

MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Church¹ in America faces a significant existential threat that will eventually sweep countless congregations into history's dustbin.² This threat is the result of two powerful currents: America's transition from modern to postmodern culture and several serious flaws in Church Growth thinking.³ As a result the Church has been dismissed from its role as chaplain to the culture and Christians have been co-opted to such a degree

¹ I use the lower-case "church" (or "congregation") to refer to the church localized and the capitalized "Church" to refer to the Church universal.

² Church attendance is significantly lower than that reported in polls that rely on telephone survey responses. Morgenthaler noted that in 2003 attendance at Evangelical churches was only 9% of the national population while attendance at Mainline churches was only 3.4%. She states, "Christian worship in the U.S. is becoming a rarified experience." Sally Morgenthaler, "Windows in Caves and Other Things We Do With Perfectly Good Prisms" *Fuller Theological Seminary News and Notes* (Spring 2005): 13-15, 25. Eileen W. Lindner, *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 2011* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), indicates that Evangelical and Mainline denominations remain in the grip of protracted decline. An abstract is available at <http://www.nccusa.org/news/110210yearbook2011.html>. Accessed March 23, 2011.

³ There is a lack of consensus about the definition of postmodernism. It is common to refer to contemporary culture as postmodern; I follow that convention here. See John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 15-18 for discussion of the challenge in defining postmodernism and how it influences evangelical thought. Sine explains how the globalized consumer culture adversely affects the Church. Tom W. Sine, Jr. "Globalization, Creation of Global Culture of Consumption and the Impact on the Church and Its Mission" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 27:4 (October 2003). Accessed in Libronix Software electronic edition, as a hard copy was unavailable.

that they fail to see that they have been domesticated. Today the typical congregation offers little to justify its existence.⁴

Missiologists, theologians, and pastors have wrestled with these problems over the last thirty years, largely independent of one another. The emerging fruit of their collective work is a new paradigm that we shall refer to as the Missional Church [MC hereafter].⁵ Rooted in a careful critique of the theological and methodological foundations of the contemporary Church, it offers an alternative to the current but now fading Attractional Church paradigm [AC hereafter]. Missional thinking encourages pastors, church planters, and congregations to re-think congregational identity and re-design congregational life in light of God's redemptive initiative.

This paper will describe both paradigms, identify key differences between them, and show that motifs of missional ecclesiology are seen in the Book of Acts. My purpose is not to prove the MC paradigm or disprove the AC paradigm but to introduce the MC paradigm, offer Biblical justification from the Book of Acts, and motivate others to consider it for themselves.

I do not approach these issues from a neutral position. My colleagues and I have seen the unintended and damaging consequences of the AC paradigm first hand.⁶ I have attempted to remain mindful of these experiences in writing this paper. The reader will determine whether the following analysis is measured and even-handed.

⁴ Darrell L. Guder, ed. *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 78.

⁵ I use the capitalized "Missional" and "Mission" to refer to the missional paradigm and the lower case "mission" and "missional" refer to the local congregation. Although Missional is a widely used term, it is not universal. Cole, for example, speaks of the "organic" church: Neil Cole, *Organic Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) and *Church 3.0* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

⁶ I am associated with the Transition Ministries Group of Huntington Beach, CA. We have collectively led over 100 churches through difficult transitions.

II. THE ATTRACTIVE CHURCH PARADIGM

Many MC advocates use the term “Attractive Church” to refer to the dominant paradigm that has guided pastors, congregations, and denominations for the last forty years. As a product of the Church Growth Movement, it rests on a host of questionable assumptions, four of which will be examined here: congregational purpose, the spiritual interests of the unchurched, the definition of *ekklesia*, and the relationship between discipleship and attendance.⁷

⁷ Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (n.p.: Wipf & Stock, 2005) and *Understanding Church Growth* 3rd Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990). As Dean Emeritus and Senior Professor of Mission, Church Growth and South Asian Studies at Fuller Seminary’s School of World Mission he is widely credited as the father of the Church Growth Movement. His early work relied on the social sciences with scant attention to theology, a shortcoming that is a hallmark of the movement. Only when his work received notice did he grapple with theological issues. One may argue that the more extravagant excesses and shortcomings should be attributed to his disciples; here we only observe that pragmatism, consumerism, reliance on social sciences, and lack of theological clarity are intrinsic to the movement. McSwain, for example, says of the homogenous unit principle, “what McGavran first stated as a sociological observation has been restated by his followers as a theological and strategic necessity.” Larry L. McSwain, “A Critical Appraisal of the Church Growth Movement” *Review and Expositor* 77, no. 4 (1980), 527. For similar criticisms see, e.g., Sidney H. Rooy, “The Concept of Man in the Missiology of McGavran: A Model of Anglosaxon Missiology in Latin America” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (1975): 175-206; Elmer L. Towns, “The Relationship of Church Growth and Systematic Theology” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 1 (1986): 63-70; Ken L. Sarles, “An Appraisal of the Signs and Wonders Movement” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no. 577 (1988): 58-83; David J. Bosch, “Church Unity Amidst Cultural Diversity A Protestant Problem” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 8 (1984): 248-60; John F. Havlik, “Trends and Issues in Evangelism Today” *Faith and Mission Today* 2, no. 2 (1985): 1-11; Orlando E. Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1974); Wilbert R. Shenk, *The Challenge of Church Growth, a Symposium* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973). In the U.S. the Church Growth Movement has produced no significant or lasting results. See, e.g., Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 36.

