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THE MISSIOLOGICAL:

JESUS AMONG THE CHICKEN LITTLES

The word on the street is that the American church is gasping its last breath. To cite just one example, popular church consultant and conference speaker Reggie McNeal argues that while the situation in North America is not hopeless, things are worse than we think and the problems are more far gone than we imagined.¹ Unless the church in North America makes big changes (and fast), we are facing “sure death.”² Even more strikingly, McNeal suggests that the new realities addressed in *The Present Future* “represent tectonic shifts in the ethos of the spiritual quest of humanity.”³ It doesn’t get much more serious than that.

The church, according to McNeal and many others, has lost its way, its influence, and its entire purpose. Without massive transformation, the church in North America will soon go the way of the dodo bird. In short, “the

institutional church in North America is in deep trouble—and it should be, because it has lost its mission.”⁴ The church, then, has two choices: change or die.

McNeal is not the only voice crying in the wilderness. David Olson begins his helpful book, *The American Church in Crisis*, with this clear, if unsurprising, assessment: “The American church is in crisis.”⁵ Similarly, Neil Cole opines that “American Christianity is dying. Our future is in serious jeopardy. We are deathly ill and don’t even know it.”⁶ “It’s the institution of the church that’s in its death throes,” says another.⁷ Not to be outdone, George Barna, who has grown increasingly disillusioned with what he has seen and measured among Christians in the last twenty-plus years, concludes very matter-of-factly based on his “research data” that “if the local church is the hope of the world, then the world has no hope.”⁸

THE SKY IS FALLING (SORT OF, MAYBE)

Among those who feel like the church is almost or completely broken, two pieces of evidence are usually offered: (1) The church is losing people; and (2) the church has lost its mission. Let’s start by looking at number one, the church’s missing members.

The church in America, it is said, is dying a death of attrition. Our most faithful members, who also happen to be the most generous, are dying off. Young people are leaving the faith and not coming back. And the lost are harder to reach than ever. Ironically, as the mainstream media fears an impending Christian theocracy, Christians in America fear their own extinction, or at least their irrelevance.

Yet, the news is not all bad. In February 1939, pollster George Gallup started asking Americans “Did you happen to go to church last Sunday?” In that year 41 percent said yes. The wording has been altered slightly over the

years, but basically the same question has been asked every year since. And the percentage responding “yes” has barely changed. From 2000 to 2005 the “yesses” in Gallup’s church poll ranged from 40 to 44 percent.⁹ In terms of actual attendance, we find that in 1990 on any given weekend 52 million people in America attended a church. In 2005, the number still stood at 52 million.¹⁰ The wheels haven’t fallen off yet.

But the news is not all good either. For starters, far fewer people actually go to church than the numbers suggest. It’s called the “halo effect”—people give better answers to pollsters than they live out in real life. By one estimate, only 17.5 percent of the American public actually attend church on any given weekend, even though more than twice as many report that they do.¹¹ Furthermore, while the number of people in church has stayed the same over the past fifteen years (about 52 million), the percentage of churchgoers has decreased. Simply put, church growth has not kept pace with population growth. The same number of people may go to church, but since there are more people in the country, the number of churchgoers as a percentage of the whole goes down. So, according to Olson, while 20.4 percent of Americans went to church on any given weekend in 1990, only 17.5 percent went in 2005, and, by his estimates, only 14.7 percent will be in church on any given weekend by 2020.¹²

This is not a good trajectory. Anyone who loves Jesus Christ wants to see His church grow. But keep in mind that these numbers do not represent declining overall membership, but rather church membership that is not growing on pace with the increased population. This too is a problem. Believe me, I am not advocating an indifference to the lack of church growth in America. I want to see the percentage line going up, not down. And the fact that it is going down is worth our prayers and reflection (more on that shortly). But the claims of the church’s imminent demise are grossly

exaggerated. Even though only 17.5 percent of Americans attend on any given weekend (assuming this lower percentage is accurate), 37 percent still attend at least once a month, and 52 percent report belonging to some church tradition.¹³ Again, I wish more people believed in Christ and that the people who claim church affiliation actually showed up in church every Sunday, but when over a hundred million people in this country attend church at least once a month, it seems a bit of a hyperbole to suggest that the church in America is about to disappear into thin air.

