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ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND AT OMAHA BEACH: A PRACTICALLY MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY



JOHN MITCHELL

June 6, 1944: D-day. The allies storm the fortified beaches of Normandy, France, to liberate a continent from fascism. Under blistering machine gun and artillery fire, thousands of soldiers threw themselves into this battle for a beachhead. By the end of the day, the German defenses and the back of Hitler's regime were broken. D-day led to the liberation of Europe and the end of World War II in the West. But victory came at a daunting price. The allies sustained over six thousand casualties, more than two thousand at Omaha Beach alone.¹ Some attacked the beach from the air, but most came from the sea. It is difficult to imagine what those brave men experienced as they threw themselves from the relative safety of their amphibious vehicles into the terrifying chaos of combat. Confronted by a powerful enemy, those who made it to shore were engulfed by the sights and sounds of death and the piercing realization that this day might well be their last. They were among what some have called America's "greatest generation"; their greatness exemplified in their willingness to

forsake their lives for the greater good and the freedom of others. Their sacrifice helped conquer a brutal enemy, and transform the political landscape for generations to come.

Circa AD 30: the Son of God established a beachhead in Galilee and launched a spiritual revolution that transformed the landscape of humanity. His message was clear: "follow me." Lose yourself in loving me, and I will make you my revolution. Many heard, and some followed. Most did so at great peril. They could have played it safe and remained hidden in the world. But they forsook the world to follow Jesus. It seems they believed him when he said that death to self is the only way to really live in him. Captured by his love, mentored by his mission, and compelled by his sacrifice, they laid down their lives to advance his revolution. Following Jesus, they became a new generation, God's new creation. We who today know Jesus stand on their shoulders and on the shoulders of those they inspired to follow him.

Church history reminds us that the choice to follow Jesus has often been a perilous one. The millennia are stained with the blood of saints who chose to lose their lives, that Christ might live through them, and others might encounter him. Like those who stormed Omaha Beach, they demonstrated Christlike greatness by rejecting personal comfort and laying down their lives to recapture more territory for him.

In the American church today, choices like this seem surreal and out of place. Few would describe their faith in terms of a dangerous mission or a battle to be won. Most would define their spirituality in more personal, introspective terms; less like launching an assault on a strategic beach and more like the anonymous poem, "Footprints in the Sand." This poem beautifully describes our hope that Jesus cares for us in difficult times. It also captures the intimacy he invites us to enjoy with him. But walking placidly beside Jesus or being carried by him through life is an unbiblical summary of what it means to follow the one whose earliest followers "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). The contrast between making footprints in the sand and advancing the Jesus revolution could not be sharper: being carried by Jesus for my sake

versus carrying out his mission; focusing on self versus dying to self that Christ be formed in me; a self-centered obsession with what Jesus has done for me lately versus a reckless faith in the One who promises me life, as I lose mine in his, and advance his revolution by walking in his steps.

As a "Foot-Prints-in-the-Sand" generation, we should not be surprised that the church in America is in decline, especially among younger generations. Only three out of ten twenty-somethings attend church weekly (two out of ten for ages twenty-five to twenty-nine).² Moreover, "since 1991, the adult population in the United States has grown by 15%. During that same period the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million—a 92% increase!"³ These trends come as no surprise to the perceptive observer of culture. They are precisely what one should expect from a generation that is steeped in the self-centered consumerism of ultra-modernism⁴ and laboring under the relativistic skepticism of postmodernism. Ignoring these trends is foolish. Bowing to them is blasphemous. Paul's challenge to Timothy to "preach the word, in season and out . . ." is equally relevant for the American church today. Pluralistic resistance to the gospel has produced entropy in the church, characterized by a propensity to retreat inward. This is evident in the abundance of self-focused programming that permeates the church and perpetuates the imploding "footprints" mentality that is moving the church toward missional impotence.

This is fundamentally a crisis of ecclesiology. The church in America must rediscover its God-given ontology and then realign and measure all it does against the Biblical mandates that define its purpose. The following reviews the missional nature of the church and offers principles for guiding local congregations toward a practically missional ecclesiology.

