

Shifting to the First Person: On Being Missional

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Shifting to the First Person: On Being Missional

Recently I spoke with a graduating college student who finished an intensive humanities degree based on the great books. I knew him to be a diligent student, keenly able to analyze the history of ideas. Curiously, I asked him, “What was the most difficult thing you encountered in your degree?” I expected a challenging concept he had wrestled with, but surprisingly he simply said, “Shifting to the third person.”

For those of us reared in the modern academy, we have been taught to write in the third person to indicate objectivity and verified truth, then to state it as unbiased factual evidence. The emerging generation is skeptical about the existence of factual truth. They view evidence as biased and subject to spin. Hence everyone’s truth claim is deemed valid in its own right. No truth is absolute and presuppositions are all equally suspect. Propositional or meta-truths are virtually non-existent, or at least all such archetypal claims are doubtful to this generation.

This graduating student found it most difficult to shift his writing style to the third person because he originally resisted the forms of philosophical absolutism that it implies. As one might imagine, this impacts the emerging generation’s view of truth in general. Their written expression of it is only one among many ways they experience culture clash. There is an increasing tension, an antinomy between the cultural conditioning of many that would lean toward a postmodern way of thinking and the absolutism expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Bible. How does one reconcile the universal, propositional claims Jesus made regarding being uniquely the only way to God (John 14:6) and a pluralistic cultural assumption that there are many ways to find and enjoy what one may individually perceive as being a god figure, perhaps shrouded in evolving mystery?

For those who increasingly sense this tension as unresolved, yet still desire to evaluate their direction in life, they may encounter crises of conscience regarding involvement in missionary activity but with a generational flare. They call it being “missional,” not “missionary,” to delineate Christian living, orthopraxy if you will, in an increasingly brave new postmodern world.

This piece is aimed at grappling with the thought of a generation still coming into view. It is almost an impossible task to identify, much less define, a morphing reality that evolves at broadband speed. We will attempt to describe the bases of missional thought in the context of emerging and emergent church trends with corresponding background influences. Then I will present matters arising from such observations, and finally provide what is intended to be a closing constructive thought or two, all attempted in both the first and third person.

Pieces of the Puzzle

The Movers and Thinkers. Evangelicalism is showing signs of shifting cycles, especially since World War II. Robert Webber delineates four seasons or eras of post-war evangelicalism and attempts to show how the emergent church varieties fit into this larger

schema. Period one ran roughly from 1946 through 1964 and was characterized by individualism. Prior to this era, conservative Christians ran underground in the aftermath of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies earlier in the twentieth century. Engagement was the watchword for these post-war conservatives. They were “marked by a rational worldview, propositionalism, and evidential apologetics.”¹

Gradually, evangelicals had an awakening of sorts between 1964 and 1984. Webber notes three distinct cross-currents in this timeframe. There was a move away from rationalism, a move toward existentialism, and a rise in political activism regarding moral reform in society. About 1984, for approximately another twenty-year period, each crosscurrent placed tension along the seams of the social fabric called evangelicalism. Webber notes that pragmatism prevailed during these days and drew attention to themes like self-image, what he labels a kind of “spiritual narcissism.” Programs, mega-churches, seekers, and contemporary worship styles are topics that shaped the concerns of a generation.²

Finally, sometime around 2004, the paradigm shifted again. Globalism, terror, wars and rumors of wars each took their toll on the collective conscience of younger evangelicals to evoke a sense of crisis. Emerging spokesmen for this generation were usually children during the 1980s (born after 1982). These leaders are the movers and thinkers of the shifting shape of evangelicalism today. They are “‘out of sorts’ with both traditional evangelical scientific theology and the pragmatism of mega-evangelicalism.”³ As these relate to the topic at hand, missions becomes missional as the days pass from modern to post-modern and beyond. Yet, others, bred in the more modernistic eras of evangelicalism, have directly influenced emergent thinking, as may be seen by what follows.