A. ASSUMPTION: THE PURPOSE OF CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITY

The first assumption in the AC paradigm is the notion that the congregation's primary purpose is to increase attendance.⁸ Cole's description captures this assumption.

With the attractational form the flow is always coming into the church, which is rooted and bound to a geographical location. In a sense, the attractational expression of church is like a lake, waiting to receive from other tributaries.⁹

The assumption is shocking because one searches in vain to find any Biblical mandate to this effect. To the contrary, building the Church and, presumably, the congregation is Jesus' work.¹⁰

The Western church has tended to shape and fit the gospel into its cultural context and made the church's institutional extension and survival its priority... [T]he church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness.¹¹

The loss of Biblical mission is due in part to the obligations a congregation incurs when it purchases property, builds, or hires staff. The congregation may understand that it exists for the purpose of mission, but it is ultimately overcome by organizational requirements. This may be due to rapid growth that pressures it into expansion or a loss of membership that saddles those who remain with crushing debt. In either case, mission is replaced as the guiding principle. Sadly, survival, expansion, and maintenance are inadequate substitutes for the Lord's purpose for the congregation.¹²

⁸ "[T]he chief and irreplaceable purpose of mission is church growth", McGavran, *Understanding*, 22. Church Growth focuses on attracting outsiders to the congregation. Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 30.

⁹ Cole, *Church 3.0*, 47.

¹⁰ Matthew 16:18.

¹¹ Guder, 5.

¹² Guder, 240.

B. ASSUMPTION: THE SPIRITUAL INTERESTS OF THE UNCHURCHED

Another assumption concerns the spiritual interests of the unchurched. It imagines that people instinctively know they should attend church and would if they found one to their liking. The assumption may have been valid in the past; now it is a serious error.¹³ Roxburgh and Boren explain.

The assumption of the attractational imagination is that people outside the church are looking for a church and know they should belong to one; therefore church leaders should create the most attractive attractational church possible. The mission, then, is to get people to attend.¹⁴

This assumption leads congregations to rely on consumer impulse to attract and retain people. In this way the congregation becomes a storefront for a vendor of religious goods and services. The congregation attends to the needs and interests of the insiders and engages mission to draw outsiders in.¹⁵ Guder offers trenchant criticism:

...[T]he social order in modern societies was defined by the fact that freely choosing, autonomous individuals decided out of rational self-interest to enter into a social compact and construct a progressive society. Also defined in this way were the various social entities within society, including the church. The church as one such voluntary association lives off the willingness of its members to remain in it. *Gaining the loyalty of members and retaining that loyalty takes priority in a voluntary association* [emphasis mine].¹⁶

¹³ See David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons *unChristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why It Matters* Reprint Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) for a detailed rebuttal of this assumption.

¹⁴ Roxburgh and Boren, 18. See also Howard Snyder, *The Community of the King*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 33-40.

¹⁵ Roxburgh and Boren, 30.

¹⁶ Guder, 84; Roxburgh and Boren, 29-30.

The AC paradigm produces believers who consider congregational life but one component in a rounded, fulfilling life. The congregation plays a limited role in informing spiritual life and has little influence in their daily lives. Thus, the AC paradigm is the source of the problem that Lordship theology seeks to address. Lordship theology has produced a flawed soteriology when the source of the problem lies in their ecclesiology.

C. ASSUMPTION: THE DEFINITION OF *EKKLESIA*

The AC paradigm rests on a faulty definition of *ekklesia*; the New Testament term typically translated as “church.” Since the Reformation congregations, local instances of the true Church have been defined by various activities: the place where the gospel is preached, the sacraments are administered, church discipline is directed, fellowship is celebrated, and spiritual maturity is cultivated.¹⁷ The result is the modern view that church is “the place where certain things happen.”¹⁸

This assumption has been the subject of recent scrutiny. Several centuries of worldwide missionary endeavor, the collapse of European colonialism with its attendant appearance of newly independent nations, the rise of robust Third World churches and the Church’s ejection from its role in contemporary culture have created tremendous pressure to reflect anew on the nature of the Church. Radmacher’s call to rethink

¹⁷ Guder, 254-55. See also Richard McBrien, “Church” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 108-110; Roger L. Omanson “The Church” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 231-33; Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 453-56. Chafer offers a broad description of the local church that is useful in MC thinking when he writes, “A church existed wherever a group of believers were met together in the bonds of fellowship. This meeting of Christians answered the fundamental meaning of the name *church* [emphasis original], by which they were identified.” Lewis S. Chafer, “Volume IV: Ecclesiology-Eschatology,” *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 145. He adds, “In its simplest conception, the local church is no more than the assembly of professed believers in one locality,” 146. Radmacher agrees, Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church: A Biblical and Historical Study*, Revised Edition (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 1996), 138-42. Guder adds, “The basic form of Christian witness is a company of followers of Jesus called by God’s Spirit and joined together as God’s people in a particular place,” 233.