Throughout history God has been pursuing a fallen race to establish a covenant people for himself (Genesis 3:15; 12:1-3; 15; Ephesians 2:4-10). The church of Jesus Christ is this covenant people, purchased by Christ to know and follow him (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 2:9-10). Seeing the church

as the culmination of God's historic mission to redeem fallen man is crucial to understanding God's purpose for the church in the world today. For as Jesus Christ incarnated God's nature and mission (John 1:18), the church must incarnate the nature and mission of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 12). He is the head of his body, the church (Ephesians 5:22-24). As we grow in him, we become like him by reflecting his character and advancing his mission (Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 4:11-16). Christology is ontologically prior to, and the basis for, ecclesiology. Christology must shape our spirituality and guide our praxis as we build his church in the twenty-first century.

The purposes of Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry reveal the purposes of his church in every generation. Jesus entered a fallen race, died to pay for man's sin, and rose in conquering power to liberate men to live once again as full human beings in relationship with the One who made them for himself (John 10:10). Jesus came as a "friend of sinners" (Matthew 11:19) to lift us from the fall and give us new spiritual life (John 3; Romans 6). Embodying God the Father's loving mission to redeem fallen man (John 3:16-17), Jesus led an unwavering, missional life to create a New Covenant people, God's *poiema*, his purposeful work of art (Ephesians 2:10a), created in Christ to reflect his glory through God-ordained, kingdom works. The nature of these works is reflected in the life and works of Jesus Christ.

Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus gave himself to producing followers who would give themselves to doing the same. This commitment defined his ministry and directed all he did, and did not, do. Though he preached to the masses on occasion, Jesus spent most of his time cultivating his disciples to embody his character and fulfill his mission. He called them to become and grow his church by building their lives and his church upon who he was and what he did for them (Matthew 16:13-19). Two foundational pillars became the framework for his church: The Great Commandment(s) (Matthew 22:37-40), and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Incarnating Christ as his church involves being

and producing God-honoring disciples who build themselves upon these two pillars of Christian character and mission. Rightly understood and fully applied, these pillars remind us that the church of Jesus Christ is missional by nature, not by option. The church consists of God's redeemed people, rescued from the fall to showcase God's goodness through their own redemption. But it does not stop there. The church is his primary vehicle to redeem those who do not yet know Christ. The church is a missional organism by nature, designed by God and indwelt by his Spirit to glorify him by proclaiming his gospel, reflecting his character, and magnifying his redemptive goodness forever.

The Great Commandment(s) and Great Commission of our Lord exhaustively capture the breadth and depth of the church's mission in the world, and therefore serve as benchmarks for our attempts to build his church and measure our progress. Each pillar deserves careful attention.

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT(S)

Summarizing covenant life in action, Jesus calls his disciples to advance God's purposes through God-centered and others-centered living in the church and the world. The Great Commandment captures what it means to be alive in Christ and live purposefully in him. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, the heart of God's first covenant with his people, Jesus reminds his disciples what God has desired from the beginning: that we would "love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind" (Matthew 22:37-38). This "great and foremost command" (Matthew 22:40) not only sums up the Law, it was and remains the basis for all genuine spirituality and relationship with God. The categories of heart, soul, and mind are "overlapping . . . together demanding our love for God to come from our whole person, our every capacity and faculty."⁵ This first and greatest commandment is the foundation and essence of all that Christ-followers must be and do. It therefore serves as the starting place for being and building his church.

The heart of the Great Commandment is theocentricity. Following the first four words of the Pentateuch, "In the beginning, God," Jesus modeled and taught that spiritual life comes from placing ourselves under the sovereign God who initiates, informs, and guides the life of the believer through a dynamic relationship with him. All Jesus said and did directed his disciples to embrace this end. This is nowhere more apparent than in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), where Jesus calls his disciples to a life of worship, submission to God, and kingdom living. Their relationship with the holy, heavenly Father *above* was to become the basis and backdrop for all they must be and do in the world *below*. Most instructive for the topic at hand, the worshiper submits his or her will to God's will, in the context of God's kingdom program, praying, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Christ-followers embrace and advance God's kingdom by becoming who God calls them to be and by accomplishing what he calls them to do. This involves leaving behind one's earthly view of things and trusting the unseen God who alone meets the spiritual and physical needs of his children as they live for him. Thus the disciple is instructed to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses."

