

Are You A Missional Christian?

By Justin A. Irving (© 2002)

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Thus Charles Dickens began his renowned *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens captured the perilous days in 1775—days of the French Revolution—as an age of both wisdom and foolishness, belief and incredulity, Light and Darkness, hope and despair.

At the dawn of the 21st century, such a description is not only timely, but also insightful. Our age of global instability is marked by a new awareness of the ever-present threat of terrorism, the dark realities of corporate fraud and bankruptcy, and a future that is far from guaranteed. Conversely, our age is also marked by what some of our leaders have called a new cultural ethic—an ethic of hope, an ethic of determination, and an ethic that inspires the courage of engagement. This new ethic has been modeled in powerful examples of ordinary citizens exhibiting the courage to say “Let’s Roll” in the face of terror, and in heroic public servants demonstrating the courage to walk up the stairs of the World Trade Centers into the fires of great uncertainty. Indeed, our age has also become *the best of times...the worst of times*.

In the face of such an age as ours, how is the church to respond? In the face of such an age, “How now shall we live”? In this article we now turn to a tale of our own. It is a tale of the Christian story. It is a tale that might best be called *A Tale of Three Christians*.

A Tale of Three Christians

In reflecting on my personal journey as a Christian, and in observing the broader Christian community in reference to what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, I have observed three distinct approaches to the Christian life. These approaches may be typified through the example of three types of Christians: *The Disengaged Christian*, *The Hand-Wringing Christian*, and *The Missional Christian*.

The Disengaged Christian

Let me introduce you to our first set of Christians—Disengaged Doug and Diane. Disengaged Doug and Diane have many of the marks you’d expected to observe in the Christian life. Doug and Diane are active members of their church. Doug substitutes as a Sunday school teacher and Diane regularly volunteers in the nursery. Each have a consistent devotional life and enjoy spending time with their Christian friends.

But there is something very troubling about Doug and Diane’s approach to the Christian life. You see, Doug and Diane’s faith is relatively *disengaged* from the rest of their lives. Though Doug and Diane find a place for faith at church and in the privacy of their home, the faith of these followers has found no place in their roles with family members, friends or in their roles as school teacher and business women in their local community. Though this sense of disengagement in their lives once troubled Doug and Diane, over the years they have begun to adopt the unwritten cultural rules that called for a bifurcation of their lives into the public and the private.

Interestingly, behind Doug and Diane’s initial disengagement has been an underlying concern that their belief in God, and Jesus, and the Bible was not really a defensible faith. In the educational ethos of Doug’s school, and in the politically correct business world of Diane, deep down, each began to feel somewhat ashamed of their faith, wondering if belief in God was credible—something that could stand against the critique of educated peers. These underlying thoughts of intellectual insecurity furthered the process of Doug and Diane’s resigning themselves to community norms. These norms meant an adoption of the unwritten rules stating that religion is best left in the living room.

The Hand-Wringing Christian

The second stage in our tale now leads us to two more individuals. Allow me to introduce to you Hand-wringing Harriet and Harry. Harriet and Harry are in many ways very similar to Doug and Diane. Just as Doug and Diane were Christians involved in their local church, so it is with Harriet and Harry. Just as Doug and Diane had consistent devotional lives, Harriet and Harry seek a regular and intimate walk with the Lord as well.

The difference with Harriet and Harry comes when we look at the heart behind their engagement (or lack thereof) with those outside of the Christian community. In contrast to Doug and Diane, Harriet and Harry have not bought the lie that issues of faith and trust in Christ should be divorced from their public life. Nevertheless, Harriet and Harry seem to be in a constant state of *hand-wringing*. Though they desire to bring their faith in Jesus to the community around them, this desire never translates into meaningful action. Though Harriet and Harry have not adopted the unwritten rules about leaving their faith at home, their approach to the Christian life in this area leaves them with a deep sense of longing for something more in their living as fully devoted followers of Jesus. Harriet and Harry have found that their hand-wringing approach to Christian living leads only to shame and an unsatisfied life before Christ.