Background

Lesslie Newbigin spent a career in India as a missionary. Returning to England when that phase of his career came to a close, he noticed that the country of his youth had changed dramatically and now required a missionary style of witness to engage the new prevailing sense of lostness there. Days were gone when one could simply presume a basic familiarity with core Christian thought. This gave rise to problems within the church as Newbigin viewed it. The church was rolling merrily along as if a Christian consensus still prevailed. Changes and challenges were needed.

The term “missional,” in its best use, simply describes the church turning outward to respond responsibly to the type of needs Newbigin noted and documented. In sum, “The church is not the same as the predominant culture. It is an alternative culture that points to the kingdom of God and the reality of the new heavens and the new earth.”⁴ Faith must thus be lived out, not only or primarily argued and reasoned. Christendom, “the synthesis between the Gospel and the

¹Robert Webber, “Introduction: The Interaction of Culture and Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 10–11.

²Ibid., 13–15.

³Ibid., 16. Webber then places four representative thinkers of this post-crisis set of leaders into a conversation with one another to help define and refine their thought: Mark Driscoll (whom he terms a “Biblicist”), John Burke (“practical theologian”), Dan Kimball (“mystical,” “missional”), Doug Pagitt (“post-evangelical”), and finally Karen Ward (advocating a “communal theology”).

⁴Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 133. Webber lays out the historical developments that are shaping many emerging and emergent categories of thought.

culture of . . . Western Europe,” needed to be dismantled so that the church would free itself to define itself over and against the status quo of culture.⁵ Webber concludes that, “The influence of Newbigin and his colleague and successor David Bosch has set into motion a very old understanding of doing church in a postmodern world.”⁶ A biblical church must indeed retain a prophetic voice and exhibit redeemed realities in an otherwise fallen and lost world. At this juncture emergent thinkers are pointing out a guilty complacency within Western Christianity.

This line of thinking also has ramifications for mission boards and sending agencies of either denominational or non-denominational types. If local churches need to shed trappings of “Christendom” and cease a symbiotic relationship with fallen “Christendom” related cultures, then the organizational structures designed to facilitate mission sending activities are also affected. “The inherent logic of a denomination is that it is organized to do something. . . . The corporate church represents a significant shift away from the identity of the established church that understood itself as the primary location of God’s presence and activity in the world.”⁷ Van Gelder criticizes the “corporate church” as being representative of the “Christendom” problem while the “established church” is the one formed in the early Christian centuries and was untainted by the sociological establishment issues inherent in “Christendom.” Organization, structure, and social interplay that has design and purpose seem suspect in the post-modern mindset. Without a clear indication of an alternative (only a probing into the historic meaning of the New Testament church for the time being) the byproduct seems to lead to chaos or disorganization by implication. How does one organize for effective work without appearing organized? While it is true that some organizations reflect more the core moral, leadership, and integrity values and principles of the New Testament than others may, it does not undermine the fact that there was organization and structure in the early church. As the emergent phenomenon continues to take on shape, this is an obvious area of needed analysis.

Understanding the New Testament specifically, and the nature of truth in general, then comes into view as a worthy topic in assessing emergent missional themes. Antiestablishment tendency regarding social organization is parallel with the “democratization of knowledge” inherent in postmodern thought that is influencing those within the emergent church movements to varying degrees. They jettison “naive realism” in favor of “A more discerning and dialogical approach . . . both to foster confidence in God’s Word and to address legitimate questions and concerns.”⁸ In general, there is skepticism, or a form of evangelical agnosticism, in relation to True truth among some emerging thinkers. While they wish to remain distinct from postmodernity’s accretions, they sometimes succumb to its more alluring aspects. One of these is the idea of openness and the evolutionary nature of truth itself, not just the idea of changing perceptions of truth. In relation to ecclesiology, Van Gelder notes that in the emerging era the church must “be aware of the limits of trying to formulate a universal understanding from within a particular context.” Hence, “all ecclesiologies must be seen as functioning relative to their

⁵Lesslie Newbigin, “The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church,” in *Lesslie Newbigin, Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, ed. Paul Weston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 115.