The life of worship, submission, and faith in the God who provides and forgives necessarily reflects itself in the disciples' relationships with others. Thus, Jesus says, as they would seek God's forgiveness, they must "forgive those who have sinned against them." This aspect of the Lord's Prayer reflects the larger principle of treating others as we would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12) and forms the essence of the second Great Commandment (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:28), which is "inseparable from the first."⁶

Quoting again from the Law (Leviticus 19:18), Jesus explains that one's theocentric, vertical relationship with the God of heaven results in a horizontal commitment to love others on earth. Specifically, we must "love our neighbors as we love ourselves." The idea being, those who have discovered their place under God and experienced his loving kindness

must now restrain their proclivity for self-centered loving in exchange for a God-like love toward others. Regarding the identity of one's neighbor, Jesus broadens the nationalistic definition provided in the law with his parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:27-37). While loving God is our foremost and greatest calling, our responsibility to love (all) others is "like it" (Matthew 22:39). Compliance with the second commandment flows out of and ratifies compliance with the first. The Lord's Prayer affirms that loving others includes forgiving them for their sins against us. But the Scriptures affirm that Great Commandment love toward others implies much more, such as showing patience and kindness (Acts 2:42-47; Ephesians 4:32), extending mercy and gentleness (Micah 6:8; Galatians 6:1-5), serving others selflessly (Philippians 2:1-11), and nurturing community (Ephesians 4:1-16). All of these reflect a Christ-like heart and horizontal Great Commandment love, especially from one Christian to another. But these characteristics should also describe the mature disciple's relationships with those who do not yet know Christ. In modeling such a heart toward the unbelieving, especially in his sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus explicitly defines Great Commandment love toward those outside God's Kingdom by calling his disciples to fulfill the so-called Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Having promised life in himself and established the great commandment in his final words before ascending into heaven, Jesus charged his followers to accomplish that for which he came, declaring: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20a NASB).

The Great Commission is Great Commandment love toward nonbelievers. As such, it is inherently evangelistic. The reference to "all the nations," alongside the command to

“baptize” (converts), clarifies that the command to “make disciples” is, at its core, a command to make followers of Christ out of those who do not yet know him, whether Jews or non-Jews.⁷ The Great Commission reflects our horizontal mandate to love those who do not know Christ by helping them begin and thrive in a relationship with him. While the central command to “make disciples” is inherently evangelistic (see also Acts 14:21–23), the supporting commands—“go,” “baptize,” and “teach”—show that fulfilling the Great Commission involves helping new disciples learn to follow Jesus fully. Taken together, these supporting commands elucidate what it means in the broadest sense for the follower of Jesus to make disciples.

Regarding the command to go, just as Jesus came to “seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10), he calls his disciples to join him in this mission as a way of life by giving themselves to helping others know and follow him. As Jesus became a “friend of sinners” (Luke 7:34) to redeem man from the fall, he called his disciples to lovingly cross relational barriers and become servants to all, that they might produce more disciples. The church of Jesus Christ, by definition, must embody Christ’s friend-of-sinners approach in order to accomplish her God-given mission on earth. Jesus did not just stand on the shores of culture; he dove in so that he could shape culture. In the same way, as the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the church must not be reduced to chasing culture or throwing stones at culture.⁸ Instead, like our Savior and Head, the church must dive into culture, sacrificing and risking whatever is necessary to lovingly bridge relational, cultural, and logistical barriers to become Christ “in” the world, while not becoming “of” the world. Jesus is the perfect model of this profound balance. While embodying perfect holiness, he was at home among sinners, calling them to repentance. By embedding himself within his culture, Jesus remained counter-cultural, even as he transformed his culture.

As God captures the hearts of nonbelievers and gives them new life in Christ, Jesus calls them to identify themselves publicly as his disciples through baptism. This voluntary

sacrament symbolizes their faith in Jesus, and entrance into the covenant community.

