

## **The story of the missional Church**

by **Stephen A. Hayner**

8/20/07

“The Church reformed, ever to be reformed”<sup>1</sup> has been a motto of “Reformed” churches since the 16th century. It recognizes that the church in every age must bow afresh to Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church. In our day, I believe that the Spirit of God is calling us to reform once again and it will happen only as we give fresh attention to the Word of God.

### **God’s Story**

So we begin with God’s story. *What is God doing in the world? What is God’s purpose for the church?*

From the time of the Fall, it was clear that *God was on a mission*. God was passionately involved. God pursued humanity. God never gave up.

Along the way God invited his people to join that mission. Israel was blessed to be a blessing — called to be a light to the Gentiles and a witness to the nations. But mostly they hoarded their blessing and walled themselves off.

In the fullness of time, God slipped into history. Jesus was sent to fulfill God’s mission. He brought reconciliation to the alienated, compassion to the deprived, and justice to the oppressed. Jesus died to free people from the shame, the guilt, and the eternal consequences of their sin. And Jesus was raised from the dead to guarantee hope and to shape a new community of followers in the world.

On Pentecost God poured out the Holy Spirit to live in and to empower Jesus’ followers to join the mission, too. What God had been doing from the time of the Fall — and what God had brought to completion in Jesus — God continued to do through the Church. Jesus commissioned his followers, saying:

- As you are going, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all the ways that I have taught you.
- As the Father has sent me, so now I am sending you!
- You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And it began to happen. In the first centuries the Holy Spirit pushed Jesus' followers to all corners of the world. By the middle of the 2nd century, Justin Martyr declared: "There is not one single race of men whether barbarians, or Greeks, or whatever they may be called, nomads, or vagrants, or herdsmen living in tents, among whom prayers and giving of thanks are not offered through the name of the crucified Jesus."<sup>2</sup> The Kingdom was advancing.

### **The Church's Story**

But in the 4th century something began to happen to the church. As Christianity in the West became the official religion, the Church began to be less of a movement and more of an institution. Even the use of the word "church" began to change. Instead of referring to God's people, "church" began to refer to a building or an institution.

- God's people began to behave as if God's primary activity had moved indoors. The church building became the place where things happened: where the Gospel was rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Instead of moving into the culture, the church compelled people to come in. *And the church became a clubhouse.* Baptism became the initiation to the club, rather than ordination for mission.
- The church thought of itself as the exclusive repository of God's grace. "Missions" came to be thought of as programs that somehow took the grace of God and the message of the Church into the enemy territory. The "us and them" view took over. There was a split between the sacred and the secular.
- As the Church became more institutional, leadership became professional and hierarchical. Leadership was less about equipping people to be a part of God's work, and more about building the institution and caring for those who gathered.

All this wasn't so bad, as long as the church was in the center of the culture. Buildings were built. People were organized. Leaders were ordained and kept things going. People were taken care of, and many flourished. Sometimes the church heard God's call to "go" and looked toward the world that did not know God. Then the church would take up the banner of Christ and march from the heart of Christendom into the heart of darkness. The great missionary text was Luke 14.2<sup>3</sup>: "Compel them to come *in*."

### **The Failure of Christendom**

About 200 years ago, the "Christendom" model of doing "church" began to fail in the West. It wasn't too noticeable at first, because the church still had a lot of power in the culture. And those who were smart worked hard to make things work better.

- When church "gatherings" began to lose steam, and weren't attracting as many people, we looked into the culture to find what people liked, and we tried to make our gatherings more interesting. We worked at

marketing.

- When we began to lose the “culture wars,” we revised our theology and made it more “acceptable” to the world. We planned more strategies and we figured out how to leverage whatever political power we could muster.
- When the church’s organization didn’t seem to be effective anymore, we reorganized. We wrote new vision statements. We formed more committees. We spent more money and we expanded the number of people in the bureaucracy.

But here’s the bottom line: *This way of thinking about how to “do church better” hasn’t worked.* The Church in the West is dying. Europe is now “post-Christian.” The Church in the U.S. has not grown (in percentage) in more than 100 years. And many denominations, including our own, are falling precipitously. People are no longer inspired by or attracted to institutional religion. The church is being pushed to the margins.

### **The Missional Church**

But the larger global church has grown more in the 20th century than in all the previous centuries combined. Every year 27 million people confess Jesus as Savior for the first time. So where is the church growing? There are now 90 million Christians in Africa with exponential growth. In Latin America the church is booming. The same is true in parts of Asia, with 50 million believers now in India and perhaps 85 million in China. What can we learn from the parts of the global church that are growing rather than declining?

1. Churches that are growing see the primary purpose of the church as joining God’s mission in the world, rather than focusing on what happens in their clubhouses. Jesus says, As the Father has sent me, so I’m sending you. The action is out there, not in here.

God didn’t just stay in his own “place.” He didn’t market a program. What God did was to become one of us.

Where is the church on Tuesday afternoon? The “church” is not a building or a program. The “church,” as the word is used in Scripture, is a “community of believers.” On Tuesday, the “church” is in neighborhoods, in offices, in schools, and in shops.

God is at work in all these places and in every corner of our world. God’s call to the Church is to go and see what God is doing, to let our hearts be broken by the things that break God’s heart, and to witness to and join God’s work.

*We are God’s witnesses* — that is fundamental to our identity.

2. *Churches that are growing see the whole world as the arena of God’s work.* Life in the world is not an issue of “us vs. them” or “culture wars.” The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper declared: “There is not one square inch of the universe over which King Jesus does not claim, ‘This is mine!’” Missional churches follow a servant Christ into the world with expectation and boldness.

“Being sent” is the identity of the missional church. And we don’t have to go anywhere special to be sent. Our mission field begins where we are. The church is not an institution for others, but Kingdom people with others.

3. *Churches that are growing see their life together as preparation for joining God’s mission.* Together we worship the missional God. We encourage one another. We equip one another. We are a healing community of grace for one another. When we meet, the purpose is not to be a better organization, but to become a more faithful community in our witness.
4. *Churches that are growing see their leaders as “equippers.”* Leaders are called to build up, to preach, to teach, and to train everyone for God’s work in the world.

In the old way of doing church, what church leaders wanted was for the institution to grow — for more people to do “church work,” for the budget to be balanced — so that *they looked successful*. But in this new way of being church, leadership is helping everyone to turn their faces toward the world and to join Jesus in a lifestyle of witness, reconciliation, compassion, and justice.

*God is on a mission.* Tim Dearborn has stated: “The Church of God does not have a mission in the world. The God of mission has a Church in the world.”<sup>3</sup> Mission is not a program of the church, but its essence and its call.

We dream about a missional, distinctively Presbyterian, church — a church that sees God at work all around us and all around the world.

- We dream of a church connected through love for the Trinitarian God, transformed through the Spirit and Word, guided by our confessions, and involved with God’s work of reconciliation, compassion, and justice.
- We dream of a denomination that brings the best of its people, its theology, and its tradition and lays all at the feet of Jesus to be sanctified and used in the service of the Kingdom.
- We dream of apostolic communities filled with people who wake up each morning praising God for his love and life — and excited to see what adventures they might have as they meet Christ throughout the day.
- We dream of people who themselves are dreaming of planting new multiethnic fellowships in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces, in their schools, and in their places of recreation.
- We dream about partnering with God’s people around the globe, joyfully learning from our brothers and sisters, and contributing our resources to God’s work everywhere.

We will never solve all the problems of the church, but we can surely join Jesus in his mission throughout the world. When we begin to shape our churches consistently around Jesus’ commission we will enter the next Reformation.

*Stephen A. Hayner is the Peachtree Associate Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga. He has been*

*president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA and vice president for student affairs at Seattle Pacific University. He holds a B.A. from Whitman College in Washington, a M.T.S. from Harvard Divinity School, a Th.M. from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.*

1 Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.

2 Dial. cum Tryph., cxvii.

3 Short-Term Missions Workbook, p. 15.