Moreover, when we look more closely at recent church decline we see that the decline has not happened uniformly across the board. Recall that from 1990 to 2005, the percentage of Americans in church on any given weekend fell from 20.4 percent to 17.5 percent. During the same time period the percentage of those attending the establishment mainline churches fell from 3.9 to 3.0 percent, while those attending a Roman Catholic church declined from 7.2 percent to 5.3 percent. But the percentage in evangelical churches was almost identical, going from 9.2 percent in 1990 to 9.1 percent in 2005.¹⁴ Keep in mind these are percentages of the total population. This means the actual number of people attending an evangelical church on any weekend rose by several million over the last decade and a half. Almost all of the net loss in percentage of church attendance came from Catholic and more liberal Protestant churches. For example, in raw numbers, the mainline churches declined 21 percent in membership (from 29 million to 22 million) from 1960 to 2000, while at the same time overall church membership in the United States rose by 33 percent.¹⁵

So the story of declining church attendance percentage is not the story of a newfound dissatisfaction with the church at large, as much as it is the continuing story of Catholics and mainline Protestants losing their young (to evangelical churches or to no church), parents in mainline and Catho-

lic pews not having as many children as evangelicals, and the old (who are found disproportionately among mainline churches) dying off.¹⁶

QUESTIONS FROM QUESTIONS

But for the sake of argument, let's look at the glass as half empty. Most of our churches are not growing. Even with all our megachurches, the evangelical community is not quite keeping up with population growth in the country at large. So how should we respond? Or to hit a little closer to home, how should *you* respond if your denomination or your church is shrinking, not only as a percentage of the whole but in real numbers?

Questions like these ought to prompt more questions. And the question the “disgruntled-with-church-as-we-know-it” books always seem to ask is the same: “What are we doing wrong?” In other words, the fix-the-church books almost always figure that declining church attendance, even as a percentage of the total population, means the church has messed something up. Even though the new crop of church books decry the old church-growth models, they still operate with the same basic assumption: namely, that churches should be growing and something is wrong with the church that isn't.

This assumption, however, is alien to the New Testament. Didn't Jesus say tell us that “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:14)? Wasn't the early church of Philadelphia commended by the Lord Jesus even though they were facing opposition and had “little power” (Rev. 3:7–13)? There is simply no biblical teaching to indicate that church size is the measure of success. The renowned missiologist Lesslie Newbigin offers a wise summary:

Reviewing, then, the teaching of the New Testament, one would have to say that, on the one hand, there is joy in the rapid growth

of the church in the earliest days, but that, on the other, there is no evidence that the numerical growth of the church is a matter of primary concern. There is no shred of evidence in Paul's letters to suggest that he judged the churches by the measure of their success in rapid numerical growth, nor is there anything comparable to the strident cries of some contemporary evangelists that the salvation of the world depends upon the multiplication of believers. There is an incomparable sense of seriousness and urgency as the apostle contemplates the fact that he and all people "must appear before the judgment seat of Christ" and as he acknowledges the constraint of Jesus' love and the ministry of reconciliation that he has received (2 Cor. 5:10–21). But this nowhere appears as either an anxiety or an enthusiasm about the numerical growth of the church.¹⁷

In short, the church does not succeed or fail based on the ebb and flow of its membership rolls.

"ARE WE GETTING IN THE WAY OF THE GOSPEL?"

Having said that, I still think the question "What are we doing wrong?"—or to put it more theologically, "Are we getting in the way of the gospel?"—is a good one (for "successful" churches too I might add). As much as the verse has been abused, we don't want to ignore Paul's injunction that we be all things to all people in order that we might save some (1 Cor. 9:22). There are conservative churches who wear smallness as a badge of honor. Because they sense the real danger of measuring success by numerical growth, they think tiny churches are a sign of faithfulness and big churches are all sell-outs. Their pastors at times sound as though they're channeling John Owen, and their engagement with culture consists in explaining how modern-day Armenians differ from theological Arminians. They talk in the cadences of

another century and specialize in preaching to the choir. There are churches out there that not only don't grow, they are frankly proud that they don't. The church in America can shrink until it shrivels and dies as far as they are concerned. They are interested in truth not results.

There is much I admire about this attitude. It is refreshingly nonfaddish and unconcerned about worldly success. But those who hold this attitude are often blind to the ways in which they make it unnecessarily hard for people to feel at home in their churches. They can be inflexible about the wrong things and unable to see how the unbeliever is not always entirely to blame for disliking the church. So, "Are we getting in the way of the gospel?" is a worthwhile question to ask.

OTHER QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING

It's just not the only question worth asking. That's my complaint with so many of the "church is lame" books, both those from the church growth vein and those from the emergent/missional approach. They assume that every decline in attendance, every negative perception of the church, every unsolved societal problem, and every unbeliever still wandering outside our doors, is an indictment on the "way we do church." If people aren't coming to know the Lord in droves and our communities aren't transformed into a multicultural city on a hill, then there must be something dreadfully wrong with church as we know it. "Surely, it's time to change. If not everything, then most everything," they argue.