¹⁸ Guder, 79.

the nature of the church, although sounded in a different cultural context, still rings true: “Thus, scarcely any concept of Christian doctrine of the present time stands so greatly in need of clarification from the ground up as that of the church.”¹⁹

D. EMERGENT CHURCHES ARE ATTRACTIVE

The Emerging church is but a variation of the AC paradigm. Its programming and culture look different but it has the same objective: to attract outsiders into the life of the congregation. “Many emergent churches *seem* to be new forms of attractational churches that have little sense of their neighborhoods or the missional nature of the church” [emphasis mine].²⁰ “Even much of the thinking about the so-called emerging church *leaves the prevailing assumptions of church and mission intact* and simply focuses on the issue of theology and spirituality in a postmodern setting” [emphasis mine].²¹ For all its novelty the Emerging church is not a missional movement. As Roxburgh and Boren explain, “[b]eing Missional is more than being post-modern attractational.”²²

E. ASSUMPTION: A CAUSAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTENDANCE AND DISCIPLESHIP

The last assumption in the AC paradigm that I’d like to mention concerns the matter of spiritual maturation and discipleship. It is an assumption that is rarely, if ever, examined. The AC paradigm assumes a causal relationship between spiritual maturation—discipleship—and attendance. Such causality does not exist.²³

¹⁹ Radmacher, 12. Erickson concurs in saying, “at no point in the history of Christian thought has the doctrine of the church received the direct and complete attention that other doctrines have received.” Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 1037.

²⁰ Roxburgh and Boren, 54.

²¹ Hirsch, 17.

²² Roxburgh and Boren, 33-34.

²³ For a brief survey of the research that displays the fallacy in this assumption see Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal* (South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2007).

F. CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE ATTRACTIVE CHURCH PARADIGM

The AC paradigm rests on several baseless assumptions. It assumes that the congregation's primary purpose is to preserve itself and to increase its size. It assumes that unbelievers know they should attend a congregation and would if they found one appealing to them. It adopts the cultural assumption about the definition of church as being a place where certain things happen. Finally, it assumes that there is a causal relationship between participation in congregational activities and growth into spiritual maturity.

III. THE MISSIONAL CHURCH PARADIGM

The MC paradigm is an archetype, *a new way of thinking* about the Church and the congregation. There is a growing body of literature devoted to the paradigm. It has been implemented in a variety of cultural contexts.²⁴ In spite of this growing body of literature, numerous field reports documenting its effectiveness, the emergence of MC networks, training and seminars, and an internet presence, the MC paradigm remains largely unknown.

Defining the MC paradigm is a bit of a challenge as a widely accepted definition has yet to emerge.²⁵ This challenge is compounded by the fact that the MC paradigm often proves elusive to those who have been schooled in the AC paradigm and its underlying foundation—the Church Growth School of Thought. In this section I will describe the MC paradigm rather than offer a definition. A description makes the paradigm easier to grasp and has the added advantage of illuminating the subtle

²⁴ Guder's bibliography lists 196 resources in the scholarly literature. Not all represent missional thinking but all intersect the MC paradigm. Guder, 269-80.

²⁵ Hirsch, e.g., offers a definition, 285. Roxburgh and Boren assume the postmodern position to argue that modernity's desire for a definition or a paradigm cannot be satisfied. Ironically, the illustration that begins their argument demonstrates that they are in fact proposing a paradigm shift, 27-45. Cole's work needs to be treated carefully as his concern is to develop and implement principles that give birth to a worldwide movement of organic churches. Still, it is clear that he employs missional motifs in his thinking.

ways in which the paradigm is distinct from the AC paradigm.²⁶ The following chart highlights the fact that the two paradigms are incompatible.²⁷ The analysis will examine four distinctions between them: a different theological provenance, a different purpose, a different set of processes and methods, and a different standard of appraisal.²⁸

	Attractional	Missional
Provenance	Ecclesiology	Christology
Purpose	Increase attendance	Produce self-replicating congregations
Process	Draw unbelievers to the church	Take the church to unbelievers <i>in situ</i>
Method	Stage attractional events and “outreach”	Send, proclaim, nurture

²⁶The MC paradigm is not a set of techniques to be incorporated into an Attractional congregation. This makes it difficult for some to understand. A useful litmus test is one’s response to the observation that Scripture does not direct us to build the congregation, nor is there any promise that Jesus will build *your* congregation. Shock, surprise, and disorientation are reactions of one who has adopted the AC paradigm without examining its presuppositions.

²⁷Attractional congregations can *transition* to the Missional paradigm. See Mark Stibbe and Andrew Williams, *Breakout: One Church’s Amazing Story of Growth Through Missional Shaped Communities* (Crownhill, Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2010). It may be possible for Attractional congregations to launch Missional groups, but as the two paradigms are immiscible, the groups will eventually become autonomous congregations that share staff and perhaps other resources. It has yet to be demonstrated that a single congregation can be both attractional and missional.

²⁸Those immersed in Church Growth thought often struggle to understand the Missional paradigm because of their conditioning and because both paradigms use the same words, but each paradigm assigns different meanings to those terms. The Church Growth Movement conditions us to see congregational activity as the way to increase attendance. The attendant pragmatism compromises their ability to understand the Missional paradigm; they tend to view it as a way to tweak a few programs, fine-tune mission statements, and perhaps increase “outreach” activity—all in the service of expanding the congregation. Roxburgh and Boren face this problem in their training seminars. They state, “The challenge we face is that our questions about missional church are primarily about how to fix what we have already been doing. We know how to do attractional church... But a missional imagination cannot be squeezed into such paradigms,” 48-49.

