

DMIN726 Academic Essay: From Missional to Meaningful

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FROM MISSIONAL TO MEANINGFUL

Abstract

Recent decades have affirmed that a missional approach is necessary if we are to move actively forward with the Great Commission. And while we have discussed home churches and missional involvement in the community, we have not acknowledged that the vernacular Tim Keller calls us to is nearly impossible to achieve in a culture that is deeply entrenched with biblical mythologies. In other words, how do we speak without raising walls of assumption, judgment, defensiveness, hurt, or anger? And, more importantly, how do we assess the assumptions, judgments, defensiveness, hurt, or anger of others if we cannot identify our own? Where are theologians and Christian leaders in the exploration of “Emotional Intelligence” or “Emotional Quotient” (EQ) popularized in Daniel Goleman’s 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence*? How do we draw parallels between the tenets of EQ and the characteristics of Jesus Christ, and how do we ensure that our leaders embody those characteristics?

FROM MISSIONAL TO MEANINGFUL

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In his 2010 book *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, Leonard Sweet argues for a new kind of evangelism:

The church has been more prone to “take a stand” on issues or “take a vote” on programs than touch. Touch is a centripetal force that includes and embraces. Taking stands is a centrifugal force that separates and divides. While the rest of the world is moving, the one taking a stand is frozen in time like kids playing freeze tag, waiting for the sign that says it’s okay to move again. Christ ran around touching people and tagging them. Every Jesus tag offered freedom. Every Jesus tag let the person tagged know they had been touched by God. (p. 242)

The Pharisees operated by centrifugal force; Jesus perpetuates a centripetal force. As a church, we know this, and yet our efforts to stand for truth in the twenty-first century invariably repel rather than attract. According to Dan Kimball (2007), we are at a point where we need to offer both an apology and an apologetic: “While we need to stand strong on what we believe and need not be ashamed of the gospel in any way, we need to make sure we are presenting a biblical picture of the church and not perpetuating negative stereotypes. We need to offer an apologetic to correct misperceptions” (p. 250). The earliest roots of the missional movement, which has been a direct attempt to rescript our ecclesiastical centrifugal spin into an inclusive centripetal force, began with conversations in the early twentieth century about missionary methods that were deemed too reliant on western superiority (Aniol, 2016). As this healthy look at missionary ecclesiology spread, writers/theologians such as Darrell Guder, Ed Stetzer, Tim Keller, and Alan Hirsch carried the conversation into a broader church context in the late twentieth century, calling for a missional church. And while I agree with the end goal of the missional approach, I

FROM MISSIONAL TO MEANINGFUL

believe the movement will eventually fade away without a direct and intentional articulation of (1) emotional quotient (EQ) and (2) audience quotient (AQ).

As Sweet (2014) argues in *Me and We: God's New Social Gospel*, the world's structural problems will remain as long as the individual human heart is ailing: "The [social gospel] movement's demise has been the subject of vast speculation and scrutiny, but it can be seen perhaps best this way: social gospelers tried to save an ailing turtle by switching out its shell, one embossed with the name 'Christianity'" (p. 3). The missional movement is in danger of a similar end. If we don't pause in our discussion of the core ideas of missiology to consider how individual hearts can be strengthened and encouraged, missional ideas will never rise from rhetoric to reality. According to Gillian Tett (2015), understanding the "messy gaps between rhetoric and reality" is critical: "Life does not always fit into the official descriptions of what people are *supposed* to do. Much of the time we ignore these messy realities" (p. 224). How, then, do we ensure that our discussion of missional church adequately prepares, equips, and strengthens the hearts of those who are sent to disciple? Are we embarking on missions – both around the globe and across the street – without properly training disciples? Peter Scazzero (2006) writes that a healthy understanding of self is essential: "The vast majority of us go to our graves without knowing who we are. We unconsciously live someone else's life, or at least someone else's expectations for us. This does violence to ourselves, our relationship with God, and ultimately others" (p. 66). In an effort to extend the missional conversation and keep the movement alive, an examination of individual EQ and AQ is an essential next step.

A Scriptural Shift

The scriptural underpinnings of the missional movement rest primarily in the Great Commission: "Then Jesus came to [the disciples] and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth

FROM MISSIONAL TO MEANINGFUL

has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20 New International Version). But two problems are confronting us as we try to live into Jesus’ commissioning: (1) We don’t fully believe in our own authority and ability to do what Jesus is asking of us, and (2) We don’t understand how to effectively speak to “all nations.” In other words, while our godly purpose may make sense to us intellectually, we aren’t properly equipped to live into it. As Mark Galli (2006) argues in *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God*, when we begin to rationalize Jesus, we render the Great Commission vacuous and ineffective:

We avoid the reality of Christ’s power in a number of ways. For instance, we’re tempted to spiritualize his power, to reduce the elemental potency and energy to a moment of personal religious inspiration. The stilling of the storm is about psychological storms in our lives. The healing of the lame is about solving emotional problems that cripple us. Jesus bringing sight to the blind is about God’s ability to help us see our lives clearly. And so on and so forth. If we do that enough, we begin to think the Gospel stories are nothing but metaphors, and metaphors primarily about us.” (p. 113)

How do we rescue Jesus’ meaning “from the barnacles that have attached themselves to it over the centuries”? (Bailey, 2008, p. 343).

FROM MISSIONAL TO MEANINGFUL

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