



What is the Missional Church?

- A Four Week Small Group Discussion

Introduction

WEEK ONE - The situational shift

WEEK TWO - The theological shift

WEEK THREE - The missiological shift

WEEK FOUR - The ecclesiological shift

Suggested Resources



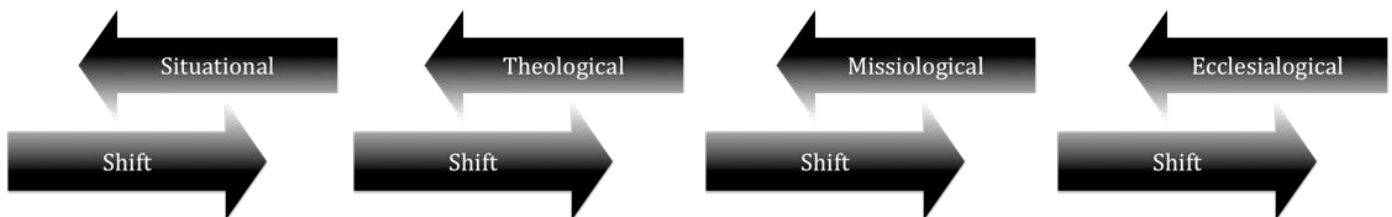
Introduction

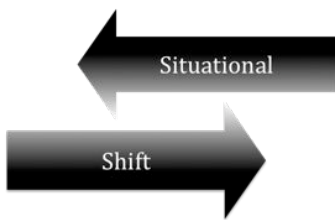
“Every time I walk into a Christian bookstore I see the word missional applied to dozens of trendy books on how to do church from authors of diverse traditions. It seems like missional is the newest model on the shelf for pragmatic evangelicals to buy and consume and self-apply. Missional is doing for younger evangelicals what Neo-Evangelicalism did for the last generation.”

I had someone share this sentiment with me over a conversation on the the importance of the missional church. Perhaps as you look at this booklet you’re saying to yourself something similar, *“the missional church is just the latest buzzword,”* *“the missional church is a pragmatic theologically light version of the church,”* etc.. If these things were true then why in the world should any group of Christians - small or large - spend time exploring what the missional church is? The honest answer is they shouldn’t. If the missional church is just the latest fad in the church then its not worth our time.

What I hope you’ll experience in these small group discussions over the next few weeks is that the missional church conversation happening all over the Western church represents not the latest growth theory taken from popular culture but rather a deeply theological and culturally thoughtful exploration of the biblical and historical nature of the church.

What is the missional church? The missional church is connected to a new *situational* awareness Christians the in West are having as the church continues to decline and revert to its original marginal character in our global pluralistic world. The missional church is the overflow of fresh considerations regarding the nature of God as one who sends. The missional church also represents a shift in how mission is viewed: no longer as a geographical movement from a Christianized West to a paganized East. Lastly, the missional church is a revived understanding of the church as sent rather than just sending.





WEEK ONE - The Situational Shift

Reading:

What is the missional church? The answer to this question can be found in the experiences of a single 20th century missionary. Lesslie Newbigin. Tim Keller in one of the most popular articles on the subject called, The Missional Church, shares the situational shift Newbigin experienced;

“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.” Tim Keller, The Missional Church

Newbigin was not the first missionary to return home to the West to find that the West was not the Christendom society he had left, but he was the one whose clarity of vision and missiological profundity helped raise the issue in a way that captured the attention of Western ministry practitioners.

The missional church is not a cliché ministry pragmatism here today and gone tomorrow, because the *situational shift* it comes from - the shift from a Christian to a Post-Christian setting for the church in the West - has brought about a lasting dynamic that will shape and inform how Christians speak of the mission and nature of the church. Darrell L. Guder, editor of perhaps the most well known work on the topic called The Missional Church, sets up the problem facing the Church in the Western world today;

“Rather than occupying a central and influential place, North American Christian churches are increasingly marginalized, so much so that in our urban areas they represent a minority movement. It is by now a truism to speak of North America as a mission field.”