But there are other questions we need to ask when we don't see the results we desire. Questions like:

- ***Are we believing the gospel?*** People won't be convinced of Christianity if they don't sense we are convinced of it. This is especially true when

doubt and disbelief come from the pulpit. As Richard Baxter (1615–91) noted in his own day, some of our churches are pastored by unregenerate men. Even more have preachers who are either confused about the gospel or simply cold to it. Just a century later (in 1740), George Whitefield concluded that “the generality of preachers [in New England] talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ. The reason why congregations have been so dead is because they have had dead men preach to them.”¹⁸

- ***Are we relying on the power of the gospel?*** If the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16), why don’t our services and our evangelism focus more explicitly on the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins? Likewise, if our churches are shrinking, perhaps it is because the role of the Word has shrunk in our preaching and witness. Do we really trust God to build His church through His Word, or do we rely on tricks and gimmicks?
- ***Are we getting the gospel out?*** It sounds simple to some, and hopelessly fundamentalist to others, but if we want to see the church grow, we need to actually get out and tell people about the good news of Jesus. Church growth will not keep pace with population growth unless we actively share the gospel with nonChristians and winsomely plead with them to be reconciled to God.
- ***Are we getting the gospel right?*** In an age where many Christians assume that doctrinal precision gets in the way of mission, we would do well to remember that Paul damned to hell anyone, including himself, who messed with the content of the gospel (Gal. 1:8). God blesses churches that remain faithful to His Word. “We will repeatedly suggest,” write sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in beginning their survey of the churching of America from 1776–2005, “that as denominations

have modernized their doctrines and embraced temporal values, they have gone into decline.”¹⁹ When it comes to doctrinal boundaries and moral demands, the history of the church in this country demonstrates that stricter is stronger.²⁰ We cannot expect the church to grow when she proclaims a false gospel.

- ***Are we adorning the gospel with good works?*** We must watch closely our doctrine and our life (1 Tim. 4:16). As we’ll see in the coming chapters, people will not listen to our message or be attracted to our churches if they see hypocritical Christians and churches unconcerned about the problems of the world. Our good works are not the gospel, but they can adorn it and make it more attractive (Titus 2:10).
- ***Are we praying for the work of the gospel?*** We must pray for more workers, pray for soft hearts, pray for God’s Spirit to supernaturally bring about new birth. If we truly believed in God’s sovereignty, discouraging trends and statistics would cause us first to pray. Every bit of hopelessness is a reminder to hope in God and an impetus to prayer.
- ***Are we training up our children in the gospel?*** A good portion of the decline in church attendance comes from the failure to retain our own children. What will it profit a man if he transforms the world but loses his own children? We should also consider that church growth is covenantal as well as evangelistic. If we want the church in America to grow, we should consider how God might be calling some of us (but not all) to grow our own families.

THE QUESTION OF A SOVEREIGN GOD

To all these questions, I could add one more: “Are we trusting God’s sovereignty in the gospel?” God causes the deaf to hear and the blind to see. He

melts hearts of stone and hardens others. Paul did not always see a favorable response to the gospel. Neither will we. God may send a season of blessing and revival or He may use us, like so many of the prophets, to give one last warning of the judgment to come. Some will plant, some will water, and some will reap a harvest.

Our part is to do our part. Church decline or stagnation can lead us to evaluate ourselves in all of the above categories. But only God saves. It is right to plan and pray for “results” and plead with others to know Christ, but no one can change the number of God’s elect.

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Remember that on that “great gettin’ up morning,” God will not reward churchgoers, or His churches for that matter, for being big and influential, or hip and culturally with-it, but for being good and faithful (Matt. 25:23). That’s all God asks of us—be good and faithful, which is right, because that’s the best we can do.

THE MISSION OF GOD

The second piece of evidence that critics offer of the church’s alleged failure is its lack of purpose and mission. Missional churches are “in” these days. Social action is hot. Evangelism is regarded as too aggressive (just a sales pitch), modern (cold, logical argumentation), and condescending (“my God is better than yours”). Service and justice ought to be the church’s chief concerns. As one author has said, “Your job is to bless people; that’s the covenant. Don’t have an evangelism strategy—have a blessing strategy.”²¹ A generation raised on seeker-sensitive churches where all the energy and value seemed to be on getting the unchurched into our worship services has reacted against an all-or-nothing commitment to getting people saved. So gone are the days where churches put all their focus on unchurched Harry

and Mary. Now the emphasis is on human trafficking, AIDS, poverty, the homeless, and the environment. To bring Christ's kingdom of peace, justice, and blessing to the world is the mission of God (*missio dei*) for the church.

