
Reawakening a Potent Missional Ethos in the Twenty-first Century Church

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In the West, the Christian church has recently witnessed a marked and rapid decline of its membership and vitality. To reengage with the Spirit's transforming power, Western Christians will need to make some fundamental changes in their Christology, ecclesiology, and ecclesial practices. These changes, however, do not involve the implementation of new, cutting-edge techniques or structures; rather, they require us to return to the forgotten ways of our deepest apostolic legacy. Recovering Jesus as our center is foremost in this realignment. But realignment also includes the recovery of discipleship as our core task, the development of an apostolic movement ethos and structure, and the re-embracing of an incarnational mission impulse. These four phenomena inherent in a more movemental ethos lie at the heart of all exponentially growing movements, such as occurred in the Early Church and, in our day, in China, India, and Cuba, as well as in Western church planting movements. Recovering and reactivating these movemental phenomena will allow the Western church to thrive once more.

The Need for Recovery of the Forgotten Ways

Let me open by telling you a story. The story comes from Gordon McKenzie's book, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace*. As boys, McKenzie and his cousin liked to "mesmerize" chickens on his uncle's farm. They did so by capturing a chicken and holding its beak down to a white line of chalk until it was "mesmerized." The chickens would remain frozen, mesmerized, in this position until the boy's uncle would come along and give them a kick in the backside to wake them up from their hypnotic stupor (McKenzie 1998).¹

Gordon McKenzie tells the story because he notes that organizations, like the white line of chalk in his story, can have a "mesmerizing effect" on people on its orbit. They create a culture of conformity that requires docility and dull obedience from its members. This stifles appropriate dissent, and puts a lid on innovation and

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creativity. Unfortunately, churches also have the same affect. Something in our traditions, theology, or inherited methodology tends to keep our ‘noses down on the line.’ We rarely break free to do something genuinely innovative, adventurous, or something that just challenges the status quo. Like it or not, we behave like a group of “mesmerized” chickens, and like them, sometimes we need God to give us a prophetic kick in the backside to break our inertia and get us moving again.²

I love God’s people, in all forms, but I also believe that there must be some seriously fundamental changes within Western Christianity if we are to halt the hemorrhaging decline of the faith in these parts of the world. The logic of Western civilization as we now experience it will mean increasing marginalization of the church as we know it. Christianity in Western Europe represents the warning for us — the fact is that it is hard to find viable witness for the gospel in the very places from which we received the Reformation message. I therefore present this talk today in the context of a long-trended decline in Western Christianity. The statistics are daunting. In Europe the decline is devastating, but the United States is now beginning to feel the pinch as well. . . .

. . . [T]he numbers don’t look good. According to 2003 actual attendance counts, adult church-going is at 18 percent nationally and dropping. Evangelical attendance (again, actual seat numbers, not telephone responses) accounts for 9 percent of the population, down from 9.2 percent in 1990. Mainline attendance accounts for 3.4 percent of the national population, down from 3.9 percent in the previous decade. And Catholics are down a full percentage point in the same ten-year period: 6.2 percent from 7.2 percent in 1990. Of the 3,098 counties in the United States, 2,303 declined in church attendance.³ (Morgenthaler 2005)

We live in a significant time, a time when decisions we make now *will* determine the course of events in the future. Because our actions today will bear directly on the church of the future, Christians in the West must recalibrate, at the most basic level, their approaches to Christology, ecclesiology, and mission.

These recalibrations, however, do not involve the search for trendy fads or innovative techniques, but rather require the reactivation of the dormant missional potentials of the church that Jesus built: the selfsame potentials that pulsed through the Early Church as it grew from as few as 25,000 adherents in AD 100 to as many as 20,000,000 only two hundred years later (see Stark 1996:6–13).⁴ To recover apostolic effectiveness, Christians need only to return to our most primal, and potent, story.

To activate this dormant ethos, I suggest that we need at least four recalibrations. There are:

- Recovery of the Centrality of Jesus in His Own Movement,
- Recovery of Discipleship as Our Core Task,
- Recovery of the Ethos/Structure of Apostolic Movements, and
- Recovery of a Missional-Incarnational Impulse.

Let’s now consider each of these “recalibrations” in turn.

Recovery of the Centrality of Jesus in His Own Movement

When Christians dream about the growth of the church, we can become highly excited by the success of exponential movements. But a critical, often neglected

consideration with such movements is the question, what are we multiplying? William Temple once said, “If your conception of God is radically false then the more devout you are the worse it will be for you. You are opening your soul to be moulded by something else. You had much better be an atheist” (quoted in Allen 1995:361). If we get Christology wrong, the most basic of the church’s theological touchstones, then whatever we do after that could be toxic. Therefore a recovery of the full phenomenon of Jesus (his Incarnation, life and teachings, *together* with the salvific events of cross, resurrection, and Parousia), with all it represents to the movement that claims his name, must lie at the very heart of any effort to renew the church and its mission. We must constantly recalibrate back to him in order to legitimize ourselves as his people. I call this return to our Center “refounding” because it requires the recognition of the Founder’s defining role in the movement and because it sets the movement’s agenda. The title of my book (with Mike Frost) — *reJesus* — says it all.

