

# Thinking About A More Robust Missional Ecclesiology

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by Bill Randall

My role with CRM (Church Resource Ministries/ChurchNEXT) feels like an amazing fit. I had the privilege to design and now direct an initiative focused on discovering and developing a new breed of apostolic leaders who are committed to launching and leading movements of the gospel that prioritize making and multiplying disciples who are equipped to do the same and leave new expressions of “church” in their quake. One of the challenges we will have to tackle is the current popular understanding of “church” and its mission.

The word “ecclesia” (what has been wrongly translated “church” in most of our bibles) was a common Greek term that described an assembly called out for an explicit purpose. In light of this, when the New Testament writers used the word “ecclesia” they were describing an assembly called out to fulfill Christ’s mission.

We learn from the pages of Scripture that Christ’s ecclesia has three primary responsibilities: 1) To worship God. 2) To love one another. 3) To live out God’s mission in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The biblical concept of ecclesia is expressed in two ways: The ecclesia universal is made up of all people from all time who are in Christ by God’s grace. A local ecclesia is a geographic (therefore “local”) expression of the body of Christ living out the purposes of ecclesia in order to advance God’s Kingdom in their neighborhood and beyond.

What I have observed is that how a “church” begins hugely determines what their mission will be. It is exhaustingly popular today to hear and read about the need for a “missional church” as opposed to the common inward focused institutions that create “sit and split” consumer Christians rather than courageous missionaries who live to make more and better disciples of Jesus and advance his Kingdom. Ingrown, consumeristic, institutional churches often have robust missional slogans and adjunct missional outings, but sorely lack a functional, missional DNA. And is it any wonder when

most church plants launch with the priority and passion to begin as soon as possible with a more “relevant” gathering that will woo other already placed Christians to “come” and be blessed by their new venue experience?

This disordered ecclesiology that begins with a GATHERING, then moves to preaching the GOSPEL, is done in the hopes that the strategy will one day make DISCIPLES. The sad truth is that after the vast majority of the budget, calendar space and energy is spent up front on the GATHERING, little if anything is functionally left for the actual mission Jesus commanded us to carry on.

I believe it is indeed possible to reinvent a missionless church and move it to become an authentic, outwardly focused and mobilized movement of the gospel. Yet this would require the resurrection power of Jesus coming upon a tribe of extra-ordinary, courageous leaders who are willing to stay the course as the costly reality of such change becomes evident. And I am certain it would require the tangible assistance of an apostolic voice in the mix to help shape and sustain the transformation.

So what is the alternative to launching new works from the common practice exercised today that is seriously failing if measured by a Kingdom scorecard? The current and common practice is to activate the following sequence:

- Launch a gathering
- Preach the gospel
- Hopefully make disciples

Rather than this typical approach to church planting embraced by the majority of western denominations, I believe that truly effective new expressions of ecclesia are launched as current members of the body of Christ:

- Share the gospel in their sphere of influence
- Make obedient disciples of Jesus
- Train emerging leaders
- Multiply gatherings that covenant to gather to grow and scatter to serve

The only way this vision of ecclesia can get and stay on track is when the pastoral and apostolically gifted leaders learn to strategically work together. It obviously also requires that the prophetic, evangelistic and teaching gifts are rightly appreciated and utilized. No doubt it requires the five-fold ministry profile (as described in Ephesians 4:11ff.) is activated in God’s mission to successfully make more disciples and advance God’s Kingdom.

Yet the greatest issue that challenges the forward motion of a robust gospel movement is the disconnect between the local/pastoral instinct and that of the trans-local/apostolic instinct resident in the body of Christ.

This challenge is both my personal experience and long standing observation of the Christian movement. I must give more attention to this in the last years of my life and live courageously into the challenge. Lord help me!

Finally, I want to encourage you to read the New Testament specifically exchanging the word “church” with the better translation of ecclesia as “an assembly called out for Christ’s mission.” It will help you rediscover the bible as an inspired document that serves as a radical missional roadmap.