Christ’s disciples begin their journey from the moment of their conversion. While baptism is a key first step in helping new believers mature in Christ, new disciples need ongoing teaching to grow to maturity. That is why Jesus commands more mature disciples to teach younger disciples how to obey all that he has commanded them, with the idea that one day they will help others know and follow Christ as well.

To sum up, Jesus calls his disciples to make and grow disciples as a way of life—to help those who do not yet follow the Great Commandments do so, by helping them begin and nurture a relationship with God through him. Jesus calls his church to “build itself up in love” (John 13:35; Ephesians 4:13–16) by pursuing inward maturity and outward influence on the world. The church expresses her maturity through glorifying God by fulfilling her mission. This includes sharing the gospel with the lost, building new disciples to maturity, and equipping them to transform their world through spiritual multiplication.

The clarity of this mission brings with it the realization that failure is possible for a (local) church, though Christ’s church (universal) will never fail. This is not so hard to accept. It takes more courage, however, to admit what many overlook: a church may simultaneously experience numeric growth through attractive programs, personalities, and buildings while cutting its disciple-making influence by at least the same proportion. *This begs the question, how should a church measure its success? The answer: by the amount of beach it conquers and landscape it transforms. That is, by the number and quality of multiplying disciples it produces.*⁹ If success means making mature Christ-followers out of those who do not yet follow him, a church’s growing attendance may have little or no correlation to its actual influence on culture. But typically, as long as a church is growing numerically, it is deemed healthy and successful. Maybe so. But maybe not.

Jesus says that successful churches are missional churches. Following Christ, they glorify God in Christlike community

and give themselves to producing Christ-followers who live the Great Commandment and fulfill the Great Commission. By definition, missional churches measurably impact their culture by multiplying Christ and his gospel for generations to come. Riveted on the example of Jesus their head, missional churches refuse to hide behind popular programming or be diverted by religious busyness. Instead, they measure all they do in terms of the number and quality of genuine Christ-followers they produce.

And what kind of disciples do missional churches produce? Those who are not satisfied with mere foot prints in the sand—men and women who band together to storm the beach and transform the landscape of a world that is lost without Jesus. Following the Savior and missional leaders, they have little time for the self-focused programming that dominates our churches today. They have no stomach for religious busyness, no matter how impressive it may appear. In dying to self, they truly live in Christ. They are not content to stay safe inside their boats but choose instead to crash the beach against unthinkable odds. These followers of Jesus lose themselves in loving him and give themselves to helping others do the same.

And how are such disciples made? Certainly not by providing one more, “this is what you need to finally break free” conference, or by helping people discover a turnkey spiritual insight. Missional hearts will not be born amidst the self-obsessed spirituality percolating in many churches today. Neither inward maturity nor outward impact will come from obsessing on self and measuring church health in terms of me-centric programming. So much of “discipleship” today is calling people to focus on themselves rather than on Jesus and the mission he calls them to fulfill. We will never make multiplying disciples of Christ by encouraging people to exchange their assault craft for comfort cruise liners that never approach the shore except to provide a tame, barefoot walk on the beach. Genuine followers of Jesus, mighty men and women of valor, are born in the fires of battle, where brave hearts are forged as the missional Christ is formed in them.

This is not to say that programs have no place in developing missional disciples. It is, however, to challenge the claim that current church programming is getting the job done. One could argue that our love for church programs is keeping the church from being and accomplishing what God desires. Jesus did not enter humanity, die on a cross, and rise again in glory so we could participate in excellent Christian programming. The missional Christ indwells and informs his missional church that we might lose ourselves in loving him and live to help others discover him. This always means staying in our boats just long enough to hit the beach and capture it for God’s glory. It never means expending all, or nearly all, our resources on making our boats more comfortable. They were never designed for this purpose.