In our endeavor to be genuinely Christian, we will therefore need to be radical in the truest sense of the word. We must go to the roots (Latin, *radix*), the source and foundation of the faith — we must radicalize. When we are lost, when the church is experiencing a crisis of identity, when we find ourselves having to renegotiate our idea of church and mission, as the church that Jesus built we must go back to him to see whether we are ‘in the faith.’ Our very authenticity as Jesus’ people is at stake in this process. As we recalibrate ourselves back to Jesus, we authenticate our Christianity, for it is the Founder that must define the whole movement. Both mission and ecclesiology will flow outward from a solid Christology, not the other way around. We must first radicalize so that we can then engage in mission and truly become the church of Jesus Christ. What are we doing if we are not extending the very movement that Jesus initiated?

It is Christology that must define — and constantly redefine — us, for it lies at the heart of the renewal of the church. Then, from Christology will naturally flow missiology, and from that missiology will flow the appropriate ecclesiology ($X > M > E$). Today’s Western church, so frequently reversing this order, will therefore need to radicalize first in order to truly missionalize. Besides being the center of the church and therefore fundamental to any notion of missional church, Jesus is a great missionary and provides a wonderful prototype as to how we might engage the world in his name. We could do with more of his way of engaging culture.

But such a process is “dangerous” to our prevailing forms because from observation we can rightfully say that Jesus and ‘religion’ simply don’t mix. In fact, let me suggest this ‘formula’ to make the point: Christianity minus Christ equals religion. To the degree that we remove Jesus from the equation of Christianity (by subtle or not so subtle means) we end up with something less than the church that Jesus built. History amply proves that without Christ, Christianity degenerates into an oppressive religion. And ‘religion’ as Jesus encounters it in the Pharisees of his day (and as Barth understood it) is an attempt to codify, moderate, mediate, and control God and, therefore, constitutes idolatry and unbelief. Viewed as such, it undermines the demands of discipleship and the meaning of Jesus’ ministry: the removal of all religion. Ellul even calls what Jesus established an ‘anti-religion’ because it undermines all attempts to control and mediate the God experience through ritual, priesthood, and institution.⁵ We know from Jesus’ life and message that he and religion do not mix. In fact, he

reserved his harshest possible condemnations for religious people! And we have to admit that in North America we have a whole lot of *religion* going on in our churches.

Sadly, history demonstrates how we as God's people can so often domesticate a radical Christology from our experience of church. It is remarkable how Jesus can be so easily cast out from among his people. Have you ever wondered why in Revelation 3:20 Jesus is seen standing outside his church, with the hookers and other outcasts, knocking at the door and asking to come in, while they worship him on the inside?! How did he get out from among his people in the first place?⁶

The process of removing Christ from his church is seldom overt, but is incremental and subversive. Because it can sneak in so covertly, we should constantly realign ourselves to Christ, remembering that we have been created in his image. However, we all have a tendency to re-create him in our own image. To prove this point, Dallas Willard suggests that most middle class Christians think that Jesus is a nice guy, but they do not think he is very smart. Most of us balk at this statement. But just consider what would happen if we were to apply Jesus' economic advice to our middle class values, or Jesus' teaching about forgiveness to the current political realm. We would be sorely tempted to moderate Jesus down to size and in so doing qualify his lordship. We must remember that we are called to follow Jesus, not just admire him. Christians are called to believe that Jesus is absolutely correct about absolutely everything.

The antidote to the "yeast of the Pharisees" is to put Jesus back into the fundamental equation and see what happens: Christianity plus Christ equals Christianity. To the degree that Jesus is present and active as the organizing center of Christianity, to that degree we are truly Christ-ian people. Having Jesus at the very center of our experience is what vital *Christ* ianity is all about.

If this first, and most important, recalibration is about rediscovering the phenomenon of Jesus in the life of the church, the next one relates to our commitment to becoming like him.