And, according to many young and emerging voices, the church is largely failing in this mission. We've "abdicated our role [as messengers of hope] and covered up our lights. We stand by and watch as people struggle with poverty, depression, and dysfunction. We see people oppressed and killed around the world, and do little or nothing."²² The church should be starting schools that provide a just education for minorities, establishing homeless shelters, setting up mentoring and adoption programs, developing programs that place the elderly into homes of younger families, and making the problems of the Third World our first priority.²³ According to one church-leaver, the church has done so little to help local communities that the neighborhoods can't help but be "very disappointed" in the church and "embarrassed to be a part of you."²⁴ In short, we've been putting all our efforts into institutional survival when our goal should be community transformation.²⁵

He Who Has Ears Let Him Hear

Before I offer a critique of this missional critique, let's recognize that one's background can color how a person will value the missional position. If you have been a part of a church or denomination that has held up evangelism as the only noble Christian calling, then a broader missional perspective is going to be welcome. If your church was suspicious of any kind of social ministry—relief, development, medical, education, you name it—then going "missional" probably sounds freeing. If you have been a part of an angry, backbiting, constantly splitting, culturally insulated church, then an emergent church or no church at all starts to sound pretty attractive. By contrast, if you have been around more liberal mainline Christians, like I have

in my denomination, or around reformed Christians lacking in evangelistic passion, like I have and sometimes have been, then the missional literature starts to sound suspect, like recycled social gospel or another moralistic endeavor that overlooks the eternal plight of the lost.

I realize I hear the missional critique of the church with certain ears. I haven't been a part of a church that makes "secular" work second rate. I've never attended a seeker church that made saving the lost the only legitimate ministry. I've never been a member of a hard-nosed fundamentalist church that considered social ministry a waste of time because "it's all going to burn up anyway." I've seen plenty of church cheesiness in my day, but I've never been to a church that offered spiritual milk fit for baby Christians every week. My antennae are more attuned to other imbalances.

All that to say I want to take from the missional folks what is good: a passionate concern for social problems, a zeal for helping the least of these, and a call to go out into the world instead of trying to make the church look like the world so they will come to us. These are just a few of the themes I appreciate in the missional approach to and critique of the church. But I also have several concerns.

Changing the World

For starters, the purpose of the church in missional circles is often reduced to one thing: community or global transformation. This point is repeated several times, but it is never really defended. All Christians agree that the gospel has social implications. Most probably agree that community transformation could be a good thing. But where do we see Paul talking to his churches about transforming their communities? Where does Jesus, with the corrupt oppressive Roman Empire in full sway, seem interested in world-changing initiatives? It may be implied in passages about the cosmic

lordship of Christ or living good lives among the pagans or praying for the king, but the concerns of the New Testament seem to have little to do with explicit community transformation.

Moreover, the missional notion of community transformation is quite narrow. As one author says, “Instead of raising awareness of the evils of some fictional book, why not work toward raising literacy in your community’s schools? Instead of forming groups to oppose gay marriage, why not work with an AIDS clinic or involve yourself in seeking justice for this oppressed group.”²⁶ Leaving aside whether homosexuals are oppressed or not, why is working at an AIDS clinic kingdom work but opposing gay marriage is not? If the kingdom is where God reigns and His rule is honored and His way of life lived out, then there are no unrepentant homosexuals in the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9).

The two groups that talk most about bringing the kingdom are dominionist/theonomist types and the emergent/missional crowd. Dominionists think, “All of creation belongs to Christ. It must all submit to His kingly rule.” So they want to change laws and influence politics and exercise Christ’s dominion over the world. On the other end, missional types think, “Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God’s peace and justice. We must work for shalom and eliminate suffering in the world.” Fascinating—one group goes right wing, seeking to change institutions and public morality, and the other goes left wing, wanting to provide more social services and champion the arts.

Both camps have a point, but both are selective in their view of the kingdom, and both have too much “already” and not enough “not yet” in their eschatology. We need to remember that when the disciples asked Jesus before His ascension whether He was now going to restore the kingdom, He not only told them no, but He told them their main responsibility was to be

His witnesses (Acts 1:6–8). We are less the reincarnation of Christ in the world ushering in His kingdom and more His ambassadors bearing testimony to His life and finished work (2 Cor. 5:20).

The Church in the World

We also need to reflect more carefully on the difference between the responsibility of the church's calling and the individual Christian's calling. Without this distinction, the church gets overwhelmed and overburdened with good ideas. For example, I've read books that suggest that the church ought to: participate in food distribution; help people find employment; offer parenting classes; help inner-city residents with issues of poverty, drug abuse, and education; adopt a city in the developing world; start an adoption program; and place the elderly in families. The church also should partner with the YMCA; begin classes for literacy and math; help people with car repairs and financial help; sponsor family movies; and organize soccer and baseball leagues. According to the missional crowd and many of those frustrated with church as we know it, this is the sort of kingdom work the church needs to be about.

