

THE FIELD IS THE WORLD

Buzzword — a word or phrase used to impress, or one that is fashionable; a stylish or trendy word or phrase. The odd thing about it is that the word “buzzword” is itself a buzzword. Sometimes we have Christian buzzwords. I wonder how many immediately come to mind?

Here’s one: “missional”. This is a word that appears seemingly everywhere: in conferences; on websites; in books and articles. It shows up as “missional people”, “missional communities”, “missional principles”, “missional church”, or just plain “missional”. I use it too, so I’m certainly not knocking it — although it’s not in the Dictionary.

I learned “missional principles” many years ago, though without the word, from an old book by Jerry Cook with the unlikely title of “Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness.” I say *unlikely* title, because the book is really about the church. And I’ve been thinking again about this book recently.

To set up the language, let’s look at a parable Jesus told:

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Mt 13:24-30, 36-43

There's a lot here in terms of counterfeit sowing of a weed that is almost impossible to distinguish from the real thing in the early stages, but may be straightforwardly distinguished at full maturity. But for our purposes, all we need is the phrase, "*The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom.*"

For the farmer who ploughs and sows and tends and harvests, the field is the arena of work — it's where the action is. As sons of the Kingdom, the field is where we're *invested*. It's the arena of operation — where it's at.

Now it's been said that Christian people are generally as confused as their pastors; and if that's true, there must be a lot of confused pastors, because a lot of the church acts like the field is the *church*. This leads to two different and contrasting models of what the church *is*:

If the field is the Church ...

If that's the emphasis, the Church is the area of operation, where the work is done. We tend to think of the Church meeting place, and so focus on the Church *building*. But even if, like us, you don't have a building, you're not off the hook. We can begin to think of the Church *meeting* as where the work is done — where the action is.

Picture a Church building, whether it's an actual building, or the meeting in the meeting place. This is the picture of an organised Church located at an address. You can direct people there. The emphasis is to get people into the building or meeting — if that's where the work is done, that's where they need to be. So we need visibility, prominent location, signage, and PR. Once they're in, we need programmes and promotions to keep them, and keep the flow.

If the field is the Church, the goals must be increasing attendance, budget and facility — we want the field to grow. It all happens in the building, so the only way to increase the field is to have a large building. In terms of ministry, we must get people into the building or meeting, then assume it will happen. The professional will take over. He lays hands on their heads, and if there are too many heads for his hands, we add another professional. Everything is designed to draw people *out* of the culture, *out* of the world, and *in* to the Church, because that's where the action is. All the arrows go in.

Involvement or service (i.e. ministry) is *positional*. To be in ministry, you must be director or minister or associate of something, therefore most are reduced to *spectators*. As Jerry Cook says:

... the individual member is easily misled about the meaning of Christian service and is often reduced to a spectator. You see, once he's in the field, unless he wins a position he has little relevance except to help keep the machine going.

He keeps his seat occupied and invites his neighbours, but that's not fulfilling so he becomes a bit confused. Then he either grabs for power or drops out. Or he regresses into a support or non-support role of the pastor's programme.

The motivation to get people in is described as "evangelism". Once they're in, we must keep them in, or the field will shrink. In this whole matter, we are in competition with the "rest of life" — people choose between church activities and other things. The outcomes are that the pastor needs to be a superstar, or becomes a puppet, depending on how the government of the Church

is organised. The Church, after initial enthusiasm, settles for comfort and mediocrity; or settles as a subculture with no real impact on the world. It's been called "an island of irrelevance in a sea of despair".

These are generalisations, but the characteristics of the model are visible. You may protest, "That's not us!" Yet all of us, to a greater or lesser extent, have aspects of *the field is the Church* in our thinking. It's good to ponder and identify, and consider what may need to be changed.

The field is the world

We know that the Church is not a building. But neither is the Church the meeting. The main meeting is very important, but it's not the Church. After the meeting, when everyone goes home, the Church still exists. The Church is people, equipped to serve, meeting needs everywhere in Jesus' name.