Recovery of Discipleship as Our Core Task

Christian discipleship is basically a growing adherence to Jesus. As a disciple of Christ, a person strives to become more like him, to become a "little Jesus." During his earthly life, Jesus himself worked to embed his life and gospel within the lives of his disciples (Hirsch 2006:102–103), and if he had not accomplished this task, there would be no Christianity today. Clearly, discipleship is crucial to the survival and transmission of the faith. As Christians seek to embody Jesus' teachings, we will also seek to transmit those teachings into the lives of others. Jesus' followers all should strive to be like him, for this is what it means to be his disciple.⁷

Movements grow only in proportion to their capacity to make disciples. No disciples, no movement. Some disciples, some movement; but lots of disciples create a real basis on which movements can both generate and develop. And so discipleship and disciple-making are in fact the strategic missional activities in our time.

As followers of Jesus, we have to recover the lost art of disciple making — not so that we can reproduce ourselves or forward our agendas, but so that we can become like the One we love and follow. I think we have to admit that most churches fail at this critical point. It is this large-scale failure that has resulted in the general public having an overall negative view of Christianity, as Kinnaman and Lyons describe

in their book *Unchristian*.⁸ If we fail in being and making “little Jesuses,” we will fail elsewhere. Discipleship is therefore the frontier issue for the church today: no disciples, no movements; no movements, no exponential growth — growth that is needed in order to reestablish Christianity as a vital force in our day.

Another key point is to recognize that discipleship lays the right foundation for leadership in the church. In fact, it ought to be the only basis for leadership in the Way of Jesus. Leadership is directly proportional to discipleship: if we have bad leadership in the church, it is most likely because we don’t take seriously the foundational Christ-likeness required in all those who follow the Lord. Becoming like Christ is the focal point of all good disciple-making.

Another reason for recovering discipleship and disciple-making as a lost art is that we live in a culture that is profoundly good at discipling people in the predominant religion of our day — consumerism. Because people come to church as experienced consumers, appealing to people as consumers (as is so common today in many church practices) actually works against Christian conversion and discipleship. Discipleship is about clinging to Christ. And it will therefore also mean removing all other competing claims to our loyalty and allegiance.⁹ The American church today operates largely by the lights, such as they are, of consumerism. But consumerist approaches to church and evangelism are inimical to true discipleship. Consumerism as a search for meaning, identity, purpose, and belonging is idolatry, and it is killing us (from within). The Kingdom extends not through some sort of Disneyland appeal, but face to face, one person at a time, through appeal to Christ. Any other appeal will have disastrous results when it comes to mission and missional church.

Recovering the Ethos/Structure of Apostolic Movements

I have no doubt that if there is to be any advancing of the Western church in the twenty-first century, it will be marked by the recovery of the apostolic-movement form of the church. If we somehow fail to rediscover this mode of church, I think we will eventually lose all significant cultural impact and become no more than a footnote to Western history.

Our forms shape our thinking and behaviors in deep and profound ways, and we have yet to escape the ecclesiological hegemony that was birthed and nurtured in the Constantinian idea of church. But if we are genuinely to rediscover movemental forms in the West, we must first dethrone Constantine and thereby liberate the Western church from its current captivity to an overly institutional imagination. What we have are inflexible, backward looking, basically fearful and defensive forms of church. What we need are missionally responsive, culturally adaptive, organizationally agile multiplication movements. Such movements mobilize the whole people of God, are reproducing and reproducible, are structurally networked (avoid centralization of power and function), and employ missional leadership and ministry modes. Let’s explore each of these characteristics in greater detail.

Movements mobilize the whole people of God. The real revolution comes when all the people of God get to embrace their God-given destiny as active agents of the King. Surely one of the most potent ecclesial doctrines in the New Testament is the priesthood of all believers, yet we have seldom lived it out. We clergy can be control freaks. We need to recognize that Jesus is well able to lead his people and that he does

not require professionals to keep his movement on track, as the phenomenology of persecuted movements clearly reveals. Much more is tied in with this dispensability of church professionals than we realize. I have been thoroughly challenged by what we find in all exponential movements across the world, and their stories can sure teach us a lot about the church that Jesus built.

The statement of an underground Chinese movement, “every believer a church planter, every church a church planting church,” sums it up for me. The whole weight of what I call Apostolic Genius (the life-force of exponential Jesus movements) downloads into that statement, and it proves that the possibility of spontaneous expansion is written into the very genetic coding of the church itself.

Said another way, we can say that every believer carries within himself/herself the potential for world transformation, which is to say that every believer carries within himself/herself the possibility of ecclesia. It’s not as far fetched as it appears at first. For instance, in a spark is the full potential for a flame; and in a flame, the potential for the conflagration. In the seed is the full potential of the tree; and in the tree, the potential for a forest. In both cases, the fire and the forest are all contained, in potential at least, in the initial seed. So it is with all of God’s people. If we allowed the reality of this to seep into our overly institutionalized imaginations, we would see new potentials in every believer and every church.