Indeed, all these ideas are fine. I like them, and I hope my church might be able to do a few of them. But when these activities are the main responsibilities of the church as church, we run into a couple of problems.

First, we will be forever failing as the church. The church will look abysmal when we are expected to be the cure-all for a large portion of our societal problems. In her book on leaving the church, Sarah Cunningham tells about surveying the citizens of her own Michigan town for their impressions of the church and how the church could do more in the community. One lady responded by saying:

We've already got tons of churches. Look around. There's a church on every corner. I bet you could count nine or ten within three blocks of here. . . . And nothing has changed, has it? . . . People don't have enough job training or employment opportunities. Drunks wander the streets. The same homeless people have been circling in and out of the shelters for the last fifteen years. Kids don't have anything to do to keep them out of trouble. Meanwhile, the churches keep right on existing, holding their services every Sunday. And it never changes anything. It seems pretty obvious to me that churches are not the answer."²⁷

At this point the author expresses her disappointment and embarrassment with the church. But does the continuing presence of problems in our communities really demonstrate the failure of the church? It could, I suppose. Maybe all the churches in her Michigan town care zippo about everyone and everything outside their doors. But some things probably are better off because there are churches on every corner. I imagine some problems are not as bad as they could be because of Christian programs and witness in that community. Do we assume police officers are worthless because we still have crime or parents are pointless because kids still do stupid things? Not at all. Why then do we assume that the existence of an unmet need or ongoing tragedy in the world is unassailable proof of the church's failure?

I am certainly not advocating carefree indifference. Apathy may be all some churches are currently offering in the way of "help." But my hunch is most are doing better than that—not as good as they could be, but not as bad as many think. Besides caring for the people in their own congregations—and Galatians 6:10 commands us to "do good to everyone, and *especially* to those who are of the household of faith" (emphasis added)—many churches help those outside her walls. Most churches I know support at least some

missionaries who work with disaster relief or economic and agricultural development in the two-thirds world. Most churches send out work trips to paint, build, or reconstruct houses. Most churches probably support a local food pantry or deliver meals on wheels. Many churches are involved in rescue missions or AIDS relief overseas or teaching English to internationals or visiting the elderly in nursing homes. Other churches have jail ministries and adoption programs, and open their buildings to the community. Still others send shoe boxes full of toys overseas, support hospitals, or do after-school tutoring.

This may not be enough—it never will be—but each of these actions is something, and a good deal something more than nothing. Before we castigate ourselves for caring so little about social justice, let's not miss all the significant work going on right under our noses. Dull church budgets, pimplly mission trips, traditional Christmas offerings, and a hundred other programs our churches do year after boring year all help people near and far.

The Christian in the Community

Besides all this, we have the work that individual Christians do. Isn't that the work of the church too? To be sure, more can and should be done, but many Christians are already involved in salt-and-light activities—as they run their business according to Christian principles, serve the less fortunate through Community Mental Health, bring their faith to bear in movies and television, and disciple young people as public schoolteachers. It simply boggles my mind when I read George Barna conclude based on his research that “local churches have virtually no influence in our culture . . . The local church appears among entities that have little or no influence on society.”²⁸

Come on, really? What research shows that? Are we actually to believe that if every church were removed from every street corner in America and

every Christian in those churches disappeared that the impact on our culture would be negligible? Are a hundred million Christians really that pathetic?

In my community, Christians staff the rescue mission and churches host soup kitchens. The Christians around here take collections for food pantries, personal needs banks, and furniture giveaways. Individual churches offer cribs, car seats, teddy bears, books, budget counseling, pots and pans, diapers, coats, and clothes, while other churches contribute to these collections and a Christian organization coordinates all the moving parts. There are hospice programs for the dying, centers for the aging, and agencies to help with adoption, foster care, and refugee assistance—all run by Christians.

Of course, Christians in mid-Michigan aren't the only ones doing good things and Christians aren't doing all the good things we could. We are better at giving to people and programs at a distance than actually entering into relationships with dirty, messy lives. But we don't have to pretend we are starting at zero. In almost any town, in any part of the country, you can find churches and Christians "being the church" in a thousand different ways that make an enormous difference in their communities.

Second, if the main work of the church as church is in the social services realm of community involvement, aren't we forgetting what makes us unique? If global change or community transformation is our main goal, we may get some good stuff done, but then we'll become political—as happened in the church on the left in the 1960s and 1970s, on the right in the 1980s and 1990s, swinging back to the left in the 2000s—and we'll become redundant. There's nothing uniquely Christian about caring for the poor or distributing micro-loans. That's not to say we can't do them with Christian motivation or even that we can only do things if no one else does them. But, as Richard John Neuhaus has said, the first political task of the church is to be the church.

