glocal means decentralizing power, decision making, information, all of it. The kingdom of God means ministry opportunities are available to almost everyone.

I'm unlearning ... the American church's traditional focus on a super-star speaker, worship leader, educator, and shepherd, which serves mainly to attract spectators rather than igniting the power of everyone else.

I'm learning ... that we serve not to convert but because we have been converted. We serve because Christ has changed us and made us servants to people who are hurting and lost.

I'm unlearning ... the assumption that "Christian" is defined primarily as acknowledging a moment of conversion. Becoming a follower of Jesus depends on what happens after that.

I'm learning ... to love people, which means to see them healed, educated, and given the same opportunities that we have

I'm unlearning ... that the Christian faith is all about heaven. I believe the church has denied the future by just waiting for the Second Coming. We need a story that includes the future.

I'm learning ... the kingdom will be established not by human power or entertainment, but by realizing God's concern for humanity and the whole of society.