⁶Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 134.

⁷Craig Van Gelder, “From Corporate Church to Missional Church: The Challenge Facing Congregations Today,” *Review and Expositor* 101 (2004): 431.

⁸Stuart McAlister, “Younger Generations and the Gospel in Western Culture,” in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*, ed. William David Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 372. McAlister goes on to note that the net affect of this is change in the purpose and nature of knowledge. Instead of “information transfer,” there is to be a “transformation of values”, a lessening of the need for “correct beliefs” and “morals,” but a raising of awareness regarding the need for “personal relationship and spiritual formation.”

context . . . the specifics of any ecclesiology are a translation of biblical perspective for a particular context. New contexts require new expressions for understanding the church.”⁹ While ecclesiological concern is the illustration here, it would apply as a characteristic within and among most of the young emergent church leaders as their approach to theological reasoning in general. It is reactive against what they perceive as the rationalism of the modern period. The translated effects of this alternative approach to theology and to ecclesiology specifically is an aversion to “(1) individuality, (2) program orientation, (3) preoccupation with numbers, (4) passivity, and (5) resistance to change.”¹⁰

Missional Agendas and Constructive Critique

New ideas shape actions and eventually they stream into new agendas. Over time they morph into a new status quo. Being “transformational” emerges as the rediscovered focus of missionary activity and fills in the functional meaning of the term “missional.” It is supposed to be more comprehensive than the historic use of the term mission or missions. It is “holistic,” “incarnational,” “environmental,” and “global.”¹¹

Generally missional values are being defined by the emerging church leaders’ agendas in reaction to at least four core values which are currently defined by the status quo church, and are deemed as holdovers from the modernist, rational era. The first is a reaction to the idea that truth is static and comprehensive. The postmodern fixed value of fluid truth permeates much missional thinking. Secondly, there is a desire to rework the aim of mission work to be likewise fluid, open to “messy” relationships, less concerned with right beliefs and more concerned with right actions. Thirdly, right actions are associated with holistic concerns for social justice and engagement as a prophetic agent of change. Fourth, what it means to be “church” in such a context is to feel more communal and relational, less bureaucratic and institutionalized. Denominational structures are deemed passé and in need of dismantling.

True truth, if left to flow with such fluidity will run aground in a sea of relativity, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. Does the New Testament indicate that reliable knowledge is embedded in the text? Are we able to retrieve it, comprehend it, and apply it in our modern contexts? If so, then how do we do so? Dan Kimball’s model for defining what it means to be “missional” illustrates the dichotomy between knowing God’s True truth and extending its applications to others. He is willing to assert that there are required premises in biblical thought, yet reacts against bundling it all into neat tidy packages distributable on a global scale.¹²

⁹Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 40–41.

¹⁰James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 113.

¹¹For a timely critique of a model for bundling all these emphases together fostered by Ralph Winter, see David J. Hesselgrave, “A Prolegomena to Understanding and Evaluating Dr. Ralph Winter’s ‘Fourth Era Kingdom Mission’” *Occasional Bulletin* 21.3 (Fall 2008): 1–4. Additionally, see the influence, or at least parallel thought, offered by the eight-point plan for transforming mission thinking and agendas in Engel and Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, 177–83.

¹²Dan Kimball, “The Emerging Church and Missional Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 83–105. For a contrasting view, see Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

A more fluid view of truth softens the nature of biblical values, especially across cultures. Traditional models for evangelism fall victim to this softening effect in that gospel information is considered less significant than gospel transformation. Relational outreach is more sensitive and transformational in nature, hence it is elevated in value within a missional model. Yet, what one gives up in the one is sacrificed in the other. To build relationships without first determining that there is definitely True truth to convey that has an eternal impact on the hearer will likely end in a meaningful friendship that is too valuable to jeopardize by introducing absolute truth and presenting the challenge to the newfound friend that “You must be born again!”

