

Towards an Effective Synthesis of Attractional and Missional Church Models

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There is little doubt that a pastor with a heart for God also has a heart for people. Becoming a pastor or serving in any ministerial capacity, really, is a job that is deeply dependent on one's desire to reach the lost. If one desires money, fame, status, or freedom, it is highly unlikely that they would seek pastorship. While the financial gain of pastoral work is likely minimal compared to other common professions, the spiritual gains cannot be matched by any other profession. But to keep a church alive, it must be able to grow and flourish. The church must be able to find the lost souls no matter where they may live, or whom they may be. Without souls coming for truth, the church will stumble and fall into obscurity.

Into this environment, one finds many theological minds trying to come up with ideas to keep churches growing and flourishing in a myriad of ways. Two of these methods include the ideas of an *attractional* church, and a *missional* church. There are many books and other sources that exist on this topic, but for the sake of this document, the concept of an attractional church will be discussed considering Andy Stanley's book *Deep and Wide* and Jared C. Wilson's book, *The Prodigal Church*. These books each tackle attractional and missional churches respectively but seem to be sharply focused on these topics without considering alternatives.

The current church models focus too much attention on either attractional or missional approaches when the best model for a church is one that effectively integrates both models. If a church focuses too much attention on an attractional church, they have the potential to raise up believers who come only to enjoy an experience and not draw closer to God. However, if a church focuses too much attention on a missional model, they have the potential to become a self-absorbed church that does not care enough about the world to try to change it¹. To properly

¹ Alvin L Reid, *Radically Unchurched* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 38.

reach the lost, the church must be adaptable, but they should not be so adaptable that they reduce or exclude God.

Attractional Churches: Are They a Christian Circus?

When one hears the word “attractional” church, it is a short order to associate with the root word of “attraction” in the recreational sense. Children will go to fall carnivals or summer festivals which feature a range of attractions which may include things like a Ferris Wheel, bumper cars, carnival games involving skill (though they are slanted towards misdirection and optical illusions rather than skills) and other recreational activities. These events attract people to them because they offer something that they cannot find elsewhere.

In truth, an attractional church does just that, it focuses on bringing something unique to people who are generally uninterested or bored by traditional churches². Yet, the relation between an attractional church and other models may seem to outsiders to have more in common with a circus or a rock concert than a spiritual gathering. But that is exactly what draws people to an attractional church, the fact that it is not like other churches people think of when they think of a church.

The scope of this document is not to explain deep historical insights into what brought about the rise of attractional churches nor is it to offer a systematic biography of the authors (Stanley and Wilson) that wrote the books. Yet a shining example of what led to the attractional church mentality can be traced back to the Calvary Chapel movement, also known as the Jesus Movement. This movement occurred in the early 1970’s but was recently introduced to a new

² Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016): 107.

audience through the movie *Jesus Revolution*³ that premiered on the Netflix streaming service in 2023. The goal of the actual Jesus Revolution upon which the film was based was to evangelize hippies who were generally outcasts shunned by contemporary churches of that time for their lifestyle and dress. By creating a place where hippies were welcomed, the Calvary Chapel was able to reach a group of unchurched people with the truth.

Attractional Churches are Changing Lives

Many individuals outside of the attractional church movement would argue that the movement does very little to grow the kingdom of Christ, only focusing on a weekend performance and nothing else⁴. While it is certainly true that attractional churches expend a great amount of energy on their evening services, that does not mean that they are not reaching lives. These services are different, loud, high-energy, and draw quite a crowd. Yet it is a proven fact that these newer style churches draw more people than most traditional churches in the same area⁵. The longer a church has been established in a particular area, the more likely the people in that area are to have already visited it. If they did not find something they like, they will go somewhere they do like.

The consumerist mentality of an attractional church is one of the secrets that can be used to draw new people to them. People who are out of church or anti-church will not likely go to a church if there is nothing tangible there for them. To counteract the predispositions of the prodigal churchgoers, attractional churches will tailor the service to meet those needs. This

³ Joshua Encinas, "Jesus Revolution Is a Christian Hit That Takes Lessons from Blumhouse and Paul Thomas Anderson," MovieMaker, March 6, 2023, <https://www.moviemaker.com/jesus-revolution-christian-hit-blumhouse/>.

⁴ William Jason Burns, "Healthy Church Multiplication in Modern Churches" (PhD diss., Southeastern University, 2020), 12, ProQuest (DAI-A 81/11 2406470223).

⁵ Ed Setzer and Daniel Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches that Multiply*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 7.

includes offering a coffee shop, perhaps a café with food, music that does not remind them of ‘old’ churches, and a truly unique experience⁶. When a well-organized attractional church welcomes new visitors, it will often strike a chord with the unchurched. If nothing else, the return rate of a visitor to an attractional church – at least in the early visitor stages – tends to be higher than the return rate of a traditional church.

When one considers the facts presented here, an attractional church offers something that is bringing some lost people to Christ. If the only desire of an attractional church was to fill their seats with people, and the only request is that people feel warm and welcome, it would be the way to go. However, a sobering reality about these churches is that some of them (not all) are doing more to damage their new believers than to help them grow.

