I. Introduction: The Rise of the Missional Church Conversation

Ecclesiology is one of the major concerns in contemporary theology. By its nature, ecclesiology cannot be a merely academic study, but it should explain how theological principles cohere with empirical reality. In ecumenical and evangelical circles, the idea of mission has evolved into the overarching concept for ecclesiology: accordingly the church is understood as God’s instrument for his saving purpose and mission.¹ As a result, the link between the church and mission is critical for evangelical theology. The discourse of missional ecclesiology specifies that the church must be by nature missionary, rather than simply sending missionaries out. In other words, it is “not the church ‘undertakes’ mission; it is the missio Dei which constitutes the church.”² With this shift in perspective, a new theological paradigm emerges, which regards

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the nature of the church as participating in the *mission Dei*, or God’s mission.

It is within this historical and theological context that the missional church movement arises as a further attempt to reassess the ecclesial identity and vocation within the context of the *missio Dei*. This movement is devoted to the task of fostering a missionary encounter with society, and is driven by a particular concern about how the church engages with the surrounding culture in everyday life. The result has been a new awareness, especially among the churches in North America, of certain theological concepts such as “missional” or the “sent-ness.”

A seminal work in this area is *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by Darrell Guder and published in 1998. Despite an enormous range of meaning given to the word “missional” in later developments, *Missional Church* has something more basic in view: the term “missional” gives penetrating insights into the very nature of “what it means to be the church, and how the being of the church provides the basis for the doing of the church.” This seminal work “seeks to

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4 For missional reframing of ecclesiology for specific denominations in North America, see Craig van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

5 As Craig van Gelder observes, “Common today is the tendency by some to assume that being missional is just another way of framing the historical understanding of missions in the life of the church—that is, what the church does. Others assume that being missional is simply the latest fad geared to help grow the church.” See idem, “Preface,” in *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity*, ed. Craig van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), vii.

6 Ibid., viii.
propel that movement by reshaping the way we do our theology of
the church.” 7 Within the extensive recent discussions on missional
ecclesiology stimulated by *Missional Church*, 8 there are some
significant common features reflected across the ecclesial spectrum
of the missional church movement.

First and foremost, with the term *missio Dei*, the missional
church movement “emphasizes the essential nature and vocation
of the church as God’s called and sent people.” 9 Influenced by the
theological development over the history of ecumenical missionary
conferences, the “called and sent” aspect of the missional church
affirms the church as God’s instrument for divine mission. 10 God

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8 W. Rodman Macllvaine III sorts out six categories for the recent missional literature: (1) biblical and theological foundations for missions; (2) missional church and denominations; (3) missional church after Christendom; (4) missional leadership; (5) missional transition of the church; (6) interdisciplinary discussion on missional methodology. See idem, “What Is the Missional Church Movement?”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (2010): 101–3.


10 Besides the ecumenical missionary movement, it is in particular the influence of Lesslie Newbigin and henceforth the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) in North America that furnish *Missional Church* with three focal points: (1) a cultural and social analysis of our North America setting; (2) theological reflection on the question, what is the gospel that addresses us in our setting? And (3) the renewal of the church and its missional identity in our setting” (George R. Hunsberger, “Acquiring the Posture of a Missionary
is the subject of mission. The church participates in his mission for all humankind and lives out a missional lifestyle in its own social and cultural context. From this perspective, mission is “founded on the mission of God in the world”; it is not about externally focused programs; it is a radically different way of being the church.\textsuperscript{11} The focus of the missional church is much less about “church growth,” which tends to view the church as a social organization that needs to be planted and managed.\textsuperscript{12} Instead, the missional church sees itself as part of the cultural fabric, and it is responsible to participate in God’s reconciling work by bearing witness to the redemptive reign as good news. In short, the missional church perspective reorients our thinking about the church in regard to God’s activity in the world as well as the church’s participation in his missionary movement.

Secondly, the missional church is God’s people gathered as “an alternative or contrast community.”\textsuperscript{13} The church differs from its surrounding world because “it looks for its cues from the One who has sent it out, rather from the powers that appear to run the

\textsuperscript{11} “Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church” (Guder, \textit{Missional Church}, 6).

