

Mission and Evangelism 1

A Gospel Mission from a Gospel God

'Mission' and 'evangelism' are buzz words in the church. Yet they conjure up quite different emotions. 'Mission' is like the phrase 'healthy living' – who could possibly object? And so 'mission' is championed by the evangelical, the liberal, the catholic, the charismatic, the emergent and all points between and besides. What each *means* by 'mission' will differ wildly but the concept is heartily endorsed. And if we were being cynical we'd add: so long as it remains a concept.

On the other hand... 'evangelism.' That's like 'long distance running.' It's a punishing option for the super-keen, not the be-all and end-all of 'healthy living'. So we say, 'God bless the Baptist revivalists and all their kind', safe in the knowledge that 'mission' is surely broader than soap-box preaching and the four spiritual laws.

Well, yes indeed. But there are some fundamental problems with this way of thinking. In particular, mission is being conceived too broadly and evangelism too narrowly.

We need to be more focused in our understanding of mission. This will mean excluding all manner of competing agendas. At the same time we should have a broader vision for evangelism. This will mean all the church in all of life proclaiming the gospel as we go.

In a follow-up paper I'll try to paint our evangelistic task in broader brushstrokes. In this paper I'll be arguing the first point – our mission is an evangelistic mission grounded in God's own gospel life. It's a Gospel Mission from a Gospel God. Therefore we will examine,

- 1) the *origin* of mission in God's missionary being, and then
- 2) the *content* of mission as the proclamation of this eternal gospel.

But first a definition...

What is mission?

Let's begin by defining what we mean by the church's mission.

If we simply trawled the Scriptures for every description of church life we could collect an imposing list. Yet 'the mission of the church' is not the distillation of these many commands, nor a selective listening to these many voices. Mission (from the latin 'to send') is the purpose for which the church is sent into the world. Mission answers the 'Why are we here?' question.

There will be *many* tasks involved, many roles to play and many penultimate goals in the fulfillment of the mission. But when we identify 'the mission of the church' we are describing the ultimate way in which the church is to relate to its Sending Lord and the world to which it is sent.

This paper will argue that the mission which the church has received from its Lord is to make disciples of all nations by proclaiming Christ. This is the ultimate answer to the question 'Why are we here?' There may be other tasks, yet those tasks ought to serve the ultimate mission and not usurp or distract from it.

1. The Origin of Mission

Some will view this definition with suspicion. Many will assume that such an evangelistic thrust originates from a certain doctrine of the last things, the reality of judgement, the urgency of the gospel, the need for regeneration, the lostness of humanity, a belief in preaching. Perhaps such a view originates from the simple equation that hell is worse than poverty.

Well all of those motivations are true and right concerns and ought to be decisive in their own way. Yet our theology of mission does not begin here. A true theology of mission arises from a true doctrine of God.

In 1933 Karl Barth addressed the Brandenburg Missionary Conference. There he introduced a missiological perspective which has determined the shape of mission theology in every part of the church.

*'Must not even the most faithful missionary, the most convinced friend of missions, have reason to reflect that the term missio was in the ancient Church an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity—namely the expression of the divine sending forth of self, the sending of the Son and Holy Spirit to the world? Can we indeed claim that we do it any other way?'*¹

Through linking the *sending* of the Son by the Father, to the sending of the church by the Triune God, Barth finds an origin for mission not in eschatology or ecclesiology or soteriology, but in the doctrine of God. There are missions because of the *missio Dei*.

The *Missio Dei*

If you want to appear hip among a gathering of pipe-smoking, microbrew-drinking theologians, drop *missio Dei* into conversation. It guarantees instant credibility. The phrase just means 'the sending of God' and it means this: From eternity the Father has always sent forth His Son who is Himself the shining out of the Father's glory. God's very being is as a sending God, even before the world began. Sending (i.e. 'mission') is therefore not just an action that God wills, or a response to the world. It is the nature of His eternal life.

Because our God is Trinity there is not a divine life that then decides mission is a good idea. It's not so much that God enjoys a life of eternal beatitude, unity and worship and *then* wills to speak or to shine or to send. Rather, those things find expression *as* He speaks, shines and sends. God's life of unity and worship is a missionary life – one of out-going, spreading goodness. God *Himself* is a missionary community.