	Attractional	Missional
Pastor	Attract and retain new people to church	Train believers for mission
Appraisal	What will produce larger audiences?	What produces new believers?
Product	Consumers moving between churches	New congregations with new believers
Christian life	Jesus an element in a fulfilled life	Organized around Jesus' mission
Net results	Few added to the kingdom	New believers added regularly

Chart 1: A Comparison of the Attractional and Missional Paradigms

A. DIFFERENT THEOLOGICAL PROVENANCE

Missional ecclesiology places the Church's identity in the *missio Dei*—the Triune God sending Himself in Christ and the Holy Spirit to redeem creation. The Church does not *have* a mission or *do* missionary work; it *is* God's mission to the world. The MC paradigm organizes the congregation's activity in two broad categories: proclamation of the gospel and nurture of new congregations. The Church's purpose is the production of self-replicating congregations by proclamation of the gospel, and the nurture of disciples who are sent to produce additional self-replicating congregations.

Most theologians place mission within ecclesiology, if they treat it at all.²⁹ Mission is seen as one ministry among many.

²⁹ E.g., Erickson reduces mission to evangelism, which he then defines as one of four church functions, 1061-1069. The section titled "The Heart of the Ministry of the Church: The Gospel" is a lengthy definition of *ton euangelion* that makes no reference to mission, 1069-76. Chafer, surprisingly, favorably quotes Scofield to the effect that the church's mission is "to build itself up until the body is complete" and that evangelism is a personal responsibility. "There is no trace of any corporate responsibility attaching to 'the church.'" Chafer, Vol. 4, 149. Geisler reduces mission to evangelism, listing it fourth among the purposes of the congregation. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Four: Church, Last Things* (Minneapolis, Bethany House Publishers, 2005), 94-95. His section, "Some Conclusions About the

In contrast, the MC paradigm begins with Theology Proper.³⁰ “Over the last forty or so years, there has been a massive shift in the way we view missions. Some have articulated this shift as being from a church-centered one to a God-centered one.”³¹

This ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has been replaced during this century by a profoundly theocentric reconceptualization of Christian mission. We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the results of God’s initiative rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.³²

MC thought begins with God’s redemptive initiative to extend grace in the Old Testament covenants and prophetic promises. In the New Testament He is the *sending* God. The Father sends the Son;³³ Father and Son send the Spirit;³⁴ the Son sends the Church;³⁵ and the Spirit empowers the Church in mission.³⁶ “As God sent the Son into the world, so we are at core a sent or simply a *missionary* people” [emphasis original].³⁷ Mission is not a product of the Church; the Church is a product

Universal Church,” offers no mention of the missional nature of the Church. Geisler, 50-57.

³⁰ Hirsch sees Christology as the provenance of missional thinking, 142-144. See also Roxburgh and Boren, 69-70; Cole, *Organic Church*, xxvii-xxviii; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 118; Halter and Smay, 20.

³¹ Hirsch, 129.

³² Guder, 4. Hirsch places the provenance within Christology, 142-44. His pithy statement is memorable: “Christology determines missiology, and missiology determines ecclesiology,” 143. Cole concurs, “Alan Hirsch has challenged how we typically order our thinking about Jesus and the church. We generally place missiology as a subheading of ecclesiology. With this pattern, mission becomes just a part of all that the church is about. I believe that Hirsch rightly orders the thinking process in another way.” Neil Cole, *Church 3.0*, 58.

³³ The Gospel of John is laden with references to the Father sending the Son: John 3:34; 4:34; 5:23-24, 30, 36-38; 6:29, 38-39, 44, 57; 7:16-18, 28-29, 33; 8:16-18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44-45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21-25.

³⁴ In John 16:7 it is the Son who sends the Spirit. In John 14:26 and 16:26 it is the Father who sends the Spirit.

³⁵ John 17:18; 20:21.

³⁶ Acts 1:6-8.

³⁷ Hirsch, 129.

of mission. “We engage first in incarnational mission, and the church, so to speak, comes out the back of it.”³⁸ Because the Church’s existence is grounded in the command of the sending God, the *missio Dei*, mission is the essence of its identity.³⁹

This theological provenance insists that the congregation align its identity with the Head of the Church. The Lord Jesus modeled missional identity as a divine dispatch; it was at the core of His self-understanding.⁴⁰ The congregation must see itself in the same way. Jesus identified Himself as the “sent one”⁴¹ who dispatched the Church into the same mission.⁴² As Radmacher presciently noted, the congregation is God’s agent in the world.

The church is in the world in the form of local churches, which are physical organizations with physical relationships and definite physical responsibilities. The local church is God’s agency in the world, transacting God’s business... That these local churches hold a place of prime importance in the mind of God and are the means through which God’s program is to be accomplished can be clearly shown by a careful study of the New Testament revelation.⁴³

B. DIFFERENT PURPOSE

This suggests a different purpose for congregational activity. The AC impulse is *to draw* in order to increase attendance. The MC impulse is *to send*. “A genuine missional impulse is a

³⁸ Ibid., 144. Speaking of what happens when believers take the church to the community, Cole concludes, “When the moths are drawn to the light and the person of peace brings several to Christ, a church is born.” Cole, *Organic Church*, 185.

³⁹ Hirsch, 128; Guder, 82.