Please understand. Community engagement is good. It's all too easy to criticize the missional crowd without actually doing anything yourself. And yet, a critique is warranted. The vision behind words like "missional" and "kingdom" often ends up reducing the church to a doer of good, noncontroversial deeds (e.g., no mention of pro-life concerns as important to community transformation) like every other humanitarian organization. When young people talk about the church getting involved in social justice, they almost always have in mind sex trafficking, oppression and death in Darfur, AIDS, or some other social cause. The danger for conservative evangelicals is to dismiss these concerns as liberal issues that don't concern us. I really don't want that to happen. I can feel it in my own heart sometimes—"Sex trafficking is a trendy emergent issue; I don't want anything to do with it." This is a sinful response.

But there are dangers for the social justice crowd too. Most of their causes demand nothing of us Christians except psychological guilt and advocacy. This often means that middle-class kids feel bad about being middle class and complain that other people (the church, the White House, multinational corporations, those fat cats on Wall Street, etc.) aren't doing more to address these problems. The problems are almost always far away and the solutions involve other people caring more.

There's also the danger that we only champion issues that win us cool points. Let's be honest, no one we run into is for genocide or for sex trafficking or for malnutrition. It takes no courage to speak out against these things. We can be thankful that in these areas the world's values (in our world at least) overlap with Christian virtues. But where is the outrage from missional folks about abortion, casinos, the threats to religious free speech, and other evils that plague our world? We all have different callings. Some may be drawn to pro-life issues and others to addressing global hunger, but

let's make sure as Christians that our missional concerns go farther than those shared by Brangelina and the United Way.

What makes the church unique is its commitment, above all else, to knowing and making known Christ and Him crucified. True, the biblical story line is creation, fall, redemption, *and* re-creation. But the overwhelming majority of Scripture is about our redemption, how God saves lawbreakers, how sin can be atoned for, how rebels can be made right with God. We haven't told the story of the Bible if we only talk about what God will do with the cosmos and we avoid mentioning the blessing or curse that will fall on individuals depending on their response to Jesus. It seems to me that proclaiming this message of redemption is the main mission of the church, even more than partnering with God to change the world through humanitarian relief and global activism.

Recently, Dan Kimball, who literally wrote the book on the emerging church, offered his honest assessment of the success of the "missional" church. I quote Kimball at length because his comments are refreshingly candid and provide a needed balance to the anti-megachurch, antipreaching, antiprogram rhetoric that passes for sophisticated analysis in our day.

We all agree with the theory of being a community of God that defines and organizes itself around the purpose of being an agent of God's mission in the world. But the missional conversation often goes a step further by dismissing the "attractational" model of church as ineffective. Some say that creating better programs, preaching, and worship services so people "come to us" isn't going to cut it anymore. But here's my dilemma—I see no evidence to verify this claim.

Not long ago I was on a panel with other church leaders in a large city. One missional advocate in the group stated that younger people

in the city will not be drawn to larger, attractional churches dominated by preaching and music. What this leader failed to recognize, however, was that young people were coming to an architecturally cool megachurch in the city—in droves. Its worship services drew thousands with pop/rock music and solid preaching. The church estimates half the young people were not Christians before attending.

Conversely, some from our staff recently visited a self-described missional church. It was 35 people. That alone is not a problem. But the church had been missional for ten years, and it hadn't grown, multiplied, or planted any other churches in a city of several million people. That sure seems to be a problem if the church is claiming to be "missional."

Another outspoken advocate of the house church model sees it as more missional and congruent with the early church. But his church has the same problem. After fifteen years it hasn't multiplied. It's a wonderful community that serves the homeless, but there's no evidence of non-Christians beginning to follow Jesus. In the same city several megachurches are seeing conversions and disciples matured.

I realize missional evangelism takes a long time, and these churches are often working in difficult soil. We can't expect growth overnight.

I just wish that the missional church would be slow to criticize "attractional" churches that are making a measurable impact. By impact, I don't mean just numbers. I am not enamored by how many come forward at an altar call. In fact, I am a bit skeptical of how numbers are generally counted and used. I am also not defending my own church here. I am not part of a megachurch, but am

part of a four-year-old missional church plant. But I am passionate about Jesus-centered disciples being made. And surprisingly, I find in many large, attractional churches, they are.

Something not helpful in all this discussion is even calling structured churches “attractional.” Yes, these churches have music, preaching, or children’s programs that can be considered “attractive,” but there is more to these structured or large churches than simply the programming. When you study these churches and hear the actual stories of people who have trusted in Jesus, you find that the *attraction* for the unchurched was not the programs or music. It was the Spirit of God in the lives of the Christians who are part of these churches. They were the ones who represented Jesus in such a way that the non-Christians became “attracted” to what God is doing in their lives. . . . We can never forget the urgency of being on mission to those who do not know Jesus yet.