Attractional Churches May Cause Spiritual Anemia

There are a considerable number of reasons that draw new and former churchgoers to attractional churches. After all, if something was not making a noticeable impact, there would not be so many books and reports written on them. When one looks past the sparkling surface of an attractional church, there may be some notable issues that should cause some concern for the droves of people attending them – lack of true discipleship being the most prevalent.

With much of the attention (and budget) of attractional churches spent on making massive weekend events with top-quality sound, professional musicians, huge LCD screens, charismatic pastors, and innovative children’s ministries, this can sometimes come at the cost of

⁶ Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 160.

fruitfully growing disciples⁷. If the church offers nothing to the attendee but a bunch of flashy lights with no plan for spiritual growth, this will create an entire generation of anemic Christians. These Christians are like the babies only being capable of drinking milk rather than eating solid food as Paul describes in Hebrews (cf. Hebrews 5:13-14). While this is useful to get the new believer started, they will eventually seek something deeper and more filling and may struggle to find it in the attractional church⁸.

Missional Churches: Growing Deep Roots

To compete with the growing number of attractional churches, some spiritual leaders have turned their attention to a missional church. Missional churches are not synonymous with “old” churches, in fact, there are just as many missional churches being started as there are attractional churches. However, unlike the bright lights and expensive coffee offered at attractional churches, missional churches have a much deeper context in that they approach a mission field and stick with it⁹.

When a church makes a strategic decision to focus their ministry on missions both at home and abroad, they officially become missional. A missional church has a heart to grow in their community, around the world, or both. Rather than trying to bring the people to their building by offering flashing lights, these churches go out into the street and find people where

⁷ Matthew Allen Thibault, “Launch Strategy and Core Development During the Pre-Launch Phase of a Church Plant in San Diego, California” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023), 33, ProQuest DAI-A 84/10(E) 30417752).

⁸ Jared C. Wilson, *The Prodigal Church: A Gentle Manifesto Against the Status Quo*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 144.

⁹ Banseok Cho, “Being Missional, Becoming Missional: A Biblical-theological Study of the Missional Conversion of the Church” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2019), 27, ProQuest (DAI-A 81/2(E) 22589830).

they are. When missional churches do things well, the community in which they are planted begin to grow and change into places where the Gospel is known and displayed¹⁰.

Missional churches do not pay as much attention to the weekly performance and being hip as they do to creating a healthy community of believers presented with ample opportunities to minister to the people. This does not mean that the missional church does not offer amazing worship, higher-end coffee, etc., rather, it means that these items are considered secondary to their desire to build up the believer in their faith. These churches can certainly offer the deeper discipleship that grows believers, but they may find it harder to draw in new people on their own¹¹.

Missional Churches Are on a Mission

To understand a missional church, one needs to look no further than the name of the church style – they are on a mission. Depending on the church leadership, the mission of the church may differ or change over time, but the focus of striving to do something in God’s name stays the same. There is no doubt that a missional church wants to grow their members and equip them for the work God has already planned for them (cf. Ephesians 2:10) and they design their churches in this manner. The congregation has planted itself in an area and is trying to do great things in that area and they hope that these actions will stir the hearts of their community and bring them to the church to grow their faith.

Once someone begins to attend a missional church, they will grow in their faith by working alongside others to grow the community. The church focuses much of its energy in

¹⁰ Mawethu Msebi, “An Analysis of the Role of the Missional Church in Community Development” *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 8, (2022), 232.

¹¹ Patrick David Tharp, “Missional Ministry in a Multiethnic Church: A Case Study of Grace Point Alliance Church” (PhD diss., Northeastern Seminary, 2022), 16, ProQuest (DAI-A 83/11 2671576989).

building the members up to learn what God wants them to do. Once the believer feels like they have discovered the work that they are to do, a missional church will want to position those believers in such a way that they can bring about a change in the lives of others and grow themselves¹².

The Mission Can Miss the Mark

Although the missional model of church can do great things in the community in which it is planted, it depends a great deal on the proper leadership and encouragement of the followers to succeed. Missional churches often live and die by whatever mission they set (sometimes both). To deliver on the mission, the church must have some measurement upon which to determine its course and measure its success, otherwise it simply becomes a hollow marker with no tangible meaning¹³. With so much energy and attention focused on this mission, the church may also judge itself harshly by seeming to fail in that mission.

No matter how well a missional church may have established itself in a community, if the church cannot maintain its unity, it will fall apart. Sometimes, this may happen as the result of a societal change, a neighborhood shift, or mismanagement of the congregation, whatever the cause, it can be devastating to the missional church. Although a missional church may be able to maintain its building and facility after a major shift, the church congregation may very well divide itself over perceived differences in direction, disagreement with changing plans or any

¹² Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 169.

¹³ Andrew A Groza, "The Seldom Acknowledged Difficulties of Leading Missional Churches: Challenges Faced by Those Who Seek to Explore Different Forms of Being and Doing Church," *Ecclesiastical Practices* 6, (2019): 163-181.

number of other reasons¹⁴. No matter how well the church is built, it is still a collection of broken people.