Busying ourselves with relationships rightly means formation of Christian compassion for the plight of those around us that we engage with godly values as a means of witness or proclamation. Social injustices, poverty, environmental development, and the like affect the totality of the human condition. Hence transformational, missional believers can and should engage these issues armed with God’s valuing regarding righteousness and justice. Yet, without a core commitment to transformational change that goes to the deepest level of one’s intimate relationship with God, we may perform social actions that alleviate social and inhumane conditions here on earth while we watch our newfound friends die and go to a real hell. Temporal compassion is no final substitute for eternity with Christ.¹³

Finally, the nature of the church in the midst of such changing realities must be determined. Yet, the very act of defining will undermine the primary need to leave truth open and relative. Theologizing in general runs the risk of developing forms of “Designer Christianity.”¹⁴ Perhaps there is a need to delve back into the concerns that emergent leaders wish to jettison, namely theological methods in order to avoid this danger and be relevant without compromising God’s Word in the process. If we are not careful, we will otherwise be relevant to a fallen world’s concerns with little to say that would challenge the state of lostness.

A Way Forward

D.A. Carson sees the tension presented in the missional approach. There seems to be a right ring to some of the criticisms of the way things are by the emergent leaders. Yet while their diagnosis of the problems may be correct to some degree, their prescriptions likely will not heal the patient. Exclusive embrace of open-ended truth will undermine the very nature of God’s chosen way to reveal Himself to humanity. Could there be a middle way? Carson advocates a “chastened modernism and a ‘soft’ postmodernism.” The former is less legalistic regarding truth, recognizes our tendency to change our minds, has a growing sense of understanding, and applies truth. The latter is more firm about the reality of True truth, and it “acknowledges that there is a reality out there that we human beings can know.” Continuing down the line of relativizing truth in an increasingly pluralistic world exacerbates the problems of humanity and its lostness, the

¹³Note the shift in motivation for mission activities surfacing. “Unfortunately, many students today exhibit theological confusion . . . young people on missions trips today may not be articulating the gospel’s promise of eternal salvation through Christ’s death on the cross as clearly as they are demonstrating their concern for social justice and compassion for the poor.” Jonathan Rice, “The New Missions Generation,” *Christianity Today* 50.9 (September 2006): 104. See also Robertson J. McQuilkin, “Lost Missions: Whatever Happened to the Idea of Rescuing People from Hell?” *Christianity Today* 50.7 (July 2006): 40–42.

¹⁴Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 156. Hirsch notes that this is an inherent danger in the emerging missional church due to the “postmodern blend of religious pluralism and philosophical relativism.”

very thing we wish to see rectified. Carson concludes that “it remains self-refuting to claim to know truly that we cannot know the truth.”¹⁵

Theologically, perhaps balanced and integrative models are needed to balance these epistemological tensions. Richard Bliese advocates a “mission matrix” that helps us map out a way to define what it means to be missional within a given context without surrendering the need to be “confessional,” “evangelical,” and “vocational” in the process.¹⁶

Conclusion

Shifting to the third person may be a more profound concern than it seems at first glance. Likewise, feeling more comfortable using the first person may be helpful in the climate of emerging church concerns. To the young college person mentioned at the beginning, it is difficult to think of truth as being overarching and applicable in a more universal way to anyone but himself as he goes through the process of discovery. To those of us that are older and accustomed to using the third person, perhaps we can profit from learning to speak more relationally. Yet, there is a common ground here. We both desire to see Christ communicated effectively in an increasingly pluralistic world. The thing we must both tether ourselves to is God’s inerrant Word and His definitions of salvation, church, and mission conveyed therein. To jettison a “conversionist” view of theology, that is the need for people to be genuinely saved from a real eternity without Christ, is to lose the ultimately important meaning of missions, mission, or even missional. Perhaps we can all profit from learning to speak third person truths in first person ways and thereby recognize that “The church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.”¹⁷

¹⁵D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 90.

¹⁶Richard H. Bliese, “The Mission Matrix: Mapping Out the Complexities of a Missional Ecclesiology,” *Word & World* 26.3 (2006): 237–48.

¹⁷Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (New York: Scribner’s, 1931), 108.

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