

What is a Missional Community?

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(borrowed from his foreword to *For The City* by Matt Carter & Darrin Patrick)

I have a constant refrain now that goes something like this: that many of the problems of that the church now faces can be actually be resolved simply by thinking *differently* about the church and its God-designed mission in the world. In other words, by changing our metaphors, or paradigms of church, we can change the game. The name I give to this “different paradigm” of church is simply *apostolic movement*. Its not new, in fact it’s ancient, and it describes completely the fluidity and dynamism of the spiritual phenomenon we see evidenced in the pages of the New Testament itself. Some churches are now beginning to reframe themselves as movements, and they are unleashing the sheer power of New Testament ecclesiology as a result. This is the church as Jesus intended it to be...a Gospel empowered, unfettered people-movement, perfectly designed for nothing less than the transformation of the world and the destruction of the forces of evil (Matt.16:18).

If we understood ecclesia properly, and began to appropriate its meaning, then many of the problems we now face will be resolved. I will reserve what is said here to just two aspects of the term, both of which have significant paradigm shifting power. First, the word *ecclesia* encapsulates a very dynamic social force and manifests in a multi-dimensional way. I can’t find a better word in our current nomenclature, than to simply call it *movement*, or more technically because I like precise language, *apostolic movement*. By engaging this movemental view of ecclesia, we cannot simply limit ecclesia to that of a local church with a distinctive shaped building and a certain denominational preference and style. It is much more wide-ranging than that. Well of course, the church in the Bible is a people-movement right across the Empire! Thinking like a movement has massive implications for missional church. I believe that this helps us unlock the meaning and potential of church in our day.

Secondly, the word has other very important meanings. In its original usage by the Greeks themselves, an ecclesia was not just an assembly or a gathering, as many suppose. If that’s all Paul wanted to convey, he could have used *agora* and *panegyris* as well as *heorte*, *koinon*, *thiasos*, *synagoge*, and *synago*, all of which refer to an assembly. Rather, the word ecclesia had a distinctly political (*polis* = city) aspect to it. In fact, it wasn’t a religious term at all, and neither was its original use limited to a religious gathering. In Paul’s time, an ecclesia was a gathering of the elders of a community. In smaller villages and towns across the Roman Empire, local elders would gather regularly to discuss and deliberate over a variety of social and political dilemmas facing the community. Neighborhood disputes, arguments over estates of deceased persons, communal responses to natural disasters—these were the kinds of things the council of elders would consider. Today, this might be similar to a meeting in the local town hall of a group of community leaders. In other words, an ecclesia was a gathering of wise community leaders, brought together by their common vision for the harmony and well-being of the wider community. Ecclesia in this sense, was really a community-within-a-community whose very purpose was to add value to that community. It brought wisdom to the village. It helped the village be a better village. They were members of the village, and their destiny was as connected to the prosperity and peace of that community as anyone. Isn’t it interesting that the base, raw material he uses to develop his vision for us, is that of a group of people adding value to their village; people who bring wisdom and blessing to the entire community, not just delivering religious services on the weekend? If we allow this to soak in, we will begin to see ourselves very differently...as sent (*missio*) by Jesus into the villages of which they’re already a part. The destiny of Jesus’ people is tied into that of the broader community in which they exist. They are there to add value, to bring wisdom, to foster a better village. In short, to participate with the work of Kingdom of God going on all around them.

The language in our best theology is that a church exists as a “sign, symbol, and foretaste, of the Kingdom of God.” It’s a scratch-and-smell experience for the people around. When people rub up against the church, a Kingdom aroma should waft from it; they should catch a glimpse of life as God intended it to be lived in the first place. And just so we don’t forget, the reach of the Kingdom of God is not just local; it is regional, universal, in fact it is cosmic in scope. It’s a big purpose and thinking about it in this way changes the game.

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