The New Testament Church: A Synthesis of Attractional and Missional Churches

After a thorough analysis of the missional and attractional model of churches, it is clear that truly successful churches must not conform to a single model. There is no such thing as a “one size fits all” church. However, there is most certainly a “one message fits all” approach that will succeed – the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. After all, once Christ ascended to Heaven, he left his followers with The Great Commission – to bring everyone to God through Christ. This is the basis upon which the first church, the church found in Acts, based its entire message¹⁵. It could be argued that the attractional church began at Pentecost when all the apostles felt the Holy Spirit fall upon them and began doing amazing works in the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 2:2-4). In that same vein, it could be argued that when Paul founded the church at Antioch, it was the first missional church (cf. Acts 11:19-24) since it was launched with the purpose of spreading the Gospel far beyond the gates of Jerusalem¹⁶.

A critical flaw in the attractional church is the focus on the location, the building, or the worship style. In the early days of the church, the people did not meet in a designated building, they met in houses – often in a different house each time to avoid detection by authorities¹⁷. This movement would eventually disappear once the Holy Roman Empire (though we might argue

¹⁴ Peirong Lin, “Strengthening Unity for the Missional Church: The Role of Theological Education in Overcoming Racism,” *International Review of the Mission* 111, no. 1 (2022): 4.

¹⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

¹⁷ Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 61.

that it was neither Holy nor Roman) made Christianity the official religion of their empire. In the original New Testament church, the location was not what mattered as much as what was being discussed. Missional churches, on the other hand, though they may have a home location (or series of locations), were more concerned about sharing the Gospel with others and studying Christ's life and teachings¹⁸. There is very little room for argument against the missional model, in fact, the missional model is part of the reason why the Gospel continues to expand to this day.

What Works – Attractional Churches

As explained previously, there are very solid things that each church model offers in a modern church. One of the greatest strengths of the attractional church is its ability to draw people into the church – especially those that normally would not want to come. Without physical and spiritual growth, a church will die, regardless of how great their services are¹⁹. If the ministries are designed in such a way that they draw new people to the church and keep their interest, it will be a solid gain for churches new and existing.

Once the new believer (or a potentially new believer) has made the decision to attend the first time, they need to feel the pull of the Holy Spirit in the new church. The non-believer and believer alike, are not as interested in flash and pizzazz as they are in feeling truly connected to God²⁰. Almost every believer, if asked, will have at least one point in their life where they felt the Holy Spirit touch them in a real and tangible way. If an attractional church can deliver that to the attendee, it will deliver it to others throughout its lifetime.

¹⁸ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 62

¹⁹ Rick Richardson and Ed Setzer: *You Found Me: New Research on How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious Are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 7

²⁰ Reid, *Radically Unchurched*, 133

What Works – Missional Churches

Beyond the flash and fancy of the attractional church, there are things that this model does not offer, and missional churches can fill that gap. The single most critical thing an attendee of a missional church needs is to be built up in discipleship so that they can multiply other disciples, New Testament churches were especially good at this²¹. In fact, one could argue that the reason that the Western World has Christianity to begin with, was because the New Testament church trained missionaries who went on to train other missionaries until the force multiplier of disciples spread to the end of the earth, just as Jesus intended (cf. Acts 1:8).

Another thing that must be considered for the success of a church of any kind, is to look at the neighborhood in which it is planted. A truly missional church should make an impact in the neighborhood or whatever mission field they have planted themselves in. A missional church focuses on the transformation of the community around it just as those in the Acts focused on the transformation of the cities in which they were planted²².

Conclusion

In conclusion, just as there is no such thing as a “one-size-fits-all” person, there is also no such thing in ministry. While it is true that we are called to reach people who are lost and fulfill the Great Commission, this should never be done by diluting the Bible just to appeal to people. An attractional church can be the breath of fresh air needed to draw the unchurched to God, but if the church never goes deeper than what is necessary to fill the pews, it is doctrinally

²¹ Christopher Hutson, et al., *First and Second Timothy and Titus (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 56

²² Bob Burton, *The Spiritual DNA of a Church on Mission: Rediscovering the 1st Century Church for 21st Century Spiritual Awakening*, (Nashville, TN: Wordsearch Academic 2020), 8

bankrupt²³. Yet, in the same way, a church that is aimed at forcing conformity among its members to achieve some existential goal beyond grace through Christ will equally create challenges for new and existing believers alike²⁴. If church leaders are to reach people and mature them in their walk with Christ, the best way to do this is to find a balance between attractional and missional churches.

It is clear, after thorough review of the materials, that the best solution for a successful ministry is to draw upon aspects of both missional and attractional churches. Church leaders must also be cognizant of the importance of the individual person (or the body of believers) involved in the church as they will change the way one approaches ministry. Finally, no matter what church leaders do, they must remember that every person, lost or found, Christian or Agnostic, are all beloved children of God and their eternal faith depends on allowing them to find Christ.

²³ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 61.

²⁴ Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 77.

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