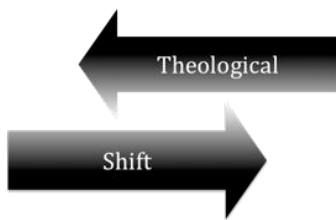


Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Every relationship the church shares to the wider culture it is situated within affords it with benefits and challenges. Discuss what some of those benefits and challenges were for the Early Church in the first hundred years of its existence. Discuss what some of the benefits and challenges were for the church during Christendom when the wider culture was Christianized. Finally, discuss what some of the benefits and challenges there may be for the Church in the Post-Christian West.
2. How does the life of Lesslie Newbigin help us understand the situational shift the Church in the West has gone through in the last hundred or so years? Why do you think cross-cultural overseas missionaries were the first ones to notice the shift?
3. What do you think caused the church to lose its presence and influence in the West? Where did it fail to be counter-cultural, where did it fail by vilifying culture?
4. Can a church be both a missional church passionate about reaching its local Post-Christian culture, and a cross-cultural overseas mission oriented church?
5. Do you think your city, your local community, your vocational setting, your family is feeling the effects of Post-Christendom?
6. If you as an individual and your church as a community started living more with the mindset of a missionary how would things change?

Life Application:

- Try and live with a missionary mindset this week. Carefully interpret the main narratives present in your surrounding culture by reading your local newspaper, noting local advertisements on the road, or visit one of your local cultural hubs and people watch. What seems to be captivating people? Does the Christian story show up in these local 'texts', if so how? If not, why do you think that is?
- On your way to work or on your daily driving trends start to try and notice how many churches are visibly present. Make a note of them and try and guess whether or not they're empty, full, or slowly declining. What do you notice about how Post-Christian culture is affecting your local neighborhood community.
- Ask your pastors, church elders, or deacons if they're aware of Post-Christendom and how your local church has been affected by it. Consider helping lead a group in your local church of "participant observers" who will be committed to interpreting the local 'texts' in your culture to see where and how Post-Christendom is shaping life.



WEEK TWO - The Theological Shift

Reading:

The theological awareness that is spreading across the Church in the West is that God himself is missional. This may sound like an odd thing to say, who doesn't think God has a passion for mission? But in popular discourse today mission is often treated like an interim program between creation and new creation, an activity largely of the church, something that had to occur because something was missing and will fade away once what was missing is restored. John Piper's book, Let the Nations Be Glad, is a good example of this when he says (note: there is much that is beneficial in Piper's book);

*"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Mission exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions." **

Fundamental to the missional church is the belief that mission is not primarily the activity of the church but the Trinity's. God's passion for revealing his Trinitarian glory through creation and covenantal relationships is what defines mission, is what the *Missio Dei* (Latin for "the sending of God" or "mission of God") is all about. His mission is bigger than the church, is bigger than redemptive history. His mission is eternal. Our God is a missionary God. He always has been and always will be. Our call is to witness to His mission, joining in what He is already at work doing. God is sent and we as his people must see our churches as sent. *"It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."* (Jurgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit) God's mission to reveal himself began in original creation takes on a redemptive yet connected shape in fallen creation and will continue on the new creation (see Chris Wright's book, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative). This is the *theological shift* for the missional church. God is a missionary God.

In light of that worship is not the instrumental cause of mission, rather worship and mission are both connected to God's desire to reveal Himself, and are inseparable from each another (worship should be missional, mission should be worshipful). Thomas H. Schattauer in, Liturgical assembly as locus of mission, fills this out. He says;

"The visible act of the assembly (in Christ by the power of the Spirit) and the forms of this assembly—what we call liturgy—enact and signify this mission. From this perspective, there is no separation between liturgy and mission. The liturgical assembly of God's people in the midst of the world enacts and signifies the outward movement of God for the life of the world. Note that in this approach, the relationship between worship and mission is not instrumental, either directly or indirectly, but rather the assembly for worship is mission."

* I chose John Piper's book because of its wide acceptance and because Piper's book is very beneficial. In offering the critique of his view above please note several overlaps in concern for worship and God's glory. The main difference between Piper and the missional church is a difference in how to define mission. Piper defines it in soteriological terms, The missional church seeks to define mission in light of theology proper (i.e. the doctrine of God). For Piper mission happens between the fall and new creation. For the missional church mission is apart of God's nature and as such plays a defining role in all God does. God has a mission in creation, in the fall, in consummation, and in new creation. How He realizes his mission is different in each but his mission is the same - His glory (something Piper would certainly agree with). The missional church defines mission in broader biblical-theological terms, Piper defines mission in narrower systematic-theological terms. Both offer helpful perspective into the meaning of mission.



Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Is mission primarily the work of the church, or God's?
2. When did mission begin?
3. Is missions merely an interim agenda for God, something he pursues between the fall of Adam and Eve and the full and final coming of His Kingdom at His Son's return; or is mission eternal?
4. How does mission and God's passion for revealing himself relate to one another?
5. Does mission exist because worship does not, and then pass away with the new heavens and new earth? How are the two related?
6. Can worship take on a missionary character, if so how does the Post-Christian setting of the church in the West effect that missionary character?
7. How does the Trinitarian drama in the biblical story help us understand mission better?
8. What is the *missio dei*?
9. How does knowing that mission is primarily an extension of who God is and what He is pursuing rather than a task the church must on her own muster up strength, interest, and initiative to accomplish give your courage, comfort, and assurance?
10. When does mission end?