If the lives of the disengaged and the hand-wringing Christian leaves something to be desired, what model of Christian living may provide us with a helpful solution? In answering this question, we turn to our final stage in this tale of three Christians. Allow me to introduce you to Missional Mike and Mary.

The Missional Christian

In contrast to both the disengaged Christian and the hand-wringing Christian, Mike and Mary have sought to orientate their lives around the model of Christ's engagement with the lost. Rather than disengaging with those outside of the Christian community, Mike and Mary always seem to find natural ways of bringing their love for Jesus to those outside the family of God in natural and authentic ways.

This is true for Mike in his role as general contractor, and for Mary in her role as a mother and as a volunteer in her children's school. Though Mike and Mary are faced with many of the same hindrances their disengaged and hand-wringing brothers and sisters encounter, and though they are faced with the same unwritten rules calling for a separation of their lives into the public and the private, Mike and Mary's authentic love for others and their unquestionable integrity continues to win them a voice in the lives of their friends, co-workers, neighbors, and family members.

What's the foundation for such a life of engagement with those outside the Christian community? I believe the foundation of missional Christianity is observable in the life and teaching of Jesus.

The Foundation of Missional Christianity

Missional Christianity is no invention of the 20th or 21st century. The foundation of missional Christianity finds its basis in the very life of Jesus. As I've analyzed the life of Jesus I have grown to personally value a summary statement that seems to capture well the heart of both the purpose and the mission of Jesus. Here it is: *The focus of Jesus was to glorify His father by seeking and saving the lost.* What was the purpose of Jesus? To glorify His father. What was the mission of Jesus, or rather, what's the missional means by which Jesus glorified His father? To seek and save the lost.

To briefly unpack the foundation of missional Christianity, allow me to invite you on a brief journey through the pages of Luke's Gospel. We begin with the boy Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem

The Business of Jesus

You recall the account. Luke records this for us in Luke 2. Joseph and Mary had been frantically searching for their son. As a parent, it's not difficult to imagine the fear and sense of panic that must have overtaken Jesus' mom and dad. Finally having found their son Jesus, they understandably ask him, "...why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.". Jesus' answer is both perplexing and revealing. "*Why were you searching for me? ...didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?*" This sentence may equally be translated, "*didn't you know I must be about my father's business.*" From the earliest days in the life of Jesus we begin observing a vital lesson—Jesus is all about glorifying and honoring His heavenly father in all that He does.

The Focus of Jesus

Continuing on our brief journey through the pages of Luke we come to chapter 9, verse 51. The broader context of this verse is sometimes referred to as the road to Jerusalem narrative, and describes a shift in Jesus' geographic and ministry focus. This verse reads, "...and Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." A literal rendering of this verse is, "*Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem.*" In this verse, we catch the determined focus of Jesus. His resolve was set. His course was determined. And Jerusalem was his immediate destination.

But what awaited Jesus in Jerusalem? Certainly the issue was not the town itself. For Jesus, Jerusalem meant night hours of agonizing prayer in Gethsemane, the kiss of a betraying friend, trumped up charges from religious elite, hidden trials, unthinkable beatings, the humiliation of spit in His face, the pain and mocking of a crown of thorns and kingly robe, unbearable scourging, and ultimately, the criminals death—the death of the roman cross. As His journey began toward *this* place, the focus of Jesus was fixed. Jesus would yield His life, for you and me, all for the sake of glorifying His father by seeking and saving the lost.

The Passion of Jesus

The next stop on our journey through Luke brings us to chapter 15. This chapter of parables begins exposing the missional passion of Christ with even more clarity. Who would the recipients of His great work be? Would it be the deserving? Would it be those of royal and kingly descent? Would it be those who had proven themselves holy through their keeping of the law? Or would the recipients of the passion of Jesus be the least deserving—those who were lost.