\textsuperscript{12} In a certain sense, the rise of the missional church stands in contrast to the evangelical church growth movement which, initiated by Donald McGavran, lays emphasis on the church’s obedience to the Great Commission and on numerical increase. For an evaluation of the church growth movement from the missional church perspective, see Gary L. McIntosh, ed., \textit{Evaluating the Church Growth Movement} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

Most decisively, it is called to demonstrate “the culture of God’s new community” with “an alternative set of behaviors, an alternative ethic, [and] an alternative kind of relationships.” The danger in failing to live as a “contrast society” is “cultural imperialism” which assumes that the gospel spreads itself in its Western cultural form and replaces the cultures it conquered. Facing this challenge, missional ecclesiology underscores the church’s identity as a form of cultural embodiment: the missional church always “lives in and among a culture or group of cultures” and “this gives an indication of God’s vision for the church’s transforming impact on its context.” The more faithfully the church lives out a distinctively holy life, the more visible the in-breaking reign of God will be for all to see. In light of this, the church is not only to be a particular community, it should also nurtures the social relationships that embody the reconciliation and healing in God’s saving mission to the world.

Thirdly, there is a common appeal to Christology, for God’s presence in Christ defines his mission to the world. The centrality of Jesus Christ to all aspects of the life of the church, including mission, is rooted in the missio Dei unfolded in the sending of the Son into the world for its salvation: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). For missional ecclesiology, mission thus

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15 Ibid., 114, 119.
means “sending”; missio Dei “unfolded in the history of God’s people across the centuries recorded in Scripture, and it reached its revelatory climax in the incarnation of God’s work of salvation in Jesus ministering, crucified, and resurrected. ... It continues today in the worldwide witness of churches in every culture to the gospel of Jesus Christ.” 20 The missional church thereby sees itself as part of an ongoing process, not as an end in itself; at its core it is a missionary movement and not an institution. And its primary concern is not about attracting people to the institution, but about sending God’s people into the midst of the world to engage others in their neighborhoods and to bear witness to God’s life in Christ. In his “enfleshing of God” as a historical person, Christ “represents the principal model for mission, ministry, and discipleship, and the focal point of an authentic New Testament faith.” 21 Since there is a link between our very actions and the saving purpose of God in and through Christ, the missional church shapes its life and ministry around Jesus Christ, his life, his death, and his resurrected power.

Partaking in the missio Dei, therefore, the missional church lives out as a counter-cultural community, in a similar way to how its Lord witnessed and practiced God’s loving power in his mission. The sending of the church is closely linked with the sending of the Son, for God’s very being is as a sending God. 22 In this particular respect the church bears a marked resemblance to the incarnation of Christ. The church “continues as an incarnate expression of the life of God,” which means that it “always takes

20 Guder, Missional Church, 4.
21 Frost and Hirsch, The Shaping, 112.
22 As Bosch claims, “There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love” (Bosch, Transforming Mission, 390).
particular form, shaped according to the cultural and historical context in which it lives.” 23 The doctrine of the incarnation defines the missional nature of a missional ecclesiology: the way the church expresses the gospel in its social setting is determined and conditioned by the incarnational model of Christ. 24 It continues Christ’s mission through its incarnational witness. To sum up thus far: missional ecclesiology considers the incarnation as the guiding norm for the church’s mission, and its interaction with other parties and cultures in a “critical, discriminating, and constructive manner.” 25

It is impossible and unrealistic to construct one particular version of ecumenical missional ecclesiology as if it were the only version. 26 Nevertheless, the following discussion will draw on a missional church model that understands the church’s incarnational mission as the continuation of Christ’s work. I will now outline the theological development of missional ecclesiology through a concise examination of the thoughts of David Bosch (1929–1992), Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998) and Darrell Guder (1939– ). Since the notion “incarnational” is bound up with the missio Dei concept and its christological concentration, Bosch’s missio Dei perspective and Newbigin’s idea of “mission in Christ’s way” will be laid out as the ground for the development of incarnational-missional ecclesiology. Afterwards, I will examine Guder’s account of incarnational witness and its implication for the

23 Guder, Missional Church, 14.
24 Ibid., 12–14; Hirsch, The Forgotten Ways, 131–38; Roxburgh and Boren, Introducing the Missional Church, 77–78.
25 Guder, Missional Church, 151.
26 Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, for instance, propose a “mystery-memory-mission” model for the missional church. See idem, Introducing the Missional Church, 39–45. The missional church as such is “about a people of memory being continually formed in practices that shape us as an alternative story in our culture” (Ibid., 44).
missional church. As one of the key leaders in the missional church movement, Guder offers particularly helpful theological reflection on the movement, and he sets the groundwork for an emerging new relation between the church and mission. This paper will conclude with an evaluation and critique of this approach.

