

Guder, Darrell L. ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 280 pp.

*Missional Church* is billed as a “splendid book of essays” in one of the back cover blurbs. However, in its opening chapter Darrell Guder encourages the readers to view it as on composite piece. He says the writers hoped to achieve “a cohesive exposition of the missional calling and practice of the church” (16). This they have accomplished. The work is better by the team’s having come together. In possibly the most indicative twist of their authenticity they have modeled the team concept they call for in postmodern times.

The six-member Missiologist team-panel purports the thesis that the solution for the current crisis in postmodern North America is authentic, incarnational Christianity which finds its fulfillment in the *missio Dei*. It is their contention that the entire history of the church on the North American continent (exclusively the United States and Canada) is the by-product of two major influencers: Christendom, and Modernity. Seismic shifts are underway that resist against these structures that were never healthy to begin with.

Guder, *et tel*, define Christendom as the system of a church-state partnership embedded in a culture. This dates to the fourth century when Constantine declared Christianity the official religion. Christianity came to *the right side of the tracks*, so to speak, at that time, receiving numerous sanctions. Christendom continues unabated at the close of the twentieth century. Even though the United States has never had a state church, due to the uniqueness of its development, each of the denominations jockeyed for position in terms of privilege and entitlement. This resulted in what the team calls a “functional Christendom.” The outcome is this: try as it may, the Church cannot avoid reduction of its cardinal truths so long as it receives incentives from its government. Canada took a different route but ended up with similar results.

Modernity has had significant impact on the North American church as well. Though modernity may find varied expression in numerous cultures around the world (hence the specific focus on the North American template), there are core components: rationalism in pure reason; individuality; and the conglomeration of the totality of individual’s collective ideas as best for society. This has left many persons feeling despondent, isolated, and hopeless. As the Church has operated from this mindset, it has progressively lost more and more influence and is no longer the custodian of postmodern culture.

Guder, *et tel*, contend the Church must change its base of operation by dealing with spiritual, theological issues in its core. They trace the development of the true marks of the Church throughout its history. The Reformation brought about positive, needed changes; but because it straddled the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the Reformation was tainted by faulty logic that placed emphasis on where the event happened – e.g. a church building – to the point that some fallout was detrimental. Ironically, the team found a better model for the marks in the earlier Nicene Creed, only they believe it would be better stated in reverse: apostolic, catholic (universal), holy, one. They see a progression in the four steps. *Missional Church* endorses the cores biblical, historical, contextual, eschatological, and practice. Or, as it is often stated in the book, “the sign, foretaste, instrument and agent of god’s inbreaking kingdom” (10, 80, 192, 228, and 266). From early in the work the Church is defined as “God’s instrument for God’s mission” (8).

Possibly the greatest insight the book offers is for churches to be “centered set” and at the same time “bounded set.” This offers the individual the chance to journey with a group of Christ’s followers before “signing up” to observe authentic values lived out before them. Yet at this point I felt the team was somewhat incongruous. The book strongly advocates that there is no such thing as a “dichotomy between a supposed invisible church and the visible one” (13, cf. 207). I

understand the team to side with the logic of Hans Küng, there is only one church that is both visible and invisible at the same time. I feel the team could have done more to make the demarcation absolutely clear while still encouraging interested onlookers to journey with authentic believers. Perhaps it is a mere matter of semantics; but the statement “the missional church must be both centered and bounded” (207), with which I agree, seems to argue for an invisible church within a visible church.

This book is substantial in its contribution. All structures change. The team wants the structure of the Church to change in ways consistent with the gospel; tradition and context. In such a missional way the Church guards against repeating errors.

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