Life Application:

- Consider how mission and worship relate to one another during your corporate worship experience in your local body this week. Does your local churches worship have a missionary character to it (e. g. its liturgical structure, cultural forms, etc.)?
- Does your personal worship in your life have a missionary character that is salt and light in your daily relationships? Do you find people being compelled to raise questions about your faith? Join God in what He's doing in *your* world.
- Spend time this week in prayer asking God to remake your character, heart, and mind like His is which is passionate to fill all creation with the knowledge of His glory.



WEEK THREE - The Missiological Shift

Reading:

The *missiological shift* like the *situational shift* of the missional church is filled with stark contrasts between how mission was conceived in the traditional church a hundred or so years ago and how it ought to be conceived today in the Post-Christian West. Michael Goheen who is one of the leading scholars on Lesslie Newbigin's life and thought spoke at an Acts 29 church planting conference. Goheen filled out what the stark contrasts are between traditional church and the missional churches understanding of mission;

Traditional Church	Missional Church
Geographical expansion from Christian West to non-Christian non-West	Mission is to, from and in all six continents
Mission and church separated	Church doesn't <i>have</i> a mission but <i>is</i> a mission
Sender (mission organization); Sent (select missionary)	Sender (Jesus); Sent (whole church, every disciple of Christ)

Goheen's helpful comparison could be expanded upon (indeed he does so elsewhere in his writing). Lesslie Newbigin in Mission in Christ's Way offers a helpful understanding of the nature of mission in relation to the Kingdom of God and the Spirit of God;

"The church is only true to its calling when it is a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the kingdom. But, on the other hand, talk about the kingdom is mere ideology if it is not tied to the name of Jesus in whom the kingdom is present and if it does not invite men and women to recognize that presence, to do the U-turn..."

"Perhaps it is unfortunate that the history of mission is so often written by missionaries. They over-estimate their role. It is the Holy Spirit who is the primary missionary; our role is secondary. Mission is not a burden laid upon the church; it is a gift and a promise to the church that is faithful. The command arise from the gift. Jesus reigns and all authority has been given to him in earth and heaven. When we understand that, we shall not need to be told to let it be known. Rather, we shall not be able to keep silent."

Traditional Church	Missional Church
Conservative's - Mission as word only; Liberals - Mission as deed only.	Mission as word and deed, as Kingdom proclamation and presence
Mission as command only	Mission as a command, gift, and assurance

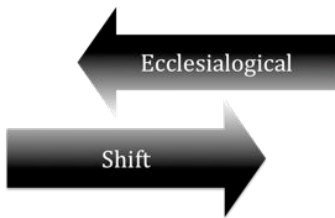


Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Where does mission happen?
2. How do mission and the church relate to each other? What happens if they are separated? What happens if they are treated as identical? Is there a third way?
3. Read and discuss John 20.21. How did the Father send the Son in mission? How does the Son send the church in mission? Who does the Son promise would empower and accompany the church in mission (read John 17; Acts 1-2)?
4. Who is the sender and who is sent in mission?
5. Paul suggests that his apostolic mission fills up what was lacking in Christ mission in Colossians 1.24. What did he mean by that? Does John 20.21 help us understand Paul's difficult statement in Colossians 1.24?
6. How does mission of the church relate to the proclamation and presence of the Kingdom of God in Jesus ministry?
7. Is mission only a command or is mission also a gift and a assurance?
8. How is mission a command?
9. How is mission a gift?
10. How is mission a assurance?

Life Application:

- Recently there has been some controversy regarding the missional church. Some cross-cultural overseas missionaries have lost portions of support when churches get enthused about becoming more missional and start supporting the needs of mission in their local Post-Christian context. How can you support both in your local church?
- Spend some time with close friends or with your family discussing how your lives can be transformed in such a way that you are committed to mission locally and globally (whether globally means reaching nearby global cities or doing overseas missions).
- Spend some time discussing with your pastors, elders, etc. what your local church could look like if it took more seriously its corporate call to mission. To live as a community sent rather than a crowd who sends a few. How would the shape of worship change, how would preaching change, how would discipleship change, how would leadership structures change, what would welcome look like to your Post-Christian setting?



