

A MISSIONAL CHURCH EMPHASIZES MINISTRY NOT MAINTENANCE MATTHEW 28:18-20

I've been going to church all of my life. It's amazing to me the excuses people offer for not wanting to go to church. They don't realize how lame they are unless you offer an analogy. For instance, here are some possible excuses for not wanting to attend an OSU football game. Do any of them sound lame to you? Whenever you go to a game, they ask for money. The other fans don't care about you. The seats are too hard. The coach never visits you. The referee makes calls you don't agree with. Some of the games go into overtime and make you late for dinner. The band plays songs you don't know. You have other things to do at game time. Your parents took you to too many games when you were growing up. You know more than the coaches do anyway. You can be just as good a fan at the lake. You won't take your kids to a game either. They must choose for themselves which teams to follow. Well, the fact remains that most people don't want to come to this or any church. That's no laughing matter.

Last week I began a four part message series on what it means for a church to be missional. What's a "missional" church? I suggested that it simply means a church that is biblical and effective. It's a church that is reaching people in its community for Jesus and it's a church that is helping its members and attendees grow in their faith. I realize that I run the risk of boring you with this subject, so let me remind you again why we need to think together about this matter. First and foremost, if you're a follower of Jesus today, the Bible teaches in numerous places that you need to be an active part of a local church. You need to be discerning. Not every church deserves your involvement. Not every church is interested in being biblical or effective. I believe our church desires to be both biblical and effective, in other words, to be missional. It is my prayer and hope that it will increasingly deserve your involvement.

Secondly, we are gathering to vote on a new constitution this morning. I felt it was important to address from the pulpit why and how this change helps us become more biblical and effective. Last week, I suggested that the governance and organizational model in the new constitution helps to release our people for more "hands on" ministry by reducing the need for meetings. Less meetings; more ministry. Less administration by groups; more ministry. Less overall bureaucracy; more ministry. It's an effort to be more streamlined so that as a church we can focus more on what we need to focus upon: hands on ministry. That leads me today to offer a second prevailing characteristic of a missional church: it emphasizes ministry over maintenance. Let me try and get at this by asking and trying to answer two questions. Here's the first one.

WHY DOES OUR CHURCH EXIST?

Something I read recently pointed out that there is one of three possible answers to that question. The first answer would be, "This congregation exists for us –

the people inside.” That would be the outlook of an inwardly focused church; in other words, the primary task of the church is caring for its own members and attendees. Win Arn, a man who has researched and written widely on missions and church growth, reveals that in his own surveys on this subject that 89% of American church attendees told him that the primary purpose of their church is to serve their needs and the needs of their families.

The second answer is this one, “This congregation exists for others – the people outside.” That would be the outlook of an outwardly focused church; in other words, the primary people to be served by the ministries of the church are folk who aren’t even here yet. That outward focus could be expressed in a variety of ways: through altar calls, seeker services or community ministries, for example. Now, you may feel less than satisfied with either answer to that question. Fortunately, there is a third possible answer to our question, “Why does our church exist?” Here it is: “This congregation exists for both – the people inside and the people outside.” In other words, we’re here for everybody! If you’re like me, you probably like that third answer best. It appeals to our sense of fair play. It can certainly be supported by what the Bible says about the church.

Now, here’s the real question we need to answer: “Who will we serve first?” Granted we need to meet the needs of people inside and outside the church, but who will we serve first? If you say, “Well, both equally” our church will be destined to become hopelessly inward. Why’s that? Because you know as well as I do, that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The needs of those who are already here will always be more apparent and “in your face” than the needs of those who aren’t here yet. Focusing on just ourselves is the easiest thing in the world for any church to do. It’s like gravity. If you jump out of a second story window, you don’t have to work intentionally at falling 20 feet. “Come on, gravity, kick in, will ya?” No, it just kind of happens without you working at it. The natural gravitational pull for any church is towards inwardness. So, for a church to focus on others, to become outward and to overcome inwardness requires absolute and sustained intentionality. Can you overcome gravity? Sure, it’s called an airplane! But building an airplane requires an intentional effort. Becoming a church that exists for others requires intentional effort day after day, year after year. It’s like building an airplane! Otherwise, any church will just give in and settle for the comfort zone of being concerned about only those who are here already. So the challenge for every truly missional church is to create a primarily outwardly focused ministry that also takes care of its own.