Movements are reproducing and reproducible. In truth, much of what we do as church is unwieldy and very hard to reproduce — largely because of our captivity to institutional forms. In contrast, exponential missional movements thrive on rapid and spontaneous expansion and can be achieved by all agents in the system. That is why they are able to achieve what Roland Allen calls ‘spontaneous expansion.’ To say it another way, reproduction necessitates reproduce-ability and reproducibility requires an ecclesiology simple enough for any disciple to be able to reproduce it. Only thus can it be geared for rapid multiplication by non-professionals. Movements require leadership, but they do not require the presence of a professional or elite ministry class. In fact, the appearance of an elite, “professional” clergy class can tend to slow things down by disempowering the people from their own priestly and God-given functions. Simple reproducibility is consistent with biblical ecclesiology: Paul, for instance, could go to Thessalonica and plant a church in somewhere between nine and forty days! He subsequently writes back to the church and says that they are an ecclesia of God and that they have no need for him (Paul) to teach them anything! Now that’s church planting!

But we make it much more elitist, and our ecclesiology is much more complex. If, for example, our idea of church requires a million dollar budget, bands, buildings, and multiple staff members to get off the ground, then our idea of church is far too complex to become a movement. Likewise, if our idea of leadership requires seven years to ‘drive the liturgy’ and get our heads around the core issues of church, then our idea of leadership is way too complex and works against the possibility of an exponential movement. It all goes back to how we conceive of the church in its basic form.

Movements employ missional modes of ministry/leadership. This means that if we wish to have missional forms of church, we simply have to find our way back to embracing missional forms of leadership — and this leadership must be at least five-fold in form: apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral, and theological (Eph. 4:7ff).

Interestingly, the root word *missio* is the Latin equivalent for the Greek word *apostello*. We find it hard even to put the word on our lips because we have delegitimized the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic ministries and are left with only a two-fold form. For far too long our orders of ministry have been limited to those of pastor and theologian. But these are maintenance forms of ministry and are ill suited to either catalyze or sustain a movement. What we need is the more generative energy of the other forms mentioned in the Ephesians text. We must broaden our understanding of ministry and leadership to include at least a fivefold form.

Recovering a Missional-Incarnational Impulse

Mission (“sending”) is a primary theme throughout biblical history. Though we often think of “mission” in terms of what Christians do in obedience or response to God, it is better to see it as characteristic of who God is, and see our own mission only in that light. Mission is therefore a subset of theology proper and not of ecclesiology (where we have normally situated it). Mission precedes the church, and missional church takes its cue from the *Missio Dei*.

Mission thus incorporates the sentness of the church and grounds it in the sent and sending God. We must feel this sentness (going *out*) at the very heart of what it means to be God’s people. But we must also allow the *way* that God engages the world to inform our imaginations and practice. We must allow our imaginations to be shaped by the Incarnation. In other words, we ourselves must become incarnational. In the incarnation of Jesus, God sets the model of how we ourselves should engage the world. If mission is the propulsion outward, then incarnational mission means going downward, deep into culture and speaking meaningfully from within it. It is through an incarnational approach that we can go *deep* in our ministry to others. These two impulses — to go out and to go deep — must be kept close together, each informing and conditioning the other. Outward, deepening, leads to outward, deepening, and so forth. Herein lies the theological grounding for any missional idea of the church.

Concluding Thoughts: Jesus Sneezed

As those entrusted with the gospel of Jesus, we are called to go out and spread the message of his love to all people. And in this practice of spreading the gospel, we can learn a lot from viruses. The gospel spreads just like a virus: we “sneeze” it, others receive it, and they in turn sneeze and pass it on to even more people. All that is needed is the right set of conditions for the virus to stay “sneezable” and, once it has been sneezed, to take hold.

As I have presented in this talk, primary in our efforts to keep the good news sneezable is the recovery of Jesus as central to his own movement. We must also maintain discipleship as our core task and retrieve the ethos of apostolic movements. And finally, we must relearn incarnational ministry, by which all people, of all classes, races, times, and associations, can be enfolded and embraced in the love of God.

Notes

1. Story paraphrased from Gordon McKenzie’s book, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool’s Guide to Surviving with Grace*.
2. Ibid.
3. See <http://www.easumbandy.com/resources/index.php?action=details&record=1386>.

4. These are my estimates based on data from Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 6–13.

5. See Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *reJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson. Pp. 12ff.

6. See *reJesus*, ch. 1–3 for a thorough analysis of this dynamic.

7. See the new book Debra (my wife) and I have written — *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010) — for a serious elaboration on the whole idea of discipleship.

8. The authors explain that Christians don't look like Jesus. See David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity. . . . And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

9. See *Untamed*. Consumerism is essentially an anatomy of modern idolatry.

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