II. David Bosch: A Paradigmatic Shift of Mission to Missio Dei

One of Bosch’s main concerns is to develop a mission theology that allows the church to engage with the contemporary crisis in mission. The old paradigm of mission emerged from the Enlightenment. There is an urgent need, Bosch observes, for a new theology of mission. This new paradigm seeks a way to dissociate mission from the imperial power structure as well as to redefine and relocate ecclesial missions in the context of missio Dei. Instead of characterizing mission as the church’s missionary enterprise, Bosch primarily refers to

the missio Dei (God’s mission), that is, God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate.28

In this vein, the theology of mission addresses the relationship between God and the world in the light of the gospel. The ground of mission is solely God’s overflowing love to and for the world.

At the center of Bosch’s theological reflection on mission is his understanding of mission as missio Dei. Mission has its origin in God because “God is a missionary God, a God who crosses

27 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 284–345.
28 Ibid., 10.
frontiers towards the world.” 29 In attempting to delineate mission adequately, the basic task for Bosch is to do justice to its trinitarian foundation and to reconfirm its centricity in God himself: mission is rooted “in the fatherly heart of God” and signifies in Christ and Spirit “a new dimension of God’s concern for the world.” 30 Since mission is God’s work from first to last, “Christian mission is always missio Dei.” 31 Bosch thus grounds the ecclesial mission in the missio Dei. In effect, the primary purpose of the church’s mission cannot simply be church planting or the “Christianization of peoples”; rather, it has to be service to the missio Dei, participating in the sending of God. In this new image, mission is “not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.” 32

In Bosch’s understanding, mission is a movement from God to the world, and the church is an instrument for that mission. Mission, in other words, is a gift that the church must receive from above. Bosch remarks that this concept “has helped to articulate the conviction that neither the church nor any other human agent can ever be considered the author or bearer of mission.” 33 Instead, the church is derived from mission, and not the other way round. To prevent from reverting to a narrow, ecclesial-centric view of mission, Bosch develops a new paradigm for mission that not only acknowledges God’s central role in mission but also calls forth the church to respond in a transformative way radically different from the past. 34

30 Ibid., 240–41.
31 Ibid., 242.
33 Ibid., 392.
34 As Bosch says, “The only ultimately effective solution to the widespread missionary malaise today ... is a ’radical transformation of the whole life of the church’ ” (Ibid., 345). “The recognition that mission is God’s mission
“Just as there have been paradigm shifts in respect to the understanding of the relationship between church and mission,” Bosch further acknowledges, “there have also been shifts in the understanding of the nature of salvation the church had to mediate in its mission.” 35 While he is wary of the humanist approach to salvation developed in the 1970s, he insists that the Christ events—his incarnation, earthly life and ministry, death, resurrection, and parousia—remain central to his understanding on salvation and mission:

All these christological elements taken together constitute the praxis of Jesus, the One who both inaugurated salvation and provided us with a model emulate; the salvation we have been granted must again and again be practiced by us.36

The church should therefore “minister to people in their total need” and “involve individual as well as society, soul and body present and future in [its] ministry of salvation.” 37 Here Bosch retains the eschatological dimension of salvation: “mission can be understood only when the risen Christ himself has still a future, a universal future for the nations.” 38 This vision prevents the church from identifying any specific project with the fullness of the reign of God. Since the eschaton will not be realized in history, the church-in-mission always lives in a creative tension as an imperfect yet

35 Ibid., 393.
38 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 517.
effective witness to the arrival of the kingdom of God.  

It follows that, for Bosch, “the church can be missionary only if its being-in-the-world is, at the same time, a being-different-from-the-world.”  

