

# THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

June 2001  
TIM KELLER

## The Need for a 'Missional' Church

In the West for nearly 1,000 years, the relationship of (Anglo-European) Christian churches to the broader culture was a relationship known as "Christendom." The institutions of society "Christianized" people, and stigmatized non-Christian belief and behavior. Though people were "Christianized" by the culture, they were not regenerated or converted with the Gospel. The church's job was then to challenge persons into a vital, living relation with Christ.

There were great advantages and yet great disadvantages to 'Christendom.' The advantage was that there was a common language for public moral discourse with which society could discuss what was 'the good.' The disadvantage 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. For these reasons and others, the church in Europe and North America has been losing its privileged place as the arbiter of public morality since at least the mid 19th century. The decline of Christendom has accelerated greatly since the end of WWII.

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 become completely 'missional'--adapting and reformulating absolutely everything it did in worship, discipleship, community, and service--so as to be engaged with the non-Christian society around it. It had not developed a 'missiology of western culture' the way it had done so for other non-believing cultures.

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 the U.S. there is still a 'heartland' with the remnants of the old 'Christendom' society. There the informal public culture (though not the formal public institutions) still stigmatizes non-Christian beliefs and behavior. *"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..."* Michael Wolff, *New York*, Feb 26 2001, p. 19. In conservative regions, it is still possible to see people profess faith and the church grow without becoming 'missional.' Most traditional evangelical churches still can only win people to Christ who are temperamentally traditional and conservative. But, as Wolff notes, this is a 'shrinking market.' And eventually evangelical churches ensconced in the declining, remaining enclaves of "Christendom" will have to learn how to become 'missional'. If it does not do that it will decline or die.

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

## The Elements of a Missional Church

### **1. Discourse in the vernacular.**

- In 'Christendom' there is little difference between the language inside and outside of the church. Documents of the early U.S. Congress, for example, are riddled with allusions to and references from the Bible. Biblical technical terms are well-known inside and outside. In a missional church, however, terms must be explained.
- The missional church avoids 'tribal' language, stylized prayer language, unnecessary evangelical pious 'jargon', and archaic language that seeks to set a 'spiritual tone.'
- The 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
- The missional church avoids sentimental, pompous, 'inspirational' talk . Instead we engage the culture with gentle, self-deprecating but joyful irony the gospel creates. Humility + joy = gospel irony and realism.
- The 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. Enter and re-tell the *culture's* stories with the gospel**

- In "Christendom" it is possible to simply exhort Christianized people to "do what they know they should." There is little or no real engagement, listening, or persuasion. It is more a matter of exhortation (and often, heavy reliance on guilt.) In a missional church preaching and communication should always assume the presence of skeptical people, and should engage *their* stories, not simply talk about "old times."
- To "enter" means to show sympathy toward and deep acquaintance with the literature, music, theater, etc. of the existing culture's hopes, dreams, 'heroic' narratives, fears.
  - The older culture's story was--to be a good person, a good father/mother, son/daughter, to live a decent, merciful, good life.
  - Now the culture's story is-- a) to be *free* and self-created and authentic (theme of freedom from oppression), and b) to make the world safe for everyone else to be the same (theme of inclusion of the 'other'; justice).
- To "re-tell" means to show how only in Christ can we have freedom without slavery and embracing of the 'other' without injustice.

## **3. Theologically train lay people for *public* life and vocation**

- In 'Christendom' you can afford to train people just in prayer, Bible study, evangelism--private world skills--because they are not facing radically non-Christian values in their public life--where they work, in their neighborhood, etc.
- In a 'missional' church, the laity needs theological education to 'think Christianly' about everything and work with Christian distinctiveness. They need to know: a) what cultural practices are common grace and to be embraced, b) what practices are antithetical to the gospel and must be rejected, c) what practices can be adapted/revised.
- In a 'missional' situation, lay people renewing and transforming the culture through distinctively Christian vocations must be lifted up as real 'kingdom work' and ministry along with the traditional ministry of the Word.
- Finally, Christians will have to use the gospel to demonstrate true, Biblical love and 'tolerance' in "the public square" toward those with whom we deeply differ. This tolerance should equal or exceed that which opposing views show toward Christians. The charge of intolerance is perhaps the main 'defeater' of the gospel in the non-Christian west.

#### **4. Create Christian community which is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive.**

- In Christendom, 'fellowship' is basically just a set of nurturing relationships, support and accountability. That is necessary, of course.
- In a missional church, however, Christian community must go beyond that 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, 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.
- In general, a 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. Only this kind of church has any chance in the non-Christian west.

#### **5. Practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level.**

- In Christendom, when 'everyone was a Christian' it was necessary (perhaps) for a church to define itself over against other churches. That is, to get an identity you had to say, "we are not like that church over there, or those Christians over here."
- Today, however, it is much more illuminating and helpful for a church to define itself over against 'the world'--the values of the non-Christian culture. It is very important that we not spend our time bashing and criticizing other kinds of churches. That simply plays in to the common 'defeater' that Christians are all intolerant.
- While we have to align ourselves in denominations that share many of our distinctives, at the local level we should cooperate and reach out to and support the other congregations and churches in our local area. This will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bias should be in the direction of cooperation.

#### **Case Study**

Let me show you how this goes beyond any 'program.' 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 is to be recommended) Rather, 1) if its members love and talk positively about the city/neighborhood, 2) if they speak in language that is not filled with pious tribal or technical terms and phrases, nor disdainful and embattled language, 3) if in their Bible study they apply the gospel to the core concerns and stories of the people of the culture, 4) if they are obviously interested in and engaged with the literature and art and thought of the surrounding culture and can discuss it both appreciatively and yet critically, 5) 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, 6) 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.