

The Way I See It

Missio Dei and the Glut of All Things *Missional!*

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It must be a case of growing cynicism that (for me) seems to accompany the inevitability of growing older, but I frequently chuckle at the fervor with which missional language is bantered about. I'm very committed to the theological substance underlying such discussions, but I've got to be candid that much of the "conversation" about all things missional is more indicative of the entrepreneurial spirit of American religious experience than anything else. For too many, it is the latest language that gives permission to create some new version of church that is more a reaction to past negative experiences with church than it is rootedness in biblical narrative or (surprise-surprise) historical awareness.

Missio Dei is actually a mid-twentieth-century theme that was framed by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in an era where many, in that segment of the global Christian church, were calling for missionary moratoriums in response to post-colonial realities. Their desire was to focus on the initiative of the redemptive mission of God in contradistinction to human missionary effort. As a Pentecostal, that focus on God's activity certainly rings true, but sixty-five years after *Missio Dei* became a theme in WCC churches, we seem to banter this term around without understanding that the lesson learned from this era gone by, is that if everything is mission, nothing in particular is "missional."

In the late 1990s, two initiatives emerged that gave impetus to our current focus on missional church. First, the eminent missiologist Ralph Winter asked the question of whether or not people committed to the Great Commission still actually believed in the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ. He wondered out loud whether mission-minded followers of Jesus still believed that we must be focused on the apostolic function of taking to the gospel where it was most resisted and least accessible.

At the same time, a group of Reformed theologians and pastors were asking the question of how we could effectively reach North America—whose Christian heritage had largely become *Christendom*, reminiscent of the era of Constantine. They wondered if our effectiveness in global mission efforts might actually necessitate us viewing North America as a "mission field" in the same way that we have historically viewed the "regions beyond." Since the formation of the *Gospel and Culture* network and other like initiatives that have taken up this serious reflection, much is being made about becoming missional.

This issue of *Encounter* journal provides opportunity for the reader to explore this current critical topic. The contributors include grass-roots leaders in the Church who actually have to live with their missional "experiments."

Here's the way I see it: the focus on all things missional is a matter of life and death. The Bible and its redemptive mission narrative is the place to root all our "missional" efforts. We need a spirituality that believes that the Jesus who walked this earth over 2,000 years ago to "rescue the perishing" is still doing the same thing today in the contexts we serve. Theological reflection done "in context" requires us to discern that the guarantee of Pentecost is that His redemptive work continues to this

very day intact, and it is our task to "see" His activity among us.

The WCC was right; *missio dei* is about God's redemptive activity. It is not measured by American religious entrepreneurship, but by our willingness to join the Suffering Servant in His ongoing mission to see some from every tribe and nation stand before our Lord singing, blessing and honor and glory and power be unto our God. Forever!