The church is empirical as well as spiritual; it always lives in the tension between the historical and eschatological. Bosch realizes that this ecclesial tension emerges as two seemingly opposite views of the church:

At one end of the spectrum, the church perceives itself to be the sole bearer of a message of salvation on which it has a monopoly; at the other end, the church views itself, as an illustration—in word and deed—of God’s involvement with the world.

Bosch’s new paradigm for the church then leads to an integration of the two visions in such a way that the tension between them becomes creative rather than destructive. As “an inseparable union of the divine and the dusty,” the church is “called to hold in ‘redemptive tension’ dual orientation.”  

Its imperfect character, indeed, does not account for discarding the church but for reforming it. The pilgrim church is itself “an object of the missio Dei, in constant need of repentance and conversion.”

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39 For Bosch, the creative tension in the church lies in the tension between the “already” and “not yet” aspects of God’s kingdom: “From the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the reign of God, from the tension between the salvation indicative (salvation is already a reality!) and the salvation subjunctive (comprehensive salvation is yet to come!) there emerges the salvation imperative—Get involved in the ministry of salvation!” (Ibid., 400).

40 Ibid., 386.

41 Ibid., 381.

42 Ibid., 386, 389.

43 Ibid., 387. Bosch then further elaborates the idea of the church’s continual
its very nature the church is missionary, yet “ambiguous in the extreme.” At times it is a true sign and instrument of the kingdom, and at other times it is a most misleading and vulnerable body. It is Bosch’s contention that the new model of the church-in-mission should hold these two extremes together in creative tension.

III. Lesslie Newbigin: Mission in Christ’s Way

Throughout his academic life, Newbigin seeks to reestablish the relationship between the church and mission, thus reconfirming the missionary character of the church in its encounter with the secular world. For him, the church cannot be understood merely in terms of its place within a society. The church must be defined by its relation to God; likewise, the missionary nature of the church is to be found in its participation in the mission of the triune God. The church’s nature and identity is given by its role to continue the mission of Jesus—proclaiming the Father’s sovereign reign over the world—in the power of the Spirit. It is in this trinitarian context that Newbigin develops his idea of “Mission in Christ’s Way”:

What is made possible for us by what Christ is and has done is that we can so live and act that there are created signs of the kingdom, signs and foretastes, enabling people both to

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 repentance within a christological framework: “The missio Dei purifies the church. It sets it under the cross—the only place where it is ever safe. The cross is the place of humiliation and judgment, but it is also the place of refreshment and new birth” (Ibid., 519). Bosch’s concept of the pilgrim church thus accords with the important Reformation principle: Ecclesia Reformata, semper reformanda.

enjoy even now a foretaste of the joy and freedom of the kingdom, and also to press forward in confident hope for its full realization.\textsuperscript{46}

The “sign” and “foretaste” of the kingdom are the key and common terms that Newbigin uses to express the church’s incompleteness. Newbigin rejects any oversimplified identification between the church and the kingdom, or between the church’s witness and Christ’s mission. While establishing a robust trinitarian framework for mission, Newbigin maintains his christological emphasis in the development of his missionary ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{47} He starts with the work of God in Jesus Christ and finds in Christ the clue for the church’s mission in the world.\textsuperscript{48} In so doing, the nature of the church is defined by its call to follow the way its Lord went. There is no other way in which the church is authorized to carry out its mission.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{48} A clear example for explaining Newbigin’s insistence on a christocentric position is his debate with Konrad Raiser in the 1990s. While Raiser considers the “Christocentric-universalist” paradigm for mission in the ecumenical movement to be problematic, Newbigin responses that a trinitarianism without a christological starting point poses greater problems for the mission of the church. See Goheen, \textit{As the Father}, 157–62. See further Konrad Raiser, \textit{Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement}?, trans. Tony Coates (Geneva: WCC, 1991).

\textsuperscript{49} As Newbigin says, “Therefore he [the Lamb of God], and he alone, can and does reveal its [the history’s] meaning to those whom he chooses. As they follow the Lamb on the way he went, they bear witness to the true meaning of what is happening in the history of the world” (Newbigin, \textit{Open Secret}, 37).
Basically, Newbigin’s logic of mission refers to an essential connection between the mission of the church and the mission of Jesus Christ. This is grounded in the doctrine of election. To be an elect in Christ (as Christ elects his church), Newbigin argues, “means to be the bearer of God’s saving purpose for his whole world, to be the firstfruit of his blessed kingdom which is for all.” Therefore, election is God’s selection of the church in Christ for a missionary responsibility—to bear witness to the salvation of the kingdom and to embody in its corporate life the redemptive purpose of God. Put it simply, the church is chosen as “the provisional incorporation of humankind into Christ.”

To be incorporated into the body of Christ, Newbigin stresses, is to be incorporated into his death and resurrection, i.e., to share in his ongoing mission to the world. Accordingly, the church is not an end in itself but always “a movement launched into the world in the same sense in which Jesus is sent into the world by the Father.” Since the church is only a provisional body, its “Mission in Christ’s way” can never be perfected nor completed on earth.

How then does the church fulfill its task in Christ’s way? Newbigin reminds us that from beginning to end it remains the mission of God. The mission of the church should be understood in light of the fact that

the meaning of contemporary history is that it is the history of the time between Christ’s ascension and his coming again, ... the time in which the full revelation of its power and glory is held back in order that all the nations may have the opportunity

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52 Ibid., 134.
to repent and believe in freedom.\textsuperscript{53}

Thus, the ecclesial mission is rooted in the Christ event which reveals and accomplishes the ultimate goal and end of universal history.\textsuperscript{54} It is the mission of Christ that “provides both the empowerment and the content of the church’s mission.”\textsuperscript{55} In the age “between the times,” therefore, the church makes the life of the kingdom known in its words and deeds. It proclaims the presence of the kingdom and bears witness to the truth and goal of history by a life “which ... by always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus becomes the place where the risen life of Jesus is made available for others (2 Cor. 4:10).” \textsuperscript{56} While the blessing and judgment of God’s kingdom is present in the corporate life of the church as in the life of Jesus, it is only in a “secondary, derivative, but nonetheless real sense” that the reign of God is present in the church.\textsuperscript{57} Mission remains “an action of God, putting forth the power of the Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer to the completion.” \textsuperscript{58} The purpose of the church’s mission is thus to bear the witness of the Spirit. In its faithfulness to Jesus the church becomes “the place where the Spirit is enabled to complete the Spirit’s work.” \textsuperscript{59}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{53} Ibid., 128.
\bibitem{54} Ibid., 109–11.
\bibitem{55} Goheen, \textit{As the Father}, 181. In this sketch of the logic of mission, Newbigin reaffirms Christ’s centricity in the church: “the kingdom of God is present in Jesus — incarnate, crucified, risen, and coming in judgment. The life of the church in the midst of the world is to be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom only in so far as its whole life is centered in that reality” (Weston, \textit{Lesslie Newbigin}, 146).
\bibitem{56} Newbigin, \textit{Gospel in a Pluralist Society}, 119.
\bibitem{57} Newbigin, \textit{Open Secret}, 53.
\bibitem{58} Ibid., 60.
\bibitem{59} Newbigin, \textit{Mission in Christ’s Way}, 20.
\end{thebibliography}
Above all, the work of the Spirit in the church is to continue that what Jesus came to do, to liberate humanity from sin, to advocate a new social order in the secular world.\textsuperscript{60} Because the Spirit, as “the active missionary,” is sovereign over the mission, the church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission.

In what sense, then, does Newbigin speak of the presence of the kingdom in the church? Newbigin argues that “the presence of the kingdom, hidden and revealed in the cross of Jesus, is carried through history hidden and revealed in the life of that community which bears in its life the dying and rising of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{61} In its hiddenness, the kingdom is revealed to whom God through his Spirit grants the gift of faith. God’s kingship is surely present in the church, but “it is not the property of the church.”\textsuperscript{62} The active agent of mission for Newbigin is always “the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God”;\textsuperscript{63} and the Spirit is “the living, mighty, self-communicating presence of God himself,” who changes both the world and the church and “always goes before the church in its missionary journey.”\textsuperscript{64} It is thus by the action of the Spirit that “the church is launched on its mission. And it remains the mission of the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{65} The church, which is not the author of the Spirit’s witness to the kingdom, is where that witness is given and acknowledged. The church’s witness is hence derived from the divine one; it is witness insofar as “it follows obediently where the Spirit leads.”\textsuperscript{66} The continuation of Jesus’ mission to the world

