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The Mission of God's People

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WHO ARE WE AND WHAT ARE WE HERE FOR?

MISSION OR MISSIONS?

The title of the book, *The Mission of God's People*, immediately sends a question to the top of the queue. It is a question of definition: What pops into our mind when we see or hear the word “mission”? Perhaps we are more familiar with it in the form “missions”, which usually brings to mind all the cross-cultural missionary work of the churches we are familiar with. We think of missionary societies, of evangelistic and church-planting missions, of long-term career missionaries or short-term missions, and of global networks of such agencies and individuals, like the Lausanne Movement.

God's Sending

All of these images have in common the notion of sending and being sent. That sense, of course, lies at the Latin root of the word *mission* itself, and is very appropriate. And very biblical too. There is no doubt that the Bible shows God sending many people “on a mission from God”, and the missionary movement in the book of Acts begins with a church responding to that divine impulse by sending Paul and Barnabas out on their first missionary journey.

But recognizing that mission has at its heart a sense of sending and being sent only raises another question: sent to do what? The Bible tells us that God did send many people. But the range of things for which people were sent is staggeringly broad. “Sending” language is used in all the following stories. Joseph was sent (unwittingly at first) to be in a position to save lives in a famine (Gen. 45:7). Moses was sent (unwillingly at first) to deliver people from oppression and exploitation (Ex. 3:10). Elijah was sent to influence the course of international politics (1 Kings 19:15–18). Jeremiah was sent to proclaim God's Word (e.g., Jer. 1:7). Jesus claimed the words of Isaiah that he was sent to preach good news, to proclaim freedom, to give sight for the blind, and to offer release from oppression (Lk 4:16–19; cf. Isa. 61:1).

The disciples were sent to preach and demonstrate the delivering and healing power of the reign of God (Matt. 10:5–8). As apostles they were sent to make disciples, baptize and teach (Matt. 28:18–20). Jesus sent them into the world in the same way that the Father had sent him, which raises a lot of interesting questions and challenges (John 17:18; 20:21). Paul and Barnabas were sent with famine relief (Acts 11:27–30). Later they were sent for evangelism and church planting (Acts 13:1–3). Titus was sent to ensure trustworthy and transparent financial administration (2 Cor. 8:16–24). Later he was sent for competent church administration (Titus 1:5). Apollos was sent as a skilled Bible teacher for church nurture (Acts 18:27–28). Many unnamed brothers and sisters were sent out as itinerant teachers for the sake of the truth of the gospel (3 John 5–8).

So, even if we agree that the concept of sending and being sent lies at the heart of mission, there is a broad range of biblically sanctioned activities that people may be sent by God to do, including famine relief, action for justice, preaching, evangelism, teaching, healing and administration. Yet when we use the words “missions” and “missionaries”, we tend to think mainly of evangelistic activity. What will our biblical theology have to say to that? We will think about this more in chapter 12.

God’s Purpose

Another common usage of the word “mission”, however, is a sense of purpose or goal-orientation. Even in the secular world we talk about organizations having a “corