

THE NECESSITY OF MISSION:
A RESPONSE TO GUDER'S "THE CHURCH AS MISSIONAL COMMUNITY"

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BY
JOEL JUPP

Over the past century, Protestants have been talking about mission more than ever. Following the lead of Kierkegaard before him, Karl Barth furthered the discussion with *Church Dogmatics* and *Missio Dei*, and by the 21st century, discussion about Christian mission has become commonplace in many of our denominations. So much has been written, in fact, that some church leaders have been saturated with talk about mission.¹

In an effort to better define “mission” and explain its necessity for ecclesiology, therefore, Darrell L. Guder has argued that the Church must be missional in nature because God is missional in nature. Missiology will help develop healthier theology, soteriology, and ecclesiology. This paper will examine Guder’s main argument, critique his proposal and suggest some clarifications, and finally, apply to a specific ministry context.

The Basics of Missional Ecclesiology

In his chapter “The Church as Missional Community,” Guder presents a strong case for the necessity of mission. The Church is missionary in its very nature, so ecclesiology without missiology suffers from a narrow and shortsighted understanding of the church. Guder argues that this is due to both historical and theological reasons.

Guder reminds his readers that the early Church was a community of mission. The Church was founded by converts and grown by converts. In its fledgling days, the Church was surrounded by the unconverted, which meant that numerical growth required outreach to those who were not yet part of the Church. When we read the book of Acts, we see the Church expanding from Jerusalem to Judea, then Samaria to the ends of the earth. The Church was fervent about mission because it had to be in order to survive.

Then, during the time of Constantine, the Church transformed from an “alternative community” to a “cultural power.” Guder proposes that this momentous shift had a hurtful effect upon the Church, and continues to hurt the Church, even to the present day. These historical developments had several dangerous effects, which are worth noting.

¹ Guder might disagree, but we will return to this point later in the paper.

First, the West reduced the importance of mission. Western Christianity lost its way after becoming a cultural power, as is evidenced by the fact that “mission” faded out of theological discussion. As Guder states, “For centuries, Western Christendom rarely spoke of “mission,” except as a technical term used by medieval theologians to discuss the internal dynamics of the Trinity.”² Clearly, because the word was used so sparingly, then it did not have a central place in the lives of everyday Christians. Eventually, the “fundamentally missional nature of the church” disappeared and was replaced with extreme individualism and consumerism.³

Second, because Western Christianity was so dominant, evangelism was “redefined” for the calling back of the already baptized. In this sense, evangelism was not much different than the recent marketing campaign *Catholics Come Home* that uses “evangomercials” to reach distant Catholics.⁴ (In the *Catholics Come Home* campaign, six out of seven links on the main page are for Catholics or Protestants, while only one link is for those of another faith.) When people around you have already heard about Jesus Christ, then mission can seem like a foreign concept. In light of this tendency, Christianization of a culture can lead to a decreased emphasis on mission, despite the fact Christianized cultures are more likely to offer the social benefits of Christian mission.⁵

Third, Christian cultural dominance led to theological error. The gospel became reduced to an individual experience, and as such, Christians became overly consumed with concerns of the afterlife and ensuring their own safe arrival in heaven. In Guder’s words, “The biblical message of salvation underwent a reductionism that resulted in emphasis upon individual salvation, how it was attained and how it was maintained.”⁶ With such an emphasis on the individual for centuries, the corporate mission of the church was forgotten.

² Darrell L Guder. “The Church as Missional Community.” *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*. Edited by Mark Husbands, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 115.

³ Guder, 118.

⁴ “Our Evangomercials.” *Catholics Come Home*.

<<http://www.catholicscomehome.org/our-evangomercials/>> (3 January 2012).

⁵ Mark A. Noll. *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 29-30.

⁶ Guder, 118.

In response to these errors, Guder offers a helpful reminder to American Evangelicals. To truly be evangelical, we must also be concerned about mission. The Western Church must turn the cultural tide of individualism and continue to develop its ecclesiology. It is possible to avoid the theological errors of our culture and recapture the missional essence of the Church.

Ultimately, mission matters because God is a missionary God. His mission is not merely one of His activities, but one of His *attributes*. The Father sent the Son, the Father and Son send the Spirit, and the Trinity sends the Church into the world to fulfill His purpose. Proper theology, therefore, should lead towards proper ecclesiology. God's own nature should inform us as to the nature of His Church.⁷

A Critique of Guder

Many of us would agree with Guder's assessment of contemporary Christianity here in the West, but his argument could be further clarified, qualified, and in some aspects, corrected. At this point, it is helpful to consider some of these weaknesses, so that we can determine what is most valuable in his argument.