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 29–30.
\textsuperscript{61} Newbigin, \textit{Open Secret}, 52.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, 56–57.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 61. Newbigin further stresses that “It is the Spirit who leads the way, opening a door here that the church must then obediently enter, kindling a flame there that the church must lovingly tend” (Ibid., 64).
through the church, therefore, is not simply an enterprise of the church. Rather, it is always the work of the living Spirit of God. The church is “weak” and “under trial” indeed, but the Spirit both assures it of the coming of the kingdom and makes it hope more eagerly for its full fruition.\footnote{Ibid., 62–63.}

**IV. Darrell Guder: Mission as Incarnational Witness**

Undoubtedly influenced by Bosch and Newbigin,\footnote{Guder himself mentions their influence on his thinking in his work, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), x–xi.} Guder undertakes the task of overcoming the separation of the gospel benefits pertaining to the church’s members from the church’s missional calling and its service of witness.\footnote{Darrell L. Guder, “The Church as Missional Community,” in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 114–28; idem, *Be My Witnesses: The Church’s Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 8–12. See further idem, *Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 120–41.} In terms of the missional church, he seeks to reestablish the basic relation between the church and mission. As the concept and practice of mission has been misled in the past centuries, Guder argues that the church today should learn to understand God in his act of sending as well as the church’s “sent-outness,” i.e., the fundamental idea of mission.\footnote{Darrell L. Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church’s Witness* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999), 21–29.} The church is missional because the God in whom it believes is a missional God. “The theology of the *missio Dei* is,” in consequence, “making clear that our ecclesiology, if it is truly to be a doctrine for the church that is continuing the apostolic witness,
must be rooted in God’s nature, purpose and action.” Guder, “Church as Missional Community,” 125.
72 See Guder, Missional Church, 11–12.
74 Guder, “Church as Missional Community,” 126.
Guder stresses that the mission of the church in following Jesus is an integration of belief and deed, which virtually reflects the way in which God’s self-communication of his gracious love took shape. By the term “incarnational witness” Guder means the understanding and practice of Christian witness that is rooted in and shaped by the life and ministry of Jesus. The incarnation of Jesus not only summarizes “the ‘what’ of the gospel,” but also defines “the ‘how’ of the gospel.” In Christ, “what” God has done for us is ultimately connected intimately with “how” God has done it. “This unique incarnation is at the same time the epitome of God’s way of making himself knowable and experienceable in human history. It is the way of ‘condescension,’ of ‘accommodation’—it is ‘incarnational.’” Accordingly, the communication of this good news in the present day is the church’s missional vocation, and “the witness to the unique salvation events of Christ’s incarnation is itself to be incarnational.” The church is called into existence in order to “continue to incarnate the presence, the message, and the reality of God in Christ.” Through its concrete life, God now continues his incarnational mission, as he has carried out the same mission in Christ.

In sum, Guder employs the term “incarnational” not only to describe God’s act of self-communication, but also to further elaborate on the theme of “Mission in Christ’s way,” the church’s way of going about its mission. At the core of his incarnational approach lies a normative principle or criterion for mission, which is rooted in God’s way of revealing himself supremely in the

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76 Guder, *Incarnation and the Church’s Witness*, xii.
77 Ibid., 3.
79 Ibid., 20.
80 Ibid., 26.
incarnation of Jesus.\textsuperscript{81} “The humanness of Jesus, and the example of his life,” is accordingly seen as “paradigmatic for the mission activity of the church.”\textsuperscript{82} In effect, Guder’s incarnational approach to mission becomes “an ethic of evangelism, based upon the humanity of Christ, whose life and actions are as much the norm of obedient Christian living as are his words.”\textsuperscript{83} Jesus as human is the model for the church’s practice. The ongoing incarnational ministry of the church is to be “the continuation of Christ’s work, not to do what he did not do, but to carry out the meaning of what was accomplished through him.”\textsuperscript{84} The ethical dimension of the church’s incarnational witness (based on the example of Christ) thus constitutes a fundamental concern of Guder’s missional ecclesiology.