Though painful to admit, many churches have, by default, defined following Jesus in terms of program participation. This has not been a conscious decision, but it has, unfortunately, become the manner by which many churches evaluate their success and measure maturity in their people. This has led many leaders into a well-intentioned obsession with chasing and implementing the latest “best practices” for their churches. But instead of producing multiplying, missional followers of Christ, this often fuels an inward-focused frenzy of activity requiring so much energy that churches have little or no resources left to fulfill their outward mission.

No wonder so few are getting out of the boat, except to take strolls on the beach. It is not because they are unwilling to step out in faith. But because, with a few bright exceptions, Christian leaders are calling their flocks to spend their time in inward-focused programs. What a tragedy! They were made and saved to escape the status quo. Their leaders have found a way to keep them caged. Jesus brought them life that they might lose themselves in living for him. But for now, safe aboard the luxury liners created for them, they are bored, disillusioned, and dreading one more walk in the sand.

It is time for a course correction. The following offers principles and practices for cultivating a practically missional ecclesiology. For those who are weary of decorating their

assault vehicles and making footprints in the sand, remember: God calls us to capture the beach—not run from it or merely stroll upon it.

Realigning our churches to fulfill Christ's mission means structuring all we are and do to help us live the Great Commandment(s) and fulfill the Great Commission. Genuinely fulfilling this mission requires the courage to measure our success or failure by the quality and number of disciples we produce and not by the programs we promote. Missional leaders are not satisfied until their disciples are multiplying the life of Christ in them into the lives of others as a way of life.

In addition to *external measurements* like event attendance, leaders must establish *internal measurements* that translate into genuinely transformed lives and culture. Instead of measuring success by how well their message is presented, missional leaders declare success when their people are living the message. They are not afraid to cancel programs that do not serve this end. Indeed, they refuse to resource even the most sacred programs or events that do not measurably move them toward producing multiplying followers of Jesus.

Finally, Jesus understood what all missional leaders grasp: producing multiplying disciples takes time, focus, and the ability to resist the tyranny of being popular. The Son of God ended his earthly ministry with eleven out of twelve apostles. Five hundred were allowed to see him after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:6), but only 120 waited for him at Pentecost (Acts 1:15). By current standards, God in the flesh took three years to plant a small, and (if we are honest) seemingly unimpressive church. But these men and women who "had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13) ultimately abandoned the security of the world to storm the beach for him. Many lost their lives; all of them suffered greatly. But this great generation of faithful Christ-followers multiplied the Jesus revolution into the lives of billions over the next two millennia.

It is D-day in the American church. Will we follow these great men and women into battle, or will we let them die on the shore while we decorate our boats? A lost generation awaits our response.

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NOTES

1. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica's Guide to Normandy 1944* [journal online]; available from <http://search.eb.com/dday/browse?browseId=1>. See also, Roger A. Lee, "The history Guy: World War 2: The Invasion of Normandy (1944)," 2000, [journal online]; available from www.historyguy.com/normandy_links.html; accessed October 10, 2005.
2. George Barna, "Twenty Somethings Struggle to Find Their Place in Christian Churches," September 24, 2003, The Barna Group [journal online]; available from www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=149; accessed October 5, 2005.
3. George Barna, "Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled Since 1991," May 4, 2004, The Barna Group [journal online]; available from www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=163; accessed October 5, 2005.
4. Harold Netland and Michael Horton reject the traditional modern/postmodern distinction in favor of what Horton refers to as "ultra-modernism." Thinkers in their camp argue that we are in an age of hyperindividualism, driven by Kantian epistemology and fueled by our struggle against the flesh. See, for example, Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 55–91. See also, Michael Horton, "Better Homes and Gardens," in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, Leonard Sweet, ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 105–125.
5. D. A. Carson, *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 464.
6. William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed., Gordon D. Fee, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 433.
7. Davies and Allison argue, based upon the syntax in this verse, this reference is universal and therefore applies to both Jews and non-Jews in this context. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew*, The International Critical Commentary, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 684.

8. Thanks to Erwin McManus for turning me on to this analogy.
9. This is not to deny that God moves sovereignly at different times in various ways, causing more disciples to be made in one season and/or location than another. Rather, it is to affirm that the ultimate success of a given ministry is directly correlated to the disciples that come from it.