There are so many who don’t understand the joy of Kingdom living here on earth and the future joy of eternal life. This joy motivates me missionally, but I also cannot forget the horrors of hell. This creates a sense of urgency in me that pushes me past missional theory to see what God is actually doing in churches—large and small, attractional and missional. . . .

Where are new disciples before being made? Where are healthy disciples being grown? I hope and pray that we won’t criticize other forms of church who are seeing new disciples being made.

I would rather be part of a Christ-centered church of any size full of “attractional” programs where people are coming to know Jesus as Savior than part of a church that uses “missional” language but people are not coming to know Jesus as Savior.²⁹

After finishing *Why We're Not Emergent*, I exchanged several e-mails with Dan Kimball. I have no doubt that we still disagree on some important issues and approaches to ministry, but he impressed me as a solid evangelical who wants to see people saved from hell, believe in Jesus, and be a part of the church. Kimball believes in the indispensability of evangelism, and this counts for a lot.

John Stott, with typical evenhandedness, explains that mission “includes evangelism and social responsibility, since both are authentic expressions of

the love which longs to serve man in his need. Yet I think we should agree with the statement of the Lausanne Covenant that ‘in the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary.’”³⁰ This means that our “blessing strat-

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egy” in mission must involve proclamation—the actual using of words to communicate the gospel so that by putting their faith in Christ, the covenant blessing of Abraham might come to all who believe (Gal. 3:14). We don’t want to fall for the old “deeds not creeds” slogan or the confused aphorism, “preach the gospel and use words only when necessary.” No matter what the trendmeisters recommend, it is absolutely biblically and eternally necessary that we verbally tell people the gospel and call people to faith and repentance in Jesus Christ.

THE LOST GOSPEL

What’s missing from most of the talk about the kingdom is any doctrine of conversion or regeneration. The kingdom of God is not primarily a new order of society. That was what the Jews in Jesus’ day thought. They did not understand that you must be born again to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5) and without holiness no one will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–10). Faith and repentance, and the godly life that follows in their wake,

are unchangeable requirements for membership in the kingdom. We aren't just out to refurbish some morals or intervene in global crises. We want to live like Christ, show people Christ, and make a difference for Christ, but also call people to renounce their rebellion against God, flee worldliness, and be ready to meet the King when He returns to finally establish His kingdom.

We need to be careful about our language. I think I know what people mean when they talk about redeeming the culture or partnering with God in His redemption of the world, but we should really pick another word. Redemption has already been accomplished on the cross. We are not co-redeemers of anything. We are called to serve, bear witness, proclaim, love, do good to everyone, and adorn the gospel with good deeds, but we are not partners in God's work of redemption.

Similarly, there is no language in Scripture about Christians building the kingdom. The New Testament, in talking about the kingdom, uses verbs like *enter*, *seek*, *announce*, *see*, *receive*, *look*, *come into*, and *inherit*. Do a word search and see for yourself. We are *given* the kingdom and *brought into* the kingdom. We testify about it, pray for it to come, and by faith it belongs to us. But in the New Testament, we are never the ones who bring the kingdom. We receive it, enter it, and are given it as a gift. It is our inheritance. It's no coincidence that "entering" and "inheriting" are two of the common verbs associated with the Promised Land in the Old Testament (see Deut. 4:1; 6:18; 16:20).³² The kingdom grows to be sure, and no doubt God causes it to grow by employing means (like Christians), but we are never told to create, expand, or usher in the kingdom just as the Israelites were not commanded to establish Canaan. Pray for the kingdom, yes; but not build it.

Most importantly, I have a hard time hearing the gospel in the missional critique of the church. At best, the gospel is about a "relationship with Jesus."³² At worst it is nothing but a "personal life-transforming

experience”³³ and “people realizing their full potential as beings created in the image of God.”³⁴ It’s possible to put a good face on all these euphemisms, but this is not a clear gospel.

When I hear people getting sick of church, I almost always see at the same time a minimizing of, or growing indifference toward, or ambiguous terminology for such phrases as “substitutionary atonement,” “justification by faith alone,” “the necessity of faith and repentance,” “the utter inability of man to save himself,” and “the centrality of the cross and resurrection.” I really want to assume that the new missional Christians still believe we are

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THE CHURCH FOCUSED
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sinner in need of grace, and that Jesus’ death paid our debt and propitiated the wrath of God, and that we must repent of our sin and trust in Jesus alone for our salvation. I want to assume this, but I wish I didn’t have to. I wish the glory of Christ crucified, the offense

of the cross, and the necessity of conversion were more explicitly stated and more clearly central.

I can’t help but feel that lurking beneath the surface in much of the current disillusionment with the church is a dis-ease with the traditional message of salvation (see chapter 3). People are passionate about the poor, the environment, and third-world debt. But they seem embarrassed by a violent, bloody atonement for sin, let alone any mention of the afterlife that hangs in the balance. Everyone, it seems, has a vision for the church that Jesus talked about in Matthew 16:18—the church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. Many people read this today as a word about the church’s role in liberating the oppressed, bringing shalom, or storming “the authority structures and control centers of evil.”³⁵ But the reference to the “gates of hades” is a Jewish euphemism for death (see Isa. 38:10, which uses

the Hebrew term *sheol*). Jesus' initial description of the church focused not on changing the world but on the hope of eternal life.

My observation is that as people grow tired of hearing about the atonement, salvation, the cross, and the afterlife, they grow tired of church. Because the more that sin and redemption and heaven and hell recede into the background, the more the church becomes just one among several options for making a difference in the world.

So as much as the church has been nothing but a holy huddle at times and as much as I admire zeal for good works, there is a danger in much of the missional literature that the gospel of God's grace toward sinners gets swallowed up in urgent calls for world redemption and cultural transformation. There is a danger of centering our churches on adopting schools and offering parenting classes instead of being centered on the message of a heavenly Father who adopts unworthy children of wrath through the work of His Son on the cross. There is a danger that we find our unity in doing good missional deeds for our community and not in the good news of the gospel. There's a danger our Christianity becomes all imperative and no indicative, all about what we need to do with God and little about what God's done for us. There's a danger that when people get disinterested in the gospel, they get disinterested in the church. And once they leave the church, they've left the only institution whose mission aims for eternity and whose gospel is truly good news.

NOTES

1. As quoted in David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 145.
2. *Ibid.*, 119.
3. *Ibid.*, xviii.
4. *Ibid.*, 141.
5. David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 15.
6. Neil Cole, *Organic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 91. Later in this same paragraph, Cole says “This is the mentality in Christian ‘churchianity.’” But I think the “mentality,” which is clearly an unhelpful one for Cole, refers to the desire “to keep current organizations alive for as long as possible” not to the sentiment that American Christianity is dying. On page 33, he says the church “is deluded into thinking she is well, when indeed she is deathly ill.”
7. Quoted in Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 137.
8. George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale, 2005), 36.
9. Olson, *Church in Crisis*, 26. Barna’s polling numbers for the same question ranged from 43 to 47 percent for the same time period.
10. Olson, *Church in Crisis*, 28, 34–35.
11. *Ibid.*, 28.
12. *Ibid.*, 180. Likewise, each year church planting (4,000 per annum) continues to outstrip church closures (3,700 per annum), so that the total number of churches in America is increasing (by 300 per annum). The growth is not keeping up with increases in total population, which Olson estimates necessitates a net of over 3,000 new churches a year (147).
13. *Ibid.*, 28–31.
14. *Ibid.*, 36.
15. Michael S. Hamilton and Jennifer McKinney, “Turning the Mainline Around: New Sociological Studies Show That Evangelicals May Well Succeed at Renewing Wayward Protestantism,” *Christianity Today*, August 1, 2003, at <http://ctlibrary.com/16902>, as cited in Olson, *Church in Crisis*, 146–47.
16. See Joseph Bottum, “The Death of Protestant America,” *First Things*, August/September 2008, 23–33.
17. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (1975; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 126.
18. Quoted in Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–2005* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2005), 53.
19. *Ibid.*, 9.

20. Ibid., 249.
21. Reggie McNeal said this at a live One Thing conference in 2008; see <http://www.rca.org/Page.aspx?pid=3721>. See also Brian McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 120–23.
22. Steve Conrad, “I’m Sorry: One Christian Apologizes to the World” in Spencer Burke, *Out of the Ooze* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2007), 22.
23. Brian Sanders, *Life After Church* (Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity, 2007), 116–17.
24. Sarah Cunningham, *Dear Church: Letters from a Disillusioned Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 21.
25. Reggie McNeal, *Present Future* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 26.
26. Mike Derschon, “Counter-Consumer Culture,” in Burke, *Out of the Ooze*, 95.
27. Cunningham, *Dear Church*, 20–21.
28. Barna, *Revolution*, 118.
29. “Dan Kimball’s Missional Misgivings” found at *Leadership Journal*, Fall 2008, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2008/12/dan_kimballs_mi.html. The text has been modified to reflect Kimball’s original submission to *Leadership Journal* (with minor corrections from Kimball himself).
30. John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), 35.
31. See Brian Vickers, “The Kingdom of God in Paul’s Gospel,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 12, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 62.
32. McNeal, *Present Future*, 82.
33. Ibid., 17.
34. Ibid., 73.
35. Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 118. See also Cole, *Organic Church*, 10; and Cunningham, *Dear Church*, 166.