The application of the incarnational principle to the witness of the church indicates that “God’s incarnational action, especially in its epitome in Christ, must continue — and it must do so incarnationally.”\textsuperscript{85} Through the church’s obedient response to God’s missional calling, God’s love is “enfleshed” in that mundane act and becomes visible to the world. This incarnational reality, now demonstrated by the church’s witness, is rooted in the church’s submission to Jesus Christ: the church must “learn

\textsuperscript{81} In reviewing John’s Mackey’s discussion of the “incarnational principle,” Guder explains that, according to this principle, “the witness must identify oneself ‘in the closest possible manner’ with one’s environment” (Guder, “Incarnation,” 178). Relatedly, he also recognizes that “the enfleshment of the Word is the climax of a long, incarnational process in which God had been entering into the experience and history of his creation in many ways, to disclose himself, his purposes, and his will, to guide as well as to reprove his people” (idem, Be My Witnesses, 18).

\textsuperscript{82} Guder, “Incarnation,” 178.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{84} Guder, Be My Witnesses, 27.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 25, emphasis mine.
what it means and how to do it from Jesus.” 86 To learn Jesus’ way of living is thus to make possible the practice of the love of God among us; the gospel, as a demonstrated message, “is to be incarnated in our relationships.” 87 “Mission is,” thereby, “to be a continuing process of translation and witness.” 88

In reality, however, there are “profound contradictions between the message of the gospel of love and the unloving way in which Christians frequently live as communities.” 89 Because of that, Guder calls for the continuing conversion of the church toward a deeper obedience to the fullness of the gospel. 90 The church should encounter again and again the power of the gospel in order to evade any reductionist view of the church and mission. The continuing conversion of the church, therefore, should go with repentance and forgiveness:

The community incarnates its witness to love ... in its honest admission of its own sin. ... In other words, the community enfleshes the gospel of love as it lives out its forgiveness before all the world. 91

The Church undergoes continual conversion “to Christ’s salvation and thus to his mission.” 92

V. Conclusion and Evaluation

We have laid out a theological framework for missional
ecclesiology through the works of Bosch, Newbigin, and Guder. In line with the ecumenical theology developed through missionary conferences in the last century, missional ecclesiology calls for rethinking the basic underlying assumption about the church and its participation in the missio Dei. It affirms the primacy of the missio Dei movement, in terms of which the church is God’s agent of reconciliation in continuing the work done in and by Christ. Just as Christ came to announce and demonstrate the coming kingdom of God, so the missional church, God’s sent people, serves as the sign and witness of the presence of the kingdom. As explained above, missional ecclesiology, while speaking of the function of the church, also acknowledges its weakness and sinfulness. In its earthly journey, the missional church is continually empowered anew to participate in the missio Dei. It always points beyond itself toward the full realization of God’s kingdom.

However, what does it mean by the church’s participation in the missio Dei movement? How does the church continue Christ’s mission, or how does Christ send his church into the world? Is there any significant difference between the ecclesial mission and Christ’s mission?

Missional ecclesiology develops the incarnational principle for answering these basic questions. The church is regarded as a dynamic cultural expression of Christ’s followers in any given place, and its incarnational witness thereby enfleshes the presence of Christ in the world. This emphasis upon the continuity of Christ and his church implies that the movement of missio Dei is the ultimate ground for understanding Christ and his mission. It is of utmost importance that the church should imitate and follow Christ in his missional and moral lifestyle. Since God is a sending God and his mission is to show the incarnational reality of salvation to the world through his communicative act in Christ and in the church, Christ and his church are led by the same divine power to the same missional goal. Instead of the person of Jesus Christ, the
“pattern” of the incarnate life becomes the determining factor in the church’s missional life. The incomparability of Christ, or the unrepeatable once-and-for-all character of the Christ event, is as such deemphasized. Christ’s saving significance is diminished to the degree in which his presence and its impact upon the world have no crucial difference from the witness of the church.