Guder lacks clarity when it comes to what version of Western Christianity he is addressing. Although this book was published in 2005, talk about the missional nature of the Church has been gaining momentum for quite some time. Guder criticizes individualism within American churches, but that does not represent all of Western Christianity. It is unfortunate that Guder does not distinguish between various strands within Western ecclesiology, some which be more missional and others that would be less so.

Further, Guder does not distinguish between the various kinds of churches in Western Christianity. While Guder references Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom* and the growth of Christianity in the Global South, he fails to recognize the growth of the immigrant church in North America.⁸ In other words, the immigrant church in the West is *not* declining, despite the fact that it is influenced to some degree by Western theology.

⁷ This is why it could also be said that missiology leads to theology.

⁸ Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. 3rd Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 238.

Likewise, the immigrant church is also influencing the American church. This reality undermines Guder's argument that Western theology is somehow to blame. It might also suggest that John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers may be the culprits rather than Constantine.

Even more problematic, Guder generalizes several centuries of church history, and one is left to wonder if it is a fair treatment of so many centuries. Considering his oversight of the influence of the Enlightenment and the differences between American and European Christianity, it appears that his perspective is somewhat affected by his own distaste for the current state of the Western Church. While that is certainly understandable, generalizing so many centuries of church history weakens his argument.

Guder believes, for instance, that the Western Church "redefined" or "reduced" the gospel to make it more individualistic. Admittedly, there was certainly an imbalance – evident by the indulgences sold by the Catholic Church prior to the Reformation – but it is unfair to represent *all* of Western Christianity as misunderstanding the gospel. While Jesus taught about the corporate aspect of the Kingdom of God, Jesus *also* talked about individuals and their place in the Kingdom.⁹ Later in the chapter, Guder admits the importance of an individual's response, but this seems to contradict his earlier suggestion that individualism was "imported" by Constantinian Christianity.

At our current point in Church history, the Western Church is not separate from the rest of the world. The Church has been affected by globalization, so American Church is not merely affected by Europe but from elsewhere in the world. As Mark Noll points out in his book *The New Shape of World Christianity*, the American Church is *distinct* from the European Church (not to mention the 3rd century church!), yet Guder largely overlooks these distinctions.¹⁰ While no one expects the Southern Church to overwhelm the Western Church, it is crucially important to recognize these distinctions.¹¹

Finally, it would be beneficial to consider the Eastern Church as a foil for Guder's argument. The Eastern Church may be less mission-oriented when compared to West, in light of the modern missionary movement, the evangelical movement, and even the house

⁹ e.g., Luke 15 provides several examples of Jesus' concern for individuals.

¹⁰ Noll, 9-14.

¹¹ Jenkins, 238.

church movement. Surely, there will not be consensus on whether the West or East has been more missional. However, it would have been helpful to examine if this is a problem limited to and caused by the West, or if it extends beyond the West.

Real-Life Application

On the whole, I agree with Guder's call to develop a more missional-influenced ecclesiology in North America. While we might disagree about the cause, we face a Western Church that is in large part declining. One reason, of course, is the fact that we cannot agree what the Church is, who is part of the Church, and what the Church should do. Despite these disagreements, as Barth stated, "theology is a function of the Church," so the Church should not give up.¹² We desperately need a more robust ecclesiology, and Guder is correct by drawing our attention to mission.

In the churches where I have served, I have found mission to be a uniting force that moves people beyond trivial concerns of local church life (e.g., what instruments do we use?) towards a more holistic view of the Church. If Walter Bruggemann is correct in saying that our current situation is comparable to exile, then we would benefit from refocusing our mission as the Church. This chapter provides a helpful reminder to keep mission in the forefront of what we do.

Finally, I was profoundly struck by Guder's mention of discipleship and sanctification. If we believe that "mission" structures the Church's work in the world, then discipleship and sanctification should be seen as integral parts of this process. Following Jesus and pursuing holiness are not fringe activities for the pietists among us who desire to be more spiritual for the sake of spirituality. Rather, all of us should pursue discipleship and sanctification – not only for our own edification, but for the sake of the entire world. We participate as people engaged in a mission that is much bigger than us.

¹² Karl Barth et al., *Church Dogmatics, Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part I* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 3.

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