⁴⁰ John 10:36; 17:3. Jesus linked his identity as the Son to the Father’s sending. Paul (Rom 8:31) and John (1 John 4:9-10, 14) were mindful of the link between the Son’s atonement and the Father’s sending him (John 3:17).

⁴¹ John 10:36; 17:3.

⁴² John 20:21.

⁴³ Radmacher, 317. Radmacher was not arguing in favor of the MC paradigm but he correctly identifies the Church’s role as the agent of God’s redemptive initiative.

sending rather than an *attractional* one” [emphasis original].⁴⁴ Its purpose is to produce self-replicating congregations.

The goal of our missional life is not to grow churches. The goal of church is to grow missionaries. The goal of the gospel is not to get people to church. The result of the gospel is that people find each other and gather because of the deep meaning of a common experience.⁴⁵

In the MC paradigm congregational life organizes around the task of extending God’s work by producing new congregations. No thought is given to enlarging any given congregation—a sharp contrast with the AC impulse.⁴⁶

C. DIFFERENT PROCESSES AND METHODS

Distinct purposes entail different processes and methods. The AC process is to draw crowds. The method is to stage attractive events.⁴⁷ The pastor’s two-fold task is to superintend a slate of events that attract people⁴⁸ and retain their loyalty.⁴⁹ The result is a stream of consumers cycling through the congregation, producing transfer growth but negligible increase in the number of new believers. The final product is a congregation filled with consumers who will eventually take their business elsewhere.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Hirsch, 129.

⁴⁵ Halter and Smay, 168.

⁴⁶ Guder, 82.

⁴⁷ Methods range from professional quality music and vocals; a renowned preacher who draws large audiences; special productions on holidays and various other methods that share one thing in common—they will draw a crowd.

⁴⁸ Today “good preaching” is employed as an attractional event. People frequent that congregation whose pastor employs the consumer’s preferred preaching style. They will quickly abandon the congregation should there be a significant change in the pulpit.

⁴⁹ Guder states, “where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members,” 84. Smaller church pastors who see their members funneled off to larger churches can testify to this painful fact.

⁵⁰ Cole tartly observes, “What we draw them *with* is what we draw them to” [emphasis original]. Cole, *Organic Church*, 95. When the congregation’s offering falls short of the consumer’s expectation, as it inevitably will, people will cycle out to another congregation that has a fresh and attractive offering.

The MC paradigm mindfully rejects this *in toto*. Rather, it seeks self-replication by taking the church to unbelievers. Its methods fall into three broad categories: sending, proclaiming, and nurturing.

Sending is the continual dispatch of missionaries who will carry the gospel to a society's unreached nooks and crannies.⁵¹ *Proclaiming* involves every believer in declaring the gospel in word and deed. It hinges on the genuine identification with and affinity for the unbelievers and requires a "real and abiding presence among the group" one is attempting to evangelize.⁵²

MC literature frequently refers to "incarnational ministry" as the key method for carrying the gospel into new places in order to establish new self-replicating congregations. "Incarnational ministry essentially means taking the church to the people rather than bringing people to the church."⁵³

Nurturing depends upon the creation of missional communities (congregations) that facilitate spiritual growth in its members. They are communities of missional activity that cultivate disciples who go out to replicate the congregation by the same process and methods.

D. DIFFERENT MEANS OF APPRAISAL

Missional congregations continually ask, "What are the ways we need to change in order to engage the people in our community who no longer consider church a part of their lives?"⁵⁴ The appraisal—the measure of success, if you will—is whether new congregations are sprouting up *in situ* as the Holy Spirit moves new believers to seek others who share the same new life.⁵⁵ This is a significantly different measure of success than that

⁵¹ Apostolic ministry, in the sense that believers are dispatched as God's agents to deliver his message (the gospel) is a key to Missional thought. Hirsch speaks of the "apostolic environment," 149-77; Cole identifies the "apostolic mission" as an essential component of the organic congregation's DNA, 115. Roxburgh and Boren speak of the "missional vocation" by which we are sent to represent the reign of God, 77-109, as the "apostle to the world," 110-41.

⁵² Hirsch, 133.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵⁴ Roxburgh and Boren, 20.

⁵⁵ Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 168.

employed in the AC paradigm which asks, “Are we attracting and sustaining increasing numbers?”

E. RESULTS OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH PARADIGM

The pragmatist who will ask, “Does it work?” rather than “Is it true?” should be satisfied by the field reports. They reveal that the MC paradigm produces congregations in which every person is trained, mobilized, and active in taking the gospel to the unsaved.⁵⁶ It is common to read of the rapid, spontaneous creation of multiple new congregations, each uniquely suited to its micro-culture.⁵⁷ They point to the Church in China, which operated on missional principles during the Cultural Revolution, as an example of a missional movement that flourished without benefit of foreign missionaries, seminaries, scholars, professional clergy, or denominational networks.⁵⁸ Pastors, church planters, and denominational executives who feel called to make a dramatic difference in their culture and society should consider these results and contemplate implementing the MC paradigm going forward.

F. CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE MISSIONAL CHURCH PARADIGM

The MC paradigm differs from the AC paradigm in a variety of important ways. It connects the local congregation directly to the *missio Dei* rather than treating mission as a sub-category of ecclesiology and as one ministry (among many) of the congregation. It suggests a significantly different purpose for the congregation: the creation of self-replicating congregations.

