

Craig van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011)

In 2011 I was responsible for re-designing an undergraduate module on missional ecclesiology that was eventually titled 'Transformational communities: planting, growing and emerging'. Van Gelder's book was of enormous value in shaping parts of that new curriculum. It was especially useful in terms of its survey of the different voices in the missional church conversation, kick-started by the 1998 publication of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Darrell Guder, as its editor, led the combined missiological reflection of a huddle of North American scholars and practitioners that collaboratively discussed the missionary nature of the church in light of the discussion about 'Gospel and Culture' which Lesslie Newbigin had given particular impetus to in the UK. In the ten years that followed, the missional conversation came to cluster around several important insights. Firstly, that God, as a missionary God, sends the church into the world. Secondly, that the Kingdom of God is central to God's mission. Thirdly, that missional implies incarnational ministry in a post-modern, post-Christendom, and globalized context. Finally, that a missional church understands and equips every believer for mission as an essential component of discipleship.

Van Gelder deftly outlines the theological framework within which the missional conversation has taken place. It is one that reconnects ecclesiology with missiology; that is trinitarian, that refers primarily to the mission of God; that finds its fulfilment in the reign of God; that understands the church as missionary by nature; and finally, one that requires a new way of reading the Scriptures – in effect, a missional hermeneutic.

Having set out the central themes and broad parameters of the missional conversation, van Gelder attempts to categorise the chief contributions using the metaphor of a tree. He roots his missional tree firmly in the framework just described and outlines four developments of the missional church conversation: discovering, utilizing, engaging, and extending. As with many analytical categories, these tend to obscure rather than explain and Gelder, unsurprisingly, gives considerable attention in the middle section of the book to unpacking the orientation and contribution of these four voices in the conversation.

His discussion of the 'discovering missional' contributors hints at this being a misappropriation of the language of missional by their applying the terminology to practices that focus on human agency and that continue to separate 'church' and 'mission'. Van Gelder's 'utilizing' missional refers to contributors who have worked hard on taking Guder's 1998 book and applying its insights to an understanding of missional church, paying particular attention to God's agency. 'Engaging' missional contributions have tended to assume a missional understanding and then applied it to an aspect of church life, at congregational and trans-local level. The fourth branch of the conversation is described as 'extending'. Within this area of the conversation, van Gelder believes that biblical and theological resources are being developed that will move it forward.

The final three chapters of this book serve as van Gelder's contribution to extending the conversation. Much of this is skilfully crafted in its discussion of key theological themes as they relate to the missional nature of God, the church, the Kingdom, and the relationship of these to the created order. He grapples with the complexities of culture as an aspect of the created order, acknowledging its hybrid,

interconnected and contested nature as an outcome of human interaction and production. He paints a picture of a God who relates to the world because he is a trinitarian and missionary God. Through its participation in the life and ministry of the Trinity, the missional church is able to learn and grow from its engagement with the world through reciprocity and hospitality.

The *Missional Church* represents an extensive discussion of the missional church literature, but it is not exhaustive. For instance, Australian readers will notice that Mike Frost's 2007 text *Exiles* is not mentioned. For a book published in 2011 and offering itself as a comprehensive treatment, I found that a surprising oversight.

I also felt that at times the tone was a little too exasperated with the fact that the missional conversation has not gone as the 1998 authors might have hoped. Newbigin was hugely inspirational for this group and, with van Gelder's complaint against subsequent anabaptist influences upon the missional church movement, he reveals a frustration that the movement has not taken Newbigin's work deeply enough into the heart of the conversation. Van Gelder's discussion of culture unfolds within the reformed tradition shared with Newbigin and I was persuaded by many elements of it. However, I was less persuaded by a rather cursory dismissal of the alternative critique of culture developed by Hauerwas and other writers like him.

Van Gelder is right to take Hauerwas to task over his failure to explain precisely how Christians are to embody the ethics of Jesus before a watching world: more specifically, *how* the watching is to take place. By the same token, van Gelder's insistence upon Christian participation in the life and ministry of the trinity must face a similar question, 'Precisely how is this participation to be undertaken?' We receive hints of an answer in the book's final section; a section that tackles the manner in which the missional practices of church life may enable Trinitarian participation to be embodied. However, this line of discussion awaits a fuller exposition and I, for one, look forward to seeing how van Gelder and others will extend the missional conversation in this particular direction

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