This means that the origin of mission is not in human enthusiasm for outreach. It is not the keen evangelists who 'get the ball rolling.' Mission is the spreading goodness of God Himself as He determines to create, restore and bless in His Son and by the Spirit. We are never the initiators of mission. We are first spectators and beneficiaries of mission before we are ever participants.

Participating in the *missio Dei*

We become participants when the Sent One adopts us by the Spirit into His own way of being. That is, Christ draws us into His own life of *sent-ness* for the salvation of the world.

Before Christ ascended back to the Father He said to His disciples:

'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.' And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:21-22)

The church is the result of God's mission. And more than this, the church is swept up by the Spirit into the purposes of the *missio Dei*. Jesus continues...

'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' (John 20:23)

Christ's ministry of reconciliation is to be continued by His Spirit-filled followers sent out into the world. The church is created by and carries forward God's own mission.

Rethinking our place in mission

If a church is particularly zealous for missionary activity we will call them 'a sending church.' By this we mean that the church is a sender and those full-time gospel workers who they support are considered to be the 'missionaries' – the sent ones. This mission is considered to be one activity among many that the church undertakes.

Such a church may seek to enlarge their 'sending arrow' greatly. They may tirelessly champion missionary work, hold constant prayer meetings for overseas workers, schedule regular missions' Sundays with special fundraising efforts. They could receive constant visits and prayer-letters from missionaries. They may even have a missions or outreach committee with a significant budget to support the work.

But what should we make of this?

Certainly such an ethos is far superior to the sleepy church that thinks of nothing but maintaining its own buildings. We might think – better to have one arrow among many than none at all. And that would be true.

Yet even such an activist church has missed something foundational to a theology of mission. Namely this: Mission is not something the local church does. Church is not the sender of gospel witnesses. The church is the body that is sent.

We are the missionaries – the church as a whole. Our very existence is an existence on mission, wherever we may be. We have our being as church *in* the commission which is laid upon the whole body to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Mission is not what we do, it is who we are.

As a friend from Crosslinks recently remarked, the ultimate missionary movement is not 'West to the rest' nor is it 'The rest to the west.' The ultimate missionary movement is always Heaven to Earth. As members of Christ's missionary body we find ourselves, wherever we are, as His ambassadors, God making His appeal through us (2 Cor 5:20). This is not a function that we resolve to undertake (whether poorly or eagerly), it is the very nature of our life together.

And this means that mission is not one activity among many. It is not one line in the budget, or one committee among others. It is the co-ordinating purpose for all that we do as church.

This does not mean that all of church life becomes an endless round of guest services and evangelism training. But it does mean that every aspect of church life reflects its true nature as a

witnessing community.

Rethinking our motivation for mission

As we live out our missionary existence, a number of very encouraging truths flow from the *missio Dei*.

First, notice the organic nature of mission. We are not commanded to be a missionary body. We are *made* a missionary body. Just as it is the very nature of God to communicate Himself by Word and Spirit, so it is the very nature of church to do the same. We *are* witnesses (Acts 1:8) and cannot help but be witnesses.

Second, as we 'go' we are empowered and accompanied by the great Evangelist – the Lord Himself. (Matt 28:20) This is so important to remember since some of the greatest enthusiasts for mission can sometimes convey the impression that God is grudgingly involved in the process and requires firebrand preachers to force His hand. The reality is that our Lord's heart beats for mission. Look to the cross and understand that His passion for the lost far outstrips our own.

Thirdly, we are caught up in this mission not as individual missionaries but as the *body* of Christ. We are not a club for evangelists but are *together* God's witness in the world. We will speak more of this in the next paper, but this means that we will exercise our different gifts in complementary ways (eg 1 Peter 4:10-11). It will also involve thinking hard about how we open out our corporate life to the world, that they might see our life together and be won for Christ (John 13:35; 17:20-23).

Fourthly, we ought to know that mission does not consist of 'God's job' and 'our job' as is popularly taught. Instead we are included into God's gospel love for the world.

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18-20).

There's not God's work and our work, rather we are God's 'fellow-workers' (1 Cor 3:9; 1 Thes 3:2). What a privilege!

