

*The Missional Church*¹

THE NEED FOR A 'MISSIONAL' CHURCH

For most of the last 1500 years, at least in the Western world, the Christian church held a position of power and favored status amongst society at-large. So profound was the church's influence on culture for most of this time that the church actually defined, developed, and prescribed the prevailing societal institutions and normative behaviors of culture. The term used to describe culture during the first 1000 years of this time frame reflects the nature of the relationship between the church and culture: *Christendom*, which literally means 'a Christian world.' Since public institutions were so heavily influenced and even regulated by the church, one of the major implications of Christendom was that society did an excellent job of 'Christianizing' the citizenry. In other words, people learned the language and behavior of Christianity simply by growing up in the West.

Christendom was positive in that the language and symbols of Christianity were commonly understood and provided the foundation for public discourse on matters of morality. The obvious flaw of Christendom was that Christian morality without gospel-changed hearts often led to cruelty and hypocrisy. Think of how the small town in 'Christendom' treated the unwed mother or the gay person. Also, under 'Christendom' the church often was silent against abuses of power of the ruling classes over the weak. Without the radical heart-change brought about by the gospel, the 'Christianized' life became, at best, a moral framework out of which to operate. At worst, the 'Christianized' life fueled evil power structures that used Christian morality to cruelly oppress those on the margins of society (i.e. justifying slavery or segregation in America's 'Christian' South).

The British missionary Lesslie Newbigin went to India around 1950. There he was involved with a church living 'in mission' in a very non-Christian culture. When he returned to England some 30 years later, he discovered that now the Western church too existed in a non-Christian society, but it had not adapted to its new situation. Though public institutions and popular culture of Europe and North America no longer 'Christianized' people, the church still ran its ministries assuming that a stream of 'Christianized,' traditional/moral people would simply show up in services. Some churches certainly did 'evangelism' as one ministry among many. But the church in the West had not adapted everything it did in worship, discipleship, community and service so as to be engaged with the non-Christian society around it. Though the Western church had trained overseas missionaries to adapt their methods in ways in order to reach non-believing cultures, it did not adjust to its own, no-longer-Christianized culture.

As a result, the church has become increasingly irrelevant to Western culture. Despite the fact that many people admire Jesus and view themselves as 'spiritual,' the increasing majority of society does not turn to the church for spiritual direction or help.

One of the reasons much of the American evangelical church has not experienced the same precipitous decline as the Protestant churches of Europe and Canada is because in

¹ This paper is adapted from Tim Keller's article '[The Missional Church](#),' and The Journey's article "[What Is a Gospel-Centered Missional Church and Why Do We Need One?](#)"

the U.S. there is still a 'heartland' with the remnants of the old 'Christendom' society. In this 'heartland,' the informal public culture (though not the formal public institutions) still stigmatizes non-Christian beliefs and behavior. Michael Wolff writes, "There is a fundamental schism in American cultural, political, and economic life. There's the quicker-growing, economically vibrant... morally relativist, urban-oriented, culturally adventuresome, sexually polymorphous, and ethnically diverse nation...and there's the small town, nuclear-family, religiously-oriented, white-centric other America, [with]...its diminishing cultural and economic force....[T]wo nations."² Most traditional evangelical churches still only win people to Christ who are temperamentally traditional and conservative. But, as Wolff notes, this is a 'shrinking market.' And eventually evangelical churches settled in the declining, remaining enclaves of 'Christendom' will have to learn how to think like missionaries in order to reach people in the surrounding culture.

This missionary mindset is what it means to be 'missional.' A missionary is somebody who relationally takes the unchanging gospel into a culture for the cause of Christ, understands people in that culture, learns the questions of that culture, understands the worldview of that culture, and begins a church in that culture that proclaims the unchanging truths of Scripture in the changing cultural context. In the same way, a church that is 'missional' views itself as a missionary to its culture, filled with ambassadors for Christ who take the gospel into every sphere of society.

We don't simply need evangelistic churches, but rather 'missional' churches.