WEEK FOUR - The Ecclesiological Shift

Reading:

The *ecclesiological shift* is found in the church renewing its missional identity in practice as well as in theory. Moving from merely a sending crowd that sends a few professional missionaries to a sent people who live out mission daily. The West is growing more and more Post-Christian which may sound like *all* bad news. This shift can however contain promise in it for the Church in the Post-Christian West in offering it a purifying challenge. Today there is a huge opportunity for the church to develop a missiology of Western culture and be what by nature she is called to be: A sent people, a missional church. Tim Keller speaks about the failure of the modern church to appreciate this and its need to make this ecclesiological shift in a holistic way instead of just changing one dimension of its life or enacting merely a new program of evangelism while the rest of the churches life stays the same;

"...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." The Missional Church

Latter in this same article Keller shares four key characteristics of missional churches who've made the ecclesiological shift;

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.*



Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. What is the ecclesiological shift that the missional church has made?
2. Is it only bad news that the West is growing more and more Post-Christian? What benefit could this new setting bring to the church?
3. What else is happening in the mission of the church world-wide? If the West is shrinking what is happening in the East (ex. the church in China & Africa) and the South (ex. the church in South America)?
4. Can a church be a missional church if it only changes the way it does evangelism?
5. What are the four characteristics of the missional church according to Tim Keller?
6. Discuss what a missional church discoursing in the vernacular of your setting would look like?
7. What would it mean for your church to enter into and re-tell your local cultural stories? Where are those stories found and how are they told? How are those stories affecting people's lives and the structure of your local community?
8. What even larger national or global stories are also playing a role in people's lives? How is the gospel as public truth (Lesslie Newbigin) able to engage those stories?
9. Does your local church theological train people for public life and vocation? How could it develop in this area?
10. What would it look like for your local church to be a counter-cultural, counter-intuitive people in your community? Are there churches that are doing this locally, if so how and why are they able to do it?
11. Are missional churches the only viable expression of the church in the global setting of today?

Life Application:

- Paste to your bathroom mirror or in a place that you will daily see this scriptural text, "*As the Father sent me so I am sending you.*" John 20.21 Contemplate upon this truth and begin to ask the Lord to make this more real in your relationships, in your daily rhythms and habits.
- In community begin to try and imagine and work out the four characteristics of a missional church.



Suggested Resources:

Formative Literature for the Missional Church -

Allen, Roland. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder it.* (Lutterworth, 2006)

Allen, Roland. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's and Ours?.* (Lutterworth, 2006)

Barret, Lois Y. *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness.* (Eerdmans, 2004)

Barth, Karl. *The Church and the Churches.* (Eerdmans, 2005)

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics IV.1 The Doctrine of Reconciliation.* (T&T Clark, 1970)

Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission.* (Orbis, 1991; also see Stan Nassbaum's *Readers Guide*)

Bosch, David J. *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture.* (Gracwing, 1998)

Goheen, Michael W. *Chosen by God for the Sake of the World: A Missional Ecclesiology for Today.* (Baker Academic, 2010)

Guder, Darrell L. ed. *Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the Church in North America.* (Eerdmans, 1998)

Guder, Darrell L. ed. *The Continuing Conversion of the Church.* (Eerdmans, 2000)

Motlmann, Jurgen. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit.* (Fortres, 1993)

Significant Works by Lesslie Newbigin -

Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture. (Eerdmans, 1986)

The Household of God: Lectures on the nature of the Church. (Wipf & Stock, 2009)

Mission in Christ's Way: A gift, a command, an assurance. (Friendship Press, 1988)



Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship. (Eerdmans 1995)

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society. (Eerdmans, 1985)

The Open Secret: An introduction to the theology of Mission. (Eerdmans 1995)

Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth. (Eerdmans, 1991)

Monographs and Biographical Studies on Lesslie Newbigin -

Goheen, Michael W. *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”.* J.E. Lesslie Newbigin’s *Missionary Ecclesiology.* (Boekencentrum, 2000)

Hunsberger, George. *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin’s theology of cultural plurality.* (Eerdmans, 1998)

Hunsberger; Foust; Kirk; Ustorf. *A Scandalous Prophet: The way of mission after Newbigin.* (Eerdmans, 2001)

Newbigin, Lesslie. *Unfinished Agenda: An updated autobiography.* (Wipf & Stock, 2009)

Stults, Donald Le Roy. *Grasping Truth and Reality: Lesslie Newbigin’s theology of mission to the Western world.* (James Clarke, 2009)

Wainwright, Geoffrey. *Lesslie Newbigin: A theological life.* (Oxford 2000)

Weston, Paul. *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian Reader.* (Eerdman, 2006)



What is the Missional Church?

Situational, theological, missiological, and ecclesiological shift's that are forming fresh expressions of the church in the Post-Christian West.