⁵⁶ Stibbe and Williams throughout their book weave reports of hundreds of new leaders and thousands of believers sent out to the community, hundreds of new groups and major growth through evangelism.

⁵⁷ Cole details the growth of the organic church movement, which started with one church in Long Beach, CA. In six years more than eight hundred self-replicating churches in thirty-two states and twenty-three countries and ninety-nine church networks had been established. Cole, *Organic Church*, 26-29. In 2006 a representative sample of fifty-three organic churches launched fifty-two new churches—almost a 100% rate of reproduction. They also report growth by conversion slightly higher than 25%—significantly higher than AC paradigm churches in America. Cole, *Church 3.0*, 72.

⁵⁸ Philip Yancey, “Discreet and Dynamic: Why, with No Apparent Resources, Chinese Churches Thrive,” *Christianity Today*, July 2004, 72. Cited in Hirsch, 19.

This requires processes and methods different than those used by an attractional congregation. Where the AC paradigm measures success by attendance and income, the MC paradigm measures the number of people in mission and the number of self-replicating congregations produced.

Clearly, the two are incompatible.

IV. MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Can missional ecclesiology be inferred from the Book of Acts? If so, the reader will be furnished with a fresh perspective on Acts and the epistolary literature. The following analysis will introduce additional missional vocabulary to insure that the MC paradigm is represented fairly.

A. ACTS 1:1-8

The opening verses of Acts are an important test of whether motifs important to the MC paradigm are present in Scripture. The presence of missional motifs in this critical ecclesiological text would afford a measure of confidence in the MC paradigm. In fact several missional motifs are present in Acts 1:1-8.

Sending is one of those motifs. Acts 1:1-8 links the apostolic commission (1:8) to “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach” (1:1) [emphasis mine]. Their being sent would be a continuation of Jesus’ work. The added historical note in 1:4-5 strengthens the link by reminding the reader of Jesus’ words in Luke 24:47-49. This section neatly ties the apostolic commission to the body of Jesus’ work as recorded in the Book of Luke. The point is that they would be sent out to continue the Lord’s work.⁵⁹

In this way the apostolic commission—their being sent—advances an important New Testament theme: God is a sending

⁵⁹Darrell F. Bock, *Acts, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 34. Walter Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), 24, 51-53. Longnecker labels Acts 1:1-4 the “resumptive preface” to stress the continuative nature of Christ’s commission. Richard N. Longnecker, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 252.

God. The Father sends Jesus and the Spirit; Jesus sends His disciples; and the Spirit empowers their witness in the world.⁶⁰

The implication of Luke's words is that his second volume will be an account of what Jesus *continued* to do and teach after his ascension—no longer in visible presence on the earth but by his Spirit and in his followers.⁶¹

The Church's existence derives from the redemptive initiative of the self-sending God. The Church is sent as his agent to continue His redemptive initiative. At its core the Church is not a voluntary group that conducts mission; it is God's mission to the world. Mission is not activity; it is identity.⁶² The sending motif is essential to missional ecclesiology and the *sine qua non* of the MC paradigm.

The expansive nature of the mission is evident: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."⁶³ The task is ethnic and geographic in scope.⁶⁴ The mission is to take the message across boundaries: geographic, political, cultural, linguistic and racial. The Lord sends the Church to continually seek new venues for the message.

This leads to a second important missional motif: the *apostolic impulse*.⁶⁵ This term does not point to Christ's gift to the Church,⁶⁶ a return of the apostolic office, or to apostolic succession. Hirsch is careful to note that missional use of the term does not imply that the apostolic office is available today. The original apostles were unique in their role and calling.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Bock, 7.

⁶¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts (New International Commentary on the New Testament)*, Rev Sub ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 30.

⁶² Bock, 67.

⁶³ Acts 1:8. English Bible quotes are from the English Standard Version.

⁶⁴ Bock, 64-66. The first boundary crossed was linguistic. Acts 2:5-11 describes people from "every nation under heaven" hearing their own language spoken. Nor did the apostles cross that barrier alone; they were accompanied by "all [who were] together in one place" as per Acts 2:1. Geographical, political, racial, and social barriers to be crossed later are seen in the countries and peoples identified in Acts 2:9-11.

⁶⁵ See note 51. "Apostolic impulse" is my term.

⁶⁶ Ephesians 4:11.

⁶⁷ Hirsch, 152.

Terms like *apostolic environment*,⁶⁸ *apostolic mission*,⁶⁹ or *apostolic impulse* relate to the Church carrying God's redemptive initiative forward into new territory.⁷⁰ Jesus' apostles carried God's message to foreign cultures and foreign lands at the direction of the Holy Spirit. In a similar sense God's agents today serve an apostolic function by taking the message to previously unreached people, cultures, and societies.⁷¹

Apostolic means sent as a representative with a message. We are here for a purpose. We have been given a prime directive to fulfill: make disciples of all the nations. This part of us also comes from who our God is. Jesus is an apostle. He is the Chief Cornerstone of the apostolic foundation. Before He left this planet, He said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21).⁷²

The Book of Acts shows the apostolic impulse at work in those who did not hold the apostolic office. Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8) and his cohorts scattered from Jerusalem preaching the word in Samaria.⁷³ It was only after word of the gospel's effect in a new venue reached Jerusalem that Peter and John went out.⁷⁴ Then, in obedience to the Spirit, Philip carried the gospel across another barrier when he spoke with the Ethiopian eunuch.⁷⁵ This part of Philip's story ends with the note that he travelled the road from Azotus to Caesarea

⁶⁸ Ibid., 149-77.

