

Salt, Light, and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology

Graham Hill

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The Missional church conversation, as Michael Frost explains, has called the church back to getting a fresh understanding of Jesus, recalibrating around mission, and then thinking about how to shape church (Christology determining missiology, determining ecclesiology). That is a helpful corrective to pragmatic preoccupations of Church Growth that wants to find a model of church that will best work, let alone postmodern consumer mentality that looks for a church system that “meets my needs”. Reencountering Jesus and recalibrating around mission is a healthy reality check for churches. Nevertheless, it is also important to rethink our foundations for church for our 21st century context. Given the demands of our context, and the mission of God that the church is invited to cooperate with, what we need is a distinctively missional ecclesiology. But who can we learn from? What guiding frameworks will best shape a missional ecclesiology?

Graham Hill has been exploring these questions over the last decade as a Baptist pastor, church planter and coach and champion of church leaders and missional experiments. He did his PhD on missional ecclesiology at Flinders University of South Australia (2009), on which this book expands. He now teaches as Lecturer in Leadership and Pastoral Theology and Vice-Principal at Morling College in Sydney. His comprehensive coverage of missional ecclesiology here is a gift to the missional movement and the broader church.

The first part surveys a dozen Euro-American ecclesiologists – three seminal and representative theologians from each of four church streams. The Roman Catholic section begins with Joseph Ratzinger, who among other things argues the church firstly needs to understand its essence, as communion experienced especially in the Eucharist. Karl Rahner conceptualises the local church as a community of witness, a servant to the world and attentive to the grace of God in people outside the church. Hans Küng summons the church to reform in order to serve the Kingdom of God, and to develop and release the spiritual gifts of its members.

Eastern Orthodoxy is a tradition that my networks tend to listen to rarely but can learn from. Thomas Hopko proclaims a refreshingly high view of the church as the centre of fullness God’s mission, and a high view of worship and Scripture. Vigen Guroian appeals for the church to rediscover itself as a peculiar, ethical community, appropriate for its post-Christendom context, and for public theology, to be freshly grounded in the church not just societal concerns. John Zizioulas paints a portrait of the Church as Eucharistic communion. Hill does not agree with everything these writers teach about church, but nevertheless they write from a perspective of diaspora in the Western world and help complete our understanding of where missional ecclesiology needs to develop.

The Protestant voices include Letty Russell, who articulates an imagination-grabbing feminist, postcolonial vision of “Church in the Round” that partners with those at the

margins with welcome and solidarity. Jürgen Moltmann explores the Church as messianic, relational *koinonia*, seeking to relate to its changing cultural landscape through the creative work of the Spirit. He urges the church to seek the fulfilment of the Kingdom, functioning as *missionary communities* rather than *doing mission work*. John Webster appeals for an ecclesiology grounded in evangelical theology, the gospel and Scripture; and celebrates the Church as a prayerfully *reading* community attentive to Scripture. Among the other insights these writers explore, it is helpful to remember the church needs to stay connected with Scripture, the Spirit and those on the margins.

As a Baptist pastor, I appreciated learning from other traditions especially reminders of Free Church ecclesiologies. John Howard Yoder declares the Church must respond adequately to the welcome end of Constantinianism and reclaim the need for discipleship under the Lordship of Christ and the Church as an alternative (not privileged) community. He says the church is itself a social ethic that exemplifies the kingdom of God, especially in its egalitarian inclusiveness, economic sharing, forgiveness and celebrating the giftedness of all. Barry Harvey upholds the Church as *Altera Civitas* “another city”, with a population from every people and nation, separate from the Empire and Christendom, released from consumerism, existing for the sake of the world. He suggests it is not abstract beliefs but core practices and spiritual disciplines that help the church *be* the church. Miroslav Volf celebrates the church as the image of the Trinity with its shared interconnected life where the whole people of God are released in ministry. Missional ecclesiology needs to grapple with what it means to be Trinitarian and counter-cultural, and how to express and live its social ethics as an alternative community, for which these writers are helpful guides and conversation partners.

The second part introduces foundations and needed future directions for missional ecclesiology. Hill unpacks the mission of God and what it means for transitioning the church from a “a place where certain things happen” to “a body of people sent on mission”. The congregational transformation this calls for is not about church style but reshaping around missional postures and practices. He calls for a church that is Christ-centred with a fresh picture of Jesus as Lord of the church; Spirit-empowered that sees spiritual gifts as missional gifts and graces, and recognises the Spirit’s presence beyond the church; and renewed by a fresh understanding of what the Trinity means for community and mission. Finally, Hill appeals for church leaders to overcome defensiveness to prophetic missional voices, and foster the dissatisfaction and vision that will overcome resistance to change.

Each chapter includes Questions for Reflection and illustrative stories of local churches from Australia and around the world. This volume is important reading for students and teachers of mission, ecclesiology and ecumenism. I will be adding it to the preferred reading list for an introductory course on missional church: *New Paradigms for Mission*. But it is also an important book for practitioners to stretch their minds with theological foundations from a dozen seminal thinkers of different church streams and their implications for a thoroughly missional ecclesiology that is life-giving, mission-forged, gospel-shaped, Christ-centred, Spirit-empowered, Trinity-imaging dialogical and courageous about “being salt, light and a city”.

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