

Over the last 7 or 8 years I have become increasingly convinced that the incarnation is the primary biblical lens through which we are to view the missionary activity of Jesus and in turn the church.

When 'the word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood' he had many options as to how he would live his life as the 'son of God'. Yet, somewhat paradoxically it would seem, he spent most of that journey quite intentionally as the 'son of man', living a simple life in a small town for his first 30 years, prior to any recognised 'ministry'. So much so that when he returned to preach the people laughed and mocked him saying 'He's just a carpenter... Mary's boy... Who does he think he is?' It begs the question, was Jesus a lousy missionary or was there something quite intentional and radically subversive about the way he approached his life and mission that we need to learn from and emulate? If Jesus were alive today and his mission was still to 'seek out and save the lost' what might he do?...

Would he hire a building, set up a sound system, develop a music team, drama team, and then do local letterbox drops advising people that they could come and be part of his church on Sunday? Frankly I don't believe this approach to mission would rate a blip on his strategic radar. The so called 'attractional' mode of mission centres its focus on the church service and is dedicated to producing an event that pagans will want to come to. The theory goes that the more professional the service is, the funkier the music, the better the coffee, and so on... the more likely the unbelievers will come, hence the term 'attractional'. As such, the success of mission in this mode is almost always measured by the number who attend on Sunday. While a small minority of larger churches do experience some success with this approach, the overwhelming majority of smaller churches attempting to be Hillsong clones continue to overwork and burn out their members every week because they cannot offer the same quality of music, preaching or other services that their mega-church comrades down the road are able to provide.

I would argue that this 'attractional mission', while effective for a few, is actually a case of putting the cart before the horse. Deciding on a form of church and then trying to make it so that people want to come is mission in reverse. There is a growing awareness that pagans do not want to come to church and simply making the Sunday event more attractive is not the answer to this problem. Perhaps the question we ought to ask ourselves is 'why do we think they would want to come to church?' Was it ever Jesus' intention that non-Christians should seek us and desire to attend our worship events? Or didn't he say quite clearly that it was his calling, and now ours to 'seek out and save the lost' to 'go' to their world and enculturate the gospel there.

By contrast the incarnational approach to mission is refreshingly simple. It requires us to live amongst the people in our communities, love them, share the good news of the kingdom both in action and in speech and then as people become followers of Christ to form up indigenous communities of faith that reflect the specific context. This requires no great resources or buildings, no slick marketing plans and no highly talented people. In incarnational mission the gatherings exist to support the believers as they move out in mission rather than being seen as the place to bring people to. While attractional churches will continue to dominate the landscape of the Christian world, I strongly believe that hope for the future lies increasingly with an incarnational approach to mission that takes both gospel and context seriously and sends Christians out as missionaries rather than calling pagans to come and attend church.

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