⁶⁹ Cole, 114-18.

⁷⁰ Hirsch's broad treatment of the apostolic servant includes three primary aspects: pioneering new ground for the gospel (155), insuring the integration of life and theology (155-57) and creating an environment for other new ministries to emerge (157-59).

⁷¹ Hirsch, 150-53. Cole describes a moment of insight when he crossed the attractional threshold into missional activity. He had planned to start a coffeehouse ministry that would attract people to a place where they could encounter the gospel. The Lord led him to scrap those plans and instead go to the coffeehouses the unsaved already frequented. It was at this turning point that the apostolic impulse was triggered. Rather than trying to draw people from one coffeehouse to another to convert them to Jesus, they would carry the message of Jesus to the unbeliever. Cole, 24.

⁷² Cole, *Organic Church*, 115.

⁷³ Acts 8:4-8.

⁷⁴ Acts 8:14.

⁷⁵ Acts 8:26-39.

preaching the gospel at every town along the way.⁷⁶ Although Philip was not an apostle, the apostolic impulse is evident in his service.

B. COMMUNITAS

Communitas, like *sending* and the *apostolic impulse*, is an important motif in missional ecclesiology. It is an impulse that drives people to instinctively seek one another to make sense of experiences that challenge the values and assumptions that once formed the foundations of their lives. *Communitas* emerges when people are disoriented, confused, or in grave danger. It produces a new network of intimate relationships based on powerful, shared experiences. It results in a new community that organizes itself to make sense of the experience and create a new way of life.

Communitas... happens in situations where individuals are driven to find each other through a common experience of ordeal, humbling, transition and marginalization. It involves intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging brought about by having to rely on each other in order to survive [emphasis original].⁷⁷

Communities that emerge from the *communitas* dynamic are different than Bible study or fellowship groups that gather to fulfill the wish for fellowship or the desire for spiritual growth.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Acts 8:40.

⁷⁷ Hirsch, 221. He employs *communitas* to distinguish what happens when a particular group of people is drawn together by their common experience of grace and organizes to do something about that experience. This is different than community. An attractional church cannot create *communitas* because its members are primarily concerned with comfort and fulfillment and its leaders assiduously avoid exposing its members to experiences of disorientation and confusion. Guder prefers “missional communities,” 142-82; Stibbe and Williams refer to “mission-shaped communities,” 52-53, 63-67; and Cole identifies the unit as a Life Transformation Group, 27-28.

⁷⁸ Hirsch’s lament captures the distinction between a small group and a community based in *communitas*. “For many of our critics Christian community has become little more than a quiet and reflective soul-space (as in Alt Worship circles) or a spiritual buzz (as in charismatic circles) for people trying to recuperate from an overly busy, consumerist lifestyle. But is this really what the church was meant to be about? Is this our grand purpose—to be a sort of refuge for recovering work addicts and experience junkies? A

Those needs may be met but a *communitas*-based group moves beyond to carry the new way of life to those outside the group's boundaries. It produces a group moving to bring a common vision into existence.

Communitas is seen throughout the Book of Acts. Significantly, it appears in the beginning, in Acts 1:14, where we find the believers of "one accord" in prayer. The word "one accord" (Gr. *homothymadon*) refers to a group acting as one. This was not a gathering of individuals each seeking his own interest. They had shared experiences that had turned their world upside down: enjoying a burgeoning messianic hope that had been temporarily dashed with Jesus' crucifixion, rejoicing in His stunning victory over the grave, and experiencing forty days of illumination that opened their understanding of the Scriptures. Everything they once hoped for was taken from them. It was replaced by a glorious reality beyond their imaginations. The *communitas* dynamic led them to forge a new way of life.

The nascent church is showing some of *its most fundamental characteristics*: gathered, seeking the Lord's will with one mind in prayer and assembled to carry out God's mission [emphasis mine].⁷⁹

Communitas is evident elsewhere in Acts. We see it when the believers gathered spontaneously to share the Lord's fellowship, to insure that none suffered want, and to rejoice over shared meals with "glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:42-46).⁸⁰ The financial sacrifice indicated in 2:45 far exceeded almsgiving. The spontaneous sale of possessions to care for others reveals intense feelings of togetherness and belonging that far exceed anything that would be expected in a group comprised of voluntary associations. This unparalleled generosity is a manifestation of *communitas*. The outward impulse of *communitas* is suggested by the fact that the believers found "favor with

sort of spiritual hospital or entertainment center?" Hirsch, 222. Roxburgh and Boren describe the moment of illumination when Boren realized that a monolithic small group strategy would be insufficient to actually reach unchurched people. Roxburgh and Boren, 84-85.

⁷⁹ Bock, 78.

⁸⁰ Hirsch, 221.

all the people” (Acts 2:47). There must have been an outward impulse to enfold others in the new way of life.⁸¹ The result is the daily addition of new believers.