As the three parables are unfolded, we see the passion of Jesus with stunning clarity. A lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. As is often the case, Jesus turns conventional wisdom on its ear. Ninety-nine do not take precedent over the one, nor the faithful son over the prodigal. No, Jesus is laying down a principle of the kingdom. Jesus is demonstrating His focused passion for the lost.

The Mission of Jesus

The final stop on our journey brings us to Jesus in the house of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Jesus was dining at the house of Zacchaeus the tax collector. Through this event we see a powerful example of a life transformed through an encounter with the Son of God. As is often the case for those who truly meet Jesus, Zacchaeus had met Him and his life was changed. In fact, we are told that he gave away half of his possessions to the poor and that he paid back those he cheated fourfold. Upon observing this heavenly transformation, Jesus rejoiced in this, calling Zacchaeus a son of Abraham.

At this point Jesus makes explicit the case that has been building throughout Luke's Gospel. You might say that Jesus' words almost burst forth at this point. What is the mission of Jesus? What is the unwavering work for which He will even give His life? Jesus speaks: "*The Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost.*"

You see the foundation of missional Christianity is rooted in the very mission of Christ Himself. Jesus saw His primary mission focused on the work of seeking and saving the lost. In fact, this would be the primary means by which Jesus would glorify His heavenly father. Such a clearly spoken mission from Jesus will inevitably leave a question that must be answered. If the mission of Jesus was nothing less than glorifying His father by seeking and saving the lost, how could our personal mission as followers of Jesus Christ be anything less?

Missional Christianity and You

So now what? We've illustrated the Christian experience through a tale of three Christians. We've laid out the foundation of missional Christianity and have seen that it is firmly grounded in the very mission of Jesus. What now?

I don't know about you, but at this point it might be easy to set aside this article and enjoy the reality that you've learned something new for the day. But is that enough? Is it enough to encounter the very heart of Jesus' mission and then part ways? Is it enough to see the heartbeat of Jesus and simply admire it at a distance? I believe our good friend James would say to these questions, "*Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*" Or again, "*Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.*" Allow me to encourage you to do a simple exercise before the day is done. I call it, *The Honest Look in the Mirror*.

The Honest Look In The Mirror

Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately? I mean the kind of looking that goes beyond the combing of hair and the brushing of teeth. I mean have you looked at your life in the mirror? If so, what do you see? And specifically, *who do you see* in reference to our tale of three Christians? Do you see a disengaged Doug or Diane looking you in the eye? Do you see a hand-wringing Harriet or Harry? Or do you see a Missional Mike or Mary?

If you're like me, it might actually depend on the day you take your honest look in the mirror. For many Christians, it's easy to identify with all three of the Christians in our tale. It seems the reality of life is that we are often taken through the disengaged, hand-wringing, and missional experience, all within a matter of days or weeks.

A word of encouragement: allow me to encourage you to not focus so much on who you *are* when you look in the mirror. Rather, I encourage you to focus on who you are *becoming*. What is the trajectory of your life in this area? Are you moving further toward missional Christianity? Are you developing a maturity to your already existent form of missional Christianity? God is honored by the honest look. God is honored by our asking Him to move us forward toward a life shaped and defined by a missional outlook—an outlook of *glorifying God by seeking and saving the lost!*

Adopting the Mission of Jesus

So I leave you with this challenge. It is the challenge of owning and adopting the mission of Jesus in *your own* life. J. Campbell White, one of the key leaders in the laymen's missionary movement early in the 20th century, made this statement: "Most men are not satisfied with the permanent output of their lives. Nothing can wholly satisfy the life of Christ within his followers except *the adoption of Christ's purpose toward the world he came to redeem.*"

Mr. White understands the heart of missional Christianity. The Lord of the universe, embodied in Jesus Christ, focused the mission of His life on *glorifying His father by seeking and saving the lost*. Have you adopted His mission as your own? Do you live your life and organize your activities and relationships in such away that His mission is yours? Are you on mission with Jesus? Do you live *to glorify God by seeking and saving the lost?* Are you a missional Christian?