ELEMENTS OF A MISSIONAL CHURCH

1. Using language that is understandable to the culture.

- A missional church does not shrink from historic, biblical terms, but works to explain what they mean. For example, a missional church does not avoid talking about 'sin,' but it makes sure to clearly explain the concept to a culture that often misunderstands it.
- A missional church avoids 'tribal' language, fancy prayer language, unnecessary evangelical pious 'jargon,' and archaic language that seeks to set a 'spiritual tone.'
- A missional church avoids 'we-them' language, disdainful jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs, and dismissive, disrespectful comments about those who differ with us.
- A missional church avoids ever talking as if non-believing people are not present. If you speak and discourse *as if* your whole neighborhood is present (not just scattered Christians), eventually more and more of your neighborhood will find their way in or be invited.
- Unless all of the above is the outflow of a truly humble-bold gospel-changed heart, it is all just 'marketing' and 'spin.'

2. Applying the gospel to the core concerns of the culture.

- A missional church seeks to understand the stories of culture (through popular film, music, literature, etc) in order to better understand the hopes, dreams and fears of people, so that it can re-tell culture's story in the light of Jesus. For example, people in American culture have a strong desire to be free. A missional

² Michael Wolff, *New York*, Feb 26 2001, p. 19.

church would work to demonstrate that only in Jesus will people find true freedom.

- A missional church is ‘for’ the culture and desires to see God’s best for the people in society. It is filled with people who love their neighbors as themselves and work for the common good of the whole community.

3. Training people for gospel living in all of life

- A missional church equips its people to about everything with a biblical worldview and work with Christian distinctiveness. They need to know: a) what cultural practices are good and should be embraced, b) what practices are adverse to the gospel and must be rejected, c) what practices can be adapted/revised.
- A missional church lifts up people who are working to renew and transform culture through their ‘normal’ vocations must be lifted up as real ‘kingdom work’ and ministry.
- A missional church demonstrates true, biblical love toward those with whom we deeply differ, because at the heart of the gospel is a man dying for his enemies and saving unworthy people by sheer grace.

4. Creating biblical community which is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive.

- A missional church is filled with people who love one another despite their differences of personality, social status, ethnicity, or vocation and support each other in authentic, nurturing, and supportive friendships.
- A missional church goes beyond basic ‘fellowship’ to embody a ‘counter-culture,’ showing the world how radically different a Christian society is with regard to sex, money, and power.
 - In sex: We avoid both the secular society’s idolization of sex and traditional society’s fear of sex. We also exhibit love rather than hostility or fear toward those whose sexual life patterns are different.
 - In money: We promote a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak.
 - In power: We are committed to power-sharing and relationship-building between races and classes that are alienated outside of the body of Christ.
- A missional church must be more deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice than traditional liberal churches and more deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion than traditional fundamentalist churches. This kind of church is profoundly ‘counter-intuitive’ to American observers. It breaks their ability to categorize (and dismiss) it as liberal or conservative.

5. Practicing Christian unity as much as possible on the local level.

- A missional church must not spend time bashing and criticizing other kinds of biblical churches, which simply plays into the common belief that Christians are intolerant and can’t get along with each other.
- A missional church should cooperate and reach out to and support the other congregations and churches in the local area. This will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bias should be in the direction of cooperation.

A CASE STUDY

These are elements that have to be present in every area of the church. So, for example, what makes a small group 'missional'? A 'missional' small group is not necessarily one which is doing some kind of specific 'evangelism' program (though that would be recommended).

Rather—

- if its members love and talk positively about the city/neighborhood,
- if they speak in language that is not filled with pious or technical terms and phrases, nor disdainful and embattled language,
- if in their Bible study they apply the gospel to the core concerns of the people of the culture,
- if they are obviously interested in and engaged with the thought of the surrounding culture and can discuss it both appreciatively and yet critically,
- if they exhibit deep concern for the poor and generosity with their money and purity and respect with regard to opposite sex, and show humility toward people of other races and cultures,
- they do not bash other Christians and churches—

then seekers and non-believing people from the city A) will be invited and B) will come and will stay as they explore spiritual issues. If these marks are not there it will only be able to include believers or traditional, 'Christianized' people.