



EVANGELIZING OUR POSTMODERN WORLD

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Our mission field includes people for whom there are three different ways of thinking. One, the pre-modern way: "We can know, because God knows and reveals." Two, the

modern way: "We can know, because we have reliable, testable methods of research." Three, the postmodern way: "Objective knowledge is an illusion. Any claim to absolutes is really a way to manipulate people. All we have is our personal perspectives, and that makes all opinions valid."

Each of these ways of thinking creates a culture. The pre-modern way created Christendom, which is now gone. The modern way created the Soviet Union, which is now gone. The postmodern way is creating the world we live in today - the world God loves and is calling us to evangelize.

Much of what we need to know for evangelism, we already know. Evangelism is primarily a matter of just being the church God wants us to be. If we'll do that, we'll hit more of the right buttons than we even intend to, because being a church beautified by the gospel is meaningful to every mission field everywhere. But there is a strategy that seems especially suitable to our postmodern times.

How did Paul evangelize his world? "Our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God" (2 Cor 1:12).

"Simplicity" is frankness, as opposed to a hidden agenda. "Godly sincerity" is purity, as opposed to an ulterior motive. "The grace of God" is the gospel's new way of thinking about everything that neither worldly moralism nor worldly relativism understands.

Paul's conscience reassured him that he had ministered to the people of Corinth with *frank openness* as to what he was there for, with *a pure desire* for their blessing, and with *a message that offered a clear alternative* to everything they had ever thought. His manner (simplicity), motive

(sincerity) and message (grace) were all under the scrutiny of conscience, and God used him.

1. Our manner

A friend and I were doing walk-up evangelism on the campus of Stanford years ago. He taught me something. In each case, he walked up to a person and asked, "May I persuade you to become a Christian?" I had been trying to start a conversation about whatever and then sneak Jesus into it along the way. But my friend was refreshingly candid. He opened doors - and closed others. But no one could accuse him of being sneaky.

Let's be simple with people, easy to read. We want to persuade them to become Christians. Let's tell them so. Most can deal with that, our consciences will approve, and God will use us, as he used Paul.

2. Our motive

Sadly, my heart sometimes wants to be a good evangelist more than my heart wants to bless the people I'm evangelizing. They become useful to me rather than what they are - loved by God. So I have to get my heart back on track with this thought: "For God so loved [pure motive] the world [bad place] that he gave his only Son [costly sacrifice], that whoever [generous openness] believes in him [easy access] should not perish but have eternal life [endless joy]" (John 3:16). That is God's heart for our city. He is a good evangelist. Knowing what he is like renews in me a nobler motive.

3. Our message

The gospel answers the deepest questions we ask about God and ourselves, but it does surprise us. The two alternatives to the gospel make perfect sense to our natural religious instincts.

First, moralism says, "You should obey God, because he'll get you if you don't. And after all, you don't want to be like *those* people, do you?" Moralism appeals to our fear and pride, but it dishonors God and makes us into nags.

Secondly, relativism says, "There are a bazillion ways to God! Take your pick -whatever suits you." Relativism lets you make your own designer god, but you lose a real God who has a mind of his own and who might disagree with you now and then and actually demand that you adjust to him.

Thirdly, the gospel is the counterintuitive message that says, "God is pure holiness and pure mercy. You are totally depraved and totally loved. Jesus is the God-man who lived the life we should have lived and died the death

we should have died. It doesn't matter if you are a sincere, well-meaning Hindu or a sincere, well-meaning Presbyterian. The gospel is not for sincere, well-meaning people who deserve heaven but for bad people who deserve hell. If you've come to realize that Christ is the only way a bad person like you can go to heaven, all God tells you to do is receive his pardon with the empty hands of faith. He promises to save you from every form of false righteousness you've been using as your self-image and give you the righteousness of Christ as the key to a whole new life. Let the adventure of re-thinking everything begin!"

4. A strategy for evangelizing our world today

See "The Missional Church," by Tim Keller

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

Tim Keller
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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'¹ 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.