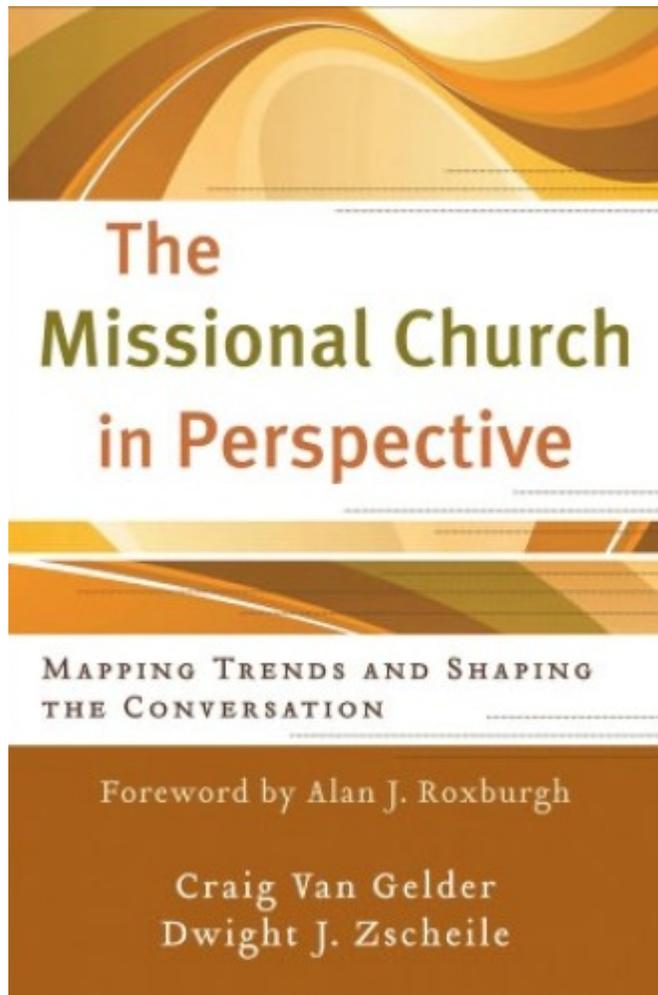


The Missional Church in Perspective, by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile
reviewed by [J. Todd Billings](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

In Review



The Missional Church in Perspective

By Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile
Baker Academic

The missional church discussion is alternately exhilarating and mystifying for pastors and church leaders. On the one hand, missional church literature addresses trenchant issues in ministry, offering a new vision that moves congregations beyond

inward focus and toward participating in the triune God's renewal of the whole creation. On the other hand, understandings of what constitutes the missional church vary widely. According to some, a missional church is one that has rediscovered the centrality of worship in word and sacrament; others contend that worship is simply a motivational session for individuals who are going out into the world, where they are more likely to encounter Jesus. The fact that a new book comes out every few months claiming to disclose the secret of being truly missional does not necessarily help.

In this context, a map of the conversation is a helpful step toward clarity. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, who teach congregational mission and leadership at Luther Seminary, provide a bird's-eye view of the landscape, along with suggestions about where the missional church movement should go.

But this book is not merely a map. Throughout, the authors propose a course for moving the missional church discussion forward—a proposal that will be highly contentious in missiological and especially theological circles. The first volume in a new Baker Academic series, it explicitly draws on “continued developments in trinitarian studies” since the 1998 publication of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by Darrell L. Guder—developments that “emphasize the social trinity in relation to the sending trinity,” but it scarcely engages the barrage of recent historical and theological works that call into question or provide alternatives to such a perspective.

Van Gelder and Zscheile begin by presenting a history of the key terms and ideas in the missional church movement and a brief but valuable account of the movements leading to the current missional church discussion. Their mapping of the various streams in the movement is profitable because it recognizes the elasticity of the term *missional* at a time when many people have “missional fatigue” because definitions of missional and the missional church are often so deeply contradictory. Van Gelder and Zscheile are sensitive to the ecclesial and cultural dimensions of this history, highlighting important proponents such as David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin, along with contrasting figures such as Donald McGavran. They recognize that some visions of the missional church seriously depart from that expressed in Guder's edited volume, while others seek to apply or extend particular aspects of that vision.

Fourteen years after its publication, *Missional Church* is still arguably the most significant academic work for the current missional church discussion. It is the best available exposition of the theological vision of the missional church movement, and it is a common seminary textbook. But Van Gelder and Zscheile note its lack of attention to the historical development of ecclesiology and missiology. More such exploration could indeed have clarified the missional church's relationship to particular ecclesial traditions, as well as giving a fuller account of the place of ordination, worship and the sacraments.

However, the authors' critique of *Missional Church* is rooted in a paradigm that many historians and theologians consider to be an outdated caricature: that there is a Western view of the Trinity that emphasizes the "single divine substance" and a contrasting "Eastern tradition of the church" that stresses "the relational personhood of the Triune community." Van Gelder and Zscheile are working from a framework of polarities: West against East, individual against communal, trinitarian sending against relationality. They claim that the Western trinitarian emphasis eventually cultivated many sins in the modern period (colonial missions, monarchical forms of leadership and so on), and they propose correcting problematic and one-sided Western trinitarian views by adding Eastern points of emphasis. But this framework is highly problematic. Numerous recent works have shown that such opposition of West and East, grounded in a certain interpretation of Augustine and the Cappadocians, is simply not sustainable. The Cappadocians were not social trinitarians in a modern sense, and Augustine offers interpersonal as well as psychological analogies in *De Trinitate*. Lewis Ayres, Michel Barnes and other historians with whom Van Gelder and Zscheile do not interact here have made this argument with great detail and persuasiveness. In my own Reformed tradition, studies of the trinitarianism of John Calvin, John Owen and Jonathan Edwards also defy their generalizations about Western trinitarianism.

Apart from this, Van Gelder and Zscheile offer some beneficial material to supplement the essays in Guder's *Missional Church* in the very important areas of worship, discipleship and the practices of the church in the midst of cultural change and globalization. They provide a helpful map of a confusing and widely divergent missional church movement, along with some instructive suggestions for coalescing the movement in particular directions.

However, rather than using reductionistic historical paradigms when engaging the church's past theological reflection, the missional church movement needs to

consider the plethora of recent works of *ressourcement* and retrieval, for example in feminist (Sarah Coakley, Kathryn Tanner) and black (J. Kameron Carter, Willie J. Jennings) theologies. It is not necessary to sentimentalize the church's past sins to draw deeply and constructively on the church's history for the church's future. A theology of the church for this new day should seek not only innovation but catholicity as well.