Now since the field is the world, the *world* is the place where the work is done. This time, all the arrows go *out*. Now the emphasis is not on visibility, organisation, programme and promotion, but rather one worship, training and fellowship, because these are the things that can produce Spirit-filled people who can meet others' needs in Jesus' name.

When we gather together, that's not the Church at work. It's the Church at rest. It's two hours or so of refreshing, challenging, equipping, encouraging, healing ... *so that* we can do the *work* of the Church in the other 166 hours of the week. The main meeting is very important, and we should prioritise it and prioritise our attendance. It's a major identification point for the Church. But even when it's over, the Church still exists, and is at work. Jerry Cook explains:

When our people gather on Sundays..., they are not the Church at work. To attend services is not to serve the Lord. Services are for what we might call R and R, rest and restoration, and this includes worship and celebration. We get together, we sing, we clap, we praise God, worship, meet one another, talk about Jesus. We don't hear any profanity or dirty stories. It's tremendous. It's unadulterated fun and enjoyment, in a pure, clean, loving environment.

When we meet, we read the Bible and the Lord speaks to us in various ways. Brothers and sisters more gifted than we are in certain areas minister to us. We thoroughly enjoy it. We're healed. Our lives are changed. We receive tremendous blessings. Why? So that we can gather for a repeat performance...because by then we'll need to be pumped up again?

No! The Church is rested and restored at meetings so that they can work in the world all week long. ... When we get together the next time, we'll share what's been going on. We'll rejoice together over our victories and pray about our needs. Some people are going to be present who were caught in the work of the Church out in the world. They are going to begin to understand what Jesus' life-style is all about.

If the field is the world, the goals are not simply measuring attendance, but goals include each one coming to wholeness, being equipped and released to ministry. Now we are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it (see 1 Cor 12:27). The Holy Spirit has gifted and wants to use all the parts of the Body, although not necessarily in meetings—many will be relatively passive

there—but rather in the *world*.

As people come to wholeness, they minister to others. Thus it's about empowering, what some would call "mobilising the laity" — more of which in the next article. The motivation is taking the message to people, and healing the whole person. It's not to compete with the world, but to change priorities. It gives people a reason to be here as believers, a purpose and a mission, rather than just faithfully waiting for heaven. Jerry Cook puts it this way:

Evangelical Christians tend to have a lot of religion in their hearts, a good bit in their heads, but not much in their feet. And Christianity that doesn't walk around in shoes isn't worth much. It has to walk in shoes, all kinds of shoes — sandals, boots, high heels, and suedes. It has to walk. The role of a pastor is to teach people how to get their Christianity to walk right. If we only teach them how to think Christianity and how to feel it, but not how to walk it, we are failing.

This brings us to a question:

Is the Church open for business?

That's a much more challenging question than it at first looks. To answer it, we have to ask another three questions: first, what is the Church?; secondly, what is the business?; and thirdly, what does it mean to be open? These questions could be investigated in detail, but what's been said has set enough of a context. We meet on Sunday mornings (or whenever our main meeting time is) and we're clearly "open" then. And of course, it's good to invite people to meetings. But here's a statement: The Church should be open seven days a week.

Now, when you read that, did you imagine the doors unlocked, the lights on and somebody there? But we know, the Church is not a building, and the Church is not a meeting. *We are the Church. We are the ones who are to be open seven days a week. And that's the challenge.*

It's not that it's not happening. But it could certainly be happening more. At work, or in a social context, the thought may come to us: "speak to him"; or "pray for her". Are we listening? Are we obedient? Is the Church open for business?

That's our potential, that's our privilege, and that's our challenge; because we're sons of the Kingdom, planted in the field, and the field is the world.

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Reference: Jerry Cook with Stanley C. Baldwin, *Love, Acceptance & Forgiveness* (Regal Books, 1979) ISBN 0-8307-0654-2