Bosch and Newbigin, indeed, do not reduce *missio Dei* theology to an incarnational principle. While never identifying the church with the kingdom of God, they emphasize that the primary agency of mission is always divine. The church’s witness is in turn secondary and derivative. In the *missio Dei*, human work is chosen as God’s instrument, but it cannot replace the divine work. Seeing the church as the divinely given agent of mission, with a kind of interdependence between human agency and divine mission, Bosch distinguishes his position from the ecclesial-centric missiology in the past.\(^{93}\) His trinitarian and eschatological perspective guarantees the ontological difference between the church and the kingdom. Newbigin, on the other hand, illustrates the dependence of the church’s mission upon the power and mission of the Spirit; it is the hidden power of the Spirit that leads the church into mission. What constitutes the church is therefore invisible: the calling of God, the election in Christ, and the work of the Spirit. Bosch and Newbigin are nevertheless significant figures for the development of missional ecclesiology: they stress that the church is missionary by its very nature in a way that it should interact with and bring impact on culture. They reject the traditional view that takes mission as the church’s project or enterprise.\(^{94}\) In light of this, missional ecclesiology, as already seen in Guder’s account,


\(^{94}\) See also, for instance, Guder, *Missional Church*, 3–7.
bears upon the task of giving shape and meaning to the relation of the church and mission in a “post-Christian pluralistic era.” It explains the church’s participation in mission specifically by conceiving the church as an incarnational reality that represents God’s distinctive and transformative presence in the world. In this way, the missional church is distinguished from the world in its demonstration of the unity of divine and human living as revealed in Christ.

Through its engagement with society and culture, the missional church exists in the world with the goal of showing forth the living divine reality. In other words, the church serves as a sign and a foretaste of the kingdom and reflects the very character of the incarnate God. This also defines the distinctiveness of the church from the world. Missional ecclesiology, insofar as it stresses the church’s outreach to the world, however, tends to dissolve God’s spiritual presence and his hidden power upon the church into the church’s self-disposing practice of witness. Its account of the church’s participation in the *missio Dei* seems to pay insufficient attention to the concept of the relation-in-distinction between the invisible and visible aspects of the church, which specifies God’s personal and authoritative presence and prevents over-simplified identification of the wholeness of church with its social structure, practice or institution.

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96 See, for instance, Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 54: “All the church does and is should live out God’s life in the midst of the world; missional people should practice God’s life before a watching world.”

becomes the “sacrament” of grace, through which God’s mighty acts in history may be present.\footnote{98} Along these lines, missional ecclesiology runs the risk of absorbing the missio Dei into the missiones ecclesiae, consequently leading to a kind of ecclesial activism. Under this kind of theological construction, the reality of God is ecclesially constituted, only by means of the incarnational witness of the church.

We have already explored how, in the missional church, human actions extend the logic of Jesus’ mission.\footnote{99} At the heart of missional ecclesiology is an incarnational Christology that characterizes the incarnate Christ as the primary model of mission at the expense of ontological concerns of the person of the savior. The missional formulation of the church’s continuation of Christ’s mission, however, requires the critical guidance of Christology which helps to achieve greater clarity in its missionary aim and motive. It should always be noted that Christ is a “divine person


\footnote{99} Of course, missional ecclesiology also has its pneumatological dimension that paves the way for this activist understanding of the church, according to which the Spirit shapes the missional community accordingly through an ongoing process of social cultivation. See, for, instance, Guder, \textit{Missional Church}, 142–82. In my opinion, this pneumatological consideration comes very close to the post-liberal approach, such as the ecclesiologies of Stanley Hauerwas and Reinhard Hütter.
or agent, to be confessed as Lord.”

He demonstrates his spiritual omnipresence through the visible forms of the church. Bosch and Newbigin, while they address the invisible aspect of the church, do not appeal explicitly to a robust Christology that affirms the church’s existence in Christ as visible and invisible. This deficiency may be one of the chief factors in future development of a theologically convincing missional ecclesiology: as such, missio Dei tends to be dissolved into human activity, and the reference to divine agency is not sufficient. For this reason, missional ecclesiology should explore the christological mystery more deeply for its further development.

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101 Instead, Newbigin’s ecclesiology seeks to recover “the intrinsic missionary character of the Holy Spirit” and considers the Spirit as the primary agent of mission in the sphere of the church. See further Goheen, As the Father, 181–89.

102 I should express my gratitude to Frankie Lee, an ordinand at Westcott House, Cambridge, who spent his valuable time to review this article and gave me constructive comments.