David Bosch has memorably put it like this:

'To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people,

| *since God is a fountain of sending love.*¹²

2. The Content of Mission

Missiologies grounded in the *missio Dei* are extremely fashionable in theology and ministry today. But rarely are the implications followed. For if we agree to a missiology grounded in our doctrine of God then we are driven to confess an *evangelistic* mission for the church. A Gospel God means a Gospel Mission.

We have a gospel to proclaim

In 1934, one year after Brandenburg, Karl Barth was in a position to apply *missio Dei* thinking to a stark socio-political crisis. In the face of the pro-Nazi 'German Christians' Barth found himself the chief author of the Barmen Declaration – the founding document of the Confessing Church. And here is its definition of mission:

*'The church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver to all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.'*¹³

Here it is clearly stated that the church's mission is gospel proclamation. And this proclamation is through preaching and sacrament. There is nothing here about socio-political involvement. The mission of the church is delivering to all people the *message* of the free grace of God.

Ironically, this mission presents the most provocative *political* challenge precisely because it refuses to engage with the world on its own terms. The Nazis are confronted because the Confessing Church occupies itself with its one true Fuhrer (Christ), its one true Reich (God's Kingdom) and its one true commission: delivering 'the message of the free grace of God'. Far from creating an 'ecclesiastical ghetto' for the Confessing Christians, this single-minded determination to let the gospel set the agenda brings the church into its most significant contact with the surrounding culture.

Against the backdrop of Nazi rule, we might have been tempted to broaden the mission of the church: 'To deliver to all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God and to fight in Christ's name for equality, justice and freedom, etc.' But to add such

an 'and' is to misunderstand the already revolutionary character of the gospel. As Robert Speer has observed:

*'Missions are powerful to transform the face of society, because they ignore the face of society, and deal with it at its heart. They yield such powerful political and social results, because they do not concern themselves with them.'*⁴

It is not that the church is neutral with regards to politics, social justice, the environment, etc. Neither is it ineffectual. Not at all. Yet its potency comes as it resolves in every area of life to proclaim the true Lord of this world to the end that He might be trusted. That is the church's mission.

And its evangelistic thrust comes from considering our Gospel God, our Gospel World and His Finished Work.

A Gospel God

Think again of Christ's words in John 20:

'As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you.' (v.21)

Our mission is grounded in the *missio* (the sending) of the Son, i.e. it is grounded in the very life of God. So we ask, What was *Christ's* mission statement? Why did the Father send His Son? Undeniably it was a mission of salvation. Our God is a Gospel God.

In fact from all eternity the purposes of the Father have been focussed on His Son (e.g. Isaiah 42:1-4). He has created in and through and for Christ (e.g. Col 1:15f) and has redeemed in and through and for Christ (e.g. Ps 110:4). It is the Father's and the Spirit's deepest passion to exalt the Son. To inherit our mission from this Gospel God can only mean carrying on a Gospel mission.

A Gospel World

Creation has never been a free-floating entity with means and ends of its own. The Lord does not have desires for creation over here, and desires for salvation over there. Creation and salvation are all a part of the *one* gospel project fulfilled in Christ.

The world exists both by and for the spreading goodness of the sending God (1 Cor. 8:6). In that outgoing gospel passion it was the same Word who made the world who then entered and reconciled it (Col. 1:20). It is under the headship of this same Word that creation is renewed and perfected (e.g. Eph. 1:10). And, crucially, all things are to be drawn under His feet *by the Spirit*. This means *by the word* as Jesus continually emphasizes in, for instance, the upper room discourse (e.g. John 14:10-26).

The mission we have joined is not disjointed, with creational needs on the one hand and redemptive needs on the other. All creation is to be brought under the rule of its true Lord. And this is to be done, not in works of the flesh but by the Spirit – that is, by the word.

A Finished Work

The church has not received its mission from a needy Christ, looking for us to finish the job. He really has saved the world through His death and resurrection. For this reason, the risen Christ constitutes us as ‘witnesses’ (Acts 1:8). We are not the do-ers – we are signposts to His ultimate and all-encompassing Doing. We are a witnessing community not a reforming task-force. *We* do not bring redemption to the world, we bring Christ to the world as One who has already accomplished our redemption.