We see *communitas* manifested in Acts 4:32-37: “Now the full number of those who believed were of *one heart and soul*, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common” [emphasis mine]. Their generosity was a spontaneous response to the Holy Spirit. Peter’s rebuke to Ananias indicates the apostles did not impose this duty; it was strictly voluntary.⁸²

C. SELF-REPLICATION

Self-replication is another important motif in missional ecclesiology and may well be the single most important feature of the MC paradigm. Missional congregations are assessed by whether they are producing additional missional congregations. Cole’s organic church paradigm insists that congregations be self-propagating, naturally starting additional self-perpetuating congregations that naturally produce other self-sustaining and self-propagating congregations.⁸³ Halter and Smay make this a financial priority among the churches in their network. “In Adullam, we prioritize putting money and time into developing leaders who can create new communities... Remember, whatever you give leadership to will grow.”⁸⁴ Hirsch uses the Biblical metaphor of sowing seeds to illuminate the fact that every congregation has within itself the ability to reproduce.⁸⁵

An example of this motif may be found in the church at Antioch in Syria. Those who fled Jerusalem when persecution broke out after Stephen’s martyrdom found themselves in Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11:19). Upon their arrival in Antioch they began “preaching the Lord Jesus” (11:20) with remarkable results. The magnitude of the response drew the

⁸¹ This is different than the attitude of the typical small group found in many American churches. These groups are intensely inward focused on their own needs. They become uncomfortable and even resentful when pressured to expand the group.

⁸² Acts 5:3-4.

⁸³ Cole, *Church 3.0*, 73-91.

⁸⁴ Halter and Smay, 175.

⁸⁵ Hirsch, 139. He uses the felicitous comparison of the missional impulse that reproduces self-propagating congregations to a sneeze, 130.

attention of the apostles in Jerusalem (11:22). They dispatched Barnabas whose work produced many more being added to the Lord (11:24). This resulted in the creation of more congregations, including Antioch. Thus, the Jerusalem church became self-replicating without having first planned to do so.

The congregation in Antioch, a “second generation” or “daughter” church, in turn replicated itself. In Acts 13:1-3 we see the congregation sending Saul and Barnabas. At Antioch in Pisidia they ignited a powerful wave of proclamation by the people that swept through the region. Many Jews and Gentile converts embraced Paul’s message with faith (15:16-41).⁸⁶ The self-replicating impulse emerges when these new believers proclaimed the message, spontaneously, throughout the community. The following Sabbath a vast crowd gathered to hear Paul (15:44). In time the message spread throughout the whole region (15:49), presumably resulting in additional self-replicating congregations.

This impulse to self-replicate can be seen throughout Acts. Word of Paul’s message preceded his arrival in Thessalonica.⁸⁷ Upon his arrival in Ephesus he discovers that the message about Jesus, albeit absent the declaration that the Spirit had come, has already been borne by unnamed witnesses.⁸⁸ The gospel established a beachhead in Rome, likely due to the presence of believers residing there rather than as a result of a dedicated mission or a coordinated evangelistic enterprise.⁸⁹ It is possible that Priscilla and Aquila, having been converted under Paul’s ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3), returned to Rome bearing the gospel to establish a congregation in their home.⁹⁰

The power of self-replicating congregations to carry the work forward spontaneously and without oversight is suggested

⁸⁶ Note that these were urged to “continue in the grace of God” (15:44), an indication that they believed and were born again.

⁸⁷ The Jews complaint that Paul had “turned the world upside down” indicates that news of his message preceded his arrival in Thessalonica, Acts 17:6. Bock, 552. Verse 13 indicates that news of Paul’s work in Berea made its way back to Thessalonica. News of the gospel’s advance throughout the region travelled readily.

⁸⁸ Bock, 599.

⁸⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans 1-8, Vol. 1, International Critical Commentary Series* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 17.

⁹⁰ Romans 16:3-5.

in Rom 15:23. Writing from Corinth Paul tells the believers in Rome he will come to them after delivering the collection to Jerusalem because “I no longer have any room for work in these regions.” Why was he confident that his mission in those regions was complete? Newbigin answers the question.

What, exactly, has he done? Certainly not converted all the people of these regions. Certainly not solved their social and economic problems. He has, in his own words, “fully preached the gospel” and left behind communities of men and women who believe the gospel and live by it. So his work as a missionary is done. It is striking, for a modern reader, that he does not agonize about all the multitudes in those regions who have not yet heard the gospel or who have not accepted it... The point here is that he has completed his missionary task in the creation of believing communities in all the regions through which he has passed.⁹¹

In his absence these congregations—God’s sent people—would follow the apostolic impulse to produce self-replicating communities.

V. CONCLUSION

As American culture continues to unwind through its transition into postmodernity, the Church will be forced to find new ways to relate to an increasingly fractured and paganized society. The MC paradigm is one promising alternative for the future.

This paper has described the Missional paradigm by identifying important ways that it differs from the Attractional model. It has also shown that several motifs of missional ecclesiology—sending, apostolic impulse, *communitas*, and self-replication—are evident in the Book of Acts. The purpose was not to prove the MC paradigm correct and the AC paradigm false. Rather, a more modest aim was to offer some Biblical justification for the MC paradigm from the Book of Acts in hopes of motivating others to examine the MC paradigm.

⁹¹ Newbigin, 121.

The MC paradigm merits further treatment. A comprehensive theological treatment based on rigorous Biblical exegesis is lacking in the literature. Perhaps another more qualified than this author will take up that task.