Is that approach taught in the Bible? Indeed, it is! Let’s look at a familiar passage in God’s Word. As many of you know, this is often referred to as the Great Commission. You might say that it’s Jesus’ answer to the question, “Why does our church exist?” Someone has suggested that many churches have so ignored the impact and importance of Jesus’ words here that it might be called the Great Omission rather than the Great Commission! I don’t have time today to

do a full explanation of these verses, but just observe with me a couple of things about what Jesus says here.

Why our church exists is spelled out by Jesus here comprehensively, deliberately and intentionally. You'll notice that four verbs shape the structure of what He says: "go, make disciples, baptizing and teaching." Only one of those verbs is in the imperative mood – "make disciples." That's the main thing for any and every church – "make disciples." That's Jesus' objective, goal, and measurement of success for every local church. That's the bottom line: are we making disciples?

So, what does that look like – this making of disciples? That's what the other three verbs indicate. The process begins with proactive, intentional outreach to the culture we live in. Go! So, again, what should we do first? What should we do primarily? Go! Some of the people we go to will decide to follow Jesus and they will publicly identify with Jesus. That's the place of baptism. Those who are baptized will need to be taught to obey all of Jesus' commands. That's the place of teaching. Of course, obeying Jesus' commands will involve them in helping to make more disciples. It's a circular process – go, baptize, teach; go, baptize, teach. Each action is dependent on the one before it. You will have someone to baptize, if you go. But if you don't go, you won't baptize anyone. You will have someone to teach, if you baptize. But if you don't baptize anyone, you won't have anyone to teach. You will have someone to go out, if you teach him or her to follow all of Jesus' commands. But if you don't teach him or her Jesus' commands, he or she won't go. When a church does all three faithfully and intentionally, the end result is that it makes disciples for the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a description of a missional church: a church that has a primarily outwardly focused ministry that also takes care of its own.

What's the opposite of a missional church? Some have suggested the word "maintenance." A maintenance church is one that is primarily concerned with maintaining itself. Now, I don't think any church is 100% missional and very few are 100% maintenance. If being totally missional is one end of the spectrum and being totally maintenance is on the other, probably every church is somewhere along that continuum. It's helpful to contrast the differences. So, here's a second big question I want to answer today:

MAINTENANCE OR MISSIONAL: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Let me suggest five key differences between a maintenance church and a missional church. The first one you could call our primary focus. It won't surprise you to learn that a maintenance church is primarily focused inward. This kind of a church has a strong club feeling about it. Its members put high value on being socially and relationally comfortable with the other members. This kind of church exists to meet the needs of its members. It's no surprise, then, that its members would have a strong consumer kind of orientation or mentality. They chose this church because it has the best music program, the best preaching or

the best youth program, for example. If and when its programs no longer meet their needs, they will usually leave for another church that does.

By way of contrast, a missional church is primarily focused outward. It doesn't ignore the needs or concerns of people already in the church, but meeting those needs isn't allowed to become the only goal of its ministry. The emphasis is on outsiders while taking care of its own. Its ministries are intentionally designed to connect members with activities and people outside the church. Its leaders are helping its members figure out what it means to go out effectively to the surrounding community and culture. It's trying to take seriously what Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:13-16 NIV)

Here's a second key difference: our attitude towards and effect upon our community. A maintenance church is essentially isolated from its community which results in little transformation. Sometimes it can be sheer indifference. Sometimes it can be genuine fear of the community around the church. Maintenance churches don't have confidence that they can have a positive impact on the people that live around the church. They become risk adverse. They develop a fortress mentality. Much energy, time and money is expended in trying to protect the church from the community rather than engage it.

A missional church is involved in its community which results in transformation at many levels. Indifference isn't an option, because a missional church knows that people matter to God – especially lost people. Missional churches have a high level of confidence that the Holy Spirit can enable them to make a positive difference in the community God has put them in. Instead of seeing the church as a fortress, missional people see it as an army sent by God to penetrate enemy territory with His love. A missional church takes Jesus seriously when He said, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem (that's our family and friends – those closest to us), throughout Judea, in Samaria (that's the community and cultures around us – those probably different than us), and to the ends of the earth (that's the rest of the world)." (Acts 1:8 NLT)

I believe a third difference between mission and maintenance churches is our organizational structure. A maintenance church demands a high investment of members' time and energy in maintaining its current programs. It values bureaucracy. It limits flexibility and creativity. A missional church calls for a low investment of members' time and energy in maintenance. It wants to release members to do more hands on ministry by reducing bureaucracy. It encourages flexibility and creativity. Again, I am convinced our proposed constitution moves

us towards being more missional because it reduces significantly the number of members who must help administrate or maintain the church's programs.

Here's a fourth difference: our understanding of outreach. A maintenance church wants to be attractional and occasional in its outreach. It depends entirely on a "come and see" approach to outreach. In other words, it wants to attract people to the church building. It says to people outside of the church, "Come and see what we're doing at the church. Come and see our great programs. Come and see!" Additionally, outreach is seen as only an occasional part of its ministry – something you do, but not all the time. A missional church, on the other hand, is incarnational and continual in its outreach. While it employs "come and see" approaches from time to time, the emphasis – the accent – is on "go, be and do." It invites members of the church to get out of the building and touch lives where those outside of the church live out their lives. It says to people outside of the church, "Because you are of eternal value to God, we are going to go out to you and see where we can make a difference."

Outreach is continual. It's a lifestyle – the very essence of a missional church's existence. I understand that some years ago now, our church's logo was "Every member a minister." I like that. That's actually missional. May I suggest a slight revision, however? "Every member a missionary." It used to be that we thought of sending missionaries, funding missionaries and praying for missionaries because we lived in a culture that was largely evangelized. Our American culture today is a whole lot more similar to what Jesus, Paul and the first Christians experienced some 2000 years ago than we might imagine. If you're a follower of Jesus, you're also a missionary: a living, breathing, imperfect but real incarnation of Jesus to a culture desperately in need of God's grace. A missional church takes God's Word seriously when it says, "God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives...." (2 Corinthians 5:19-20 MSG)

Here's a final difference: our definition of success. A maintenance church is all about enlargement. It feels successful when more people attend its worship services than the year before. It feels like it's fulfilling God's will when it builds additional facilities. The goal is getting more and more people to come into the church. On the other hand, a missional church is all about extension. It feels successful when more of its members have been released to and involved in ministry and mission projects than the year before. It feels like it's fulfilling God's will when more of its members are having a transformational impact in the world than the year before. The goal is getting more and more people to go out from the church. It's comfortable with numerical growth, but as a by product of its ministry not as the goal. A missional church takes seriously the words of Jesus when He said, " 'You didn't choose me. I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using my name.'" (John 15:16 NLT)

In the early days of World War 2 - the spring of 1940 to be exact - Adolph Hitler's panzer divisions were mopping up French troops and preparing for a siege of Great Britain. The Dutch had already surrendered, as had the Belgians. The British army floundered on the coast of France in the port of Dunkirk. Nearly a quarter million young British soldiers and over 100,000 other allied troops faced capture or death. The Fuehrer's troops closed in on an easy kill. The Royal Navy of Great Britain had enough ships to save barely 17,000 men. The House of Commons was told to brace itself for "hard and heavy tidings." Then, while a despairing world watched with fading hope, something absolutely amazing happened. A bizarre fleet of ships appeared on the horizon of the English Channel – that body of water between Great Britain and France. Trawlers, tugs, fishing sloops, lifeboats, sailboats, pleasure craft, an island ferry named Gracie Fields, and even the America's Cup challenger Endeavor, all manned by civilian sailors, sped to the rescue. That ragtag naval armada eventually rescued 338,682 men and returned them to the shores of England, as pilots of the Royal Air Force jockeyed with the German Luftwaffe in the skies above the channel. It was one of the most remarkable, unlikely and successful naval operations in history.

The Church of Jesus Christ, likewise, is God's ragtag naval armada. The Church – and this local expression of it along with every other local church - is a mix of flawed individuals on a rescue operation commissioned by God. Billions of people around the world – several thousand of them living right around this church – are trapped in their own sin and separation from God. The devil is closing in for an easy kill. So what if we aren't perfect. We need to go out. So what if we make some mistakes. We need to go out. So what if we lack some training. We need to go out. What's a missional church? It's a church that emphasizes ministry not maintenance – going out not just staying put.