None of this is to deny that the gospel has an incredible transformative effect on lives and communities in the here and now. Under the Headship of the true Lord, under the authority of the divine word, in the power of the Holy Spirit, there is a power to transform social structures and bring healing to every aspect of life – even in advance of Christ’s return. Yet *that* is the context for such change. To attempt to bring this healing into a sphere which explicitly rejects this Head, this word and this Spirit, is to trust to the flesh and to deny that the *gospel* is the power to transform. It is, therefore to betray the evangel – it is to be anti-evangelistic.

As we conclude this section we will address one vital question of application:

Should our mission involve ‘ministries of mercy’?

Having said all this, let’s be very clear: you simply cannot be a *Christian* and close your heart to the practical needs around you. So much of *1 John* is about this. And I must confess that I lavish time and money on my own ‘non-spiritual’ blessings day in and day out. If I am to love my neighbour as myself, will I really with-hold such blessings from others?

If anyone refuses to feed and clothe the poor let them never claim justification in an ‘evangelism-only’ missiology. It is greed pure and simple.

But then what *should* we do at a church level? Where do practical deeds of service fit if our mission is proclamation?

Ministries of mercy will feature in two ways.

Firstly, the life of the church family is a life of bearing one another's loads (e.g. Gal 6:2). Our *missionary* unity is still a missionary *unity* and therefore the church will model sacrificial love before a watching world. Jesus makes clear in John 13:35 and John 17:21 that this bears witness to the gospel. Notice therefore that Jesus expects our church life to be opened out to the world as a witness. Notice that a penultimate goal like unity serves a more ultimate missionary goal. And notice that the Spirit gifts certain people for such service within the body (Acts 6:1-4). But again, even with such specialization, the coordinating mission remains one of proclamation.

Secondly, as with Jesus' ministry, deeds of service will accompany the proclamation of the word. It would be impossible for this *not* to happen, unless we only evangelized the wealthy – an unthinkable proposition (Luke 4:18). But such helps will be provided in the context of people sitting under the word.

In Jesus' own ministry we see, for instance in Mark 6 and parallels, that those who would sit under the teaching of Christ were shown tremendous kindness – the feeding of the 5000! Yet even this deed was a *sign* proclaiming Christ (and Jesus used words to explain it as such). Note too that Jesus does not put on an evangelistic supper and then give a talk. Jesus sees their primary need: Mark 6:34 – *teaching*. First He preaches, then He feeds those who sit under His word.

As a modern example think of David Wilkerson's missionary efforts to the gangs of New York city. He did not *first* address the social needs, opening drug rehab units and gaining trust and good will. He went with the foolishness of preaching and *then* served those responding to the word. This mission had a tremendous social impact, but it was the gospel that was proved to be the power.

It is popular in modern evangelicalism to construe our mission to the world as one of 'service' – an umbrella term under which proclamation fits, along with any number of social ministries.

Yet this is not the way Christ coordinated His own mission. Nor Paul. Think of 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 – proclamation coordinates service not the other way around.

Thus our desire for a powerful social ministry should not be: 'let's have a soup kitchen with a 5 minute gospel talk'. Rather, we should be saying 'let's move into a deprived area and proclaim the word of Christ. And let's provide food, shelter, clothing and every material need for all those who will hear.'

Ministries with powerful social, political and even environmental impact ought to accompany our gospel proclamation since our gospel is powerful to effect such change. Yet it must be clear that it is the gospel that is the power.

Conclusion

Who is God? The Ultimate Missional Community

What is the world? The ultimate mission field, ripe for harvest

Who are we? Sent ones, participants in Christ's mission to the world

We have inherited a Gospel Mission from our Gospel God. This is our true motivation for mission. Not the guilt trips employed by the cults, but the astonishing indicatives of God's own gospel purposes.

In the next paper we will examine how, individually and corporately, we can best fit into God's mission to the world.

Endnotes

1. Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, Orbis, 1995, p.105-6.
2. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, 1992, p.390.
3. Article 6 of the Barmen Declaration, 1934: <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/barmen-declaration.html> - last checked 3rd Nov. 2010.
4. Robert Speer, *Missionary Principles and Practice*, Fleming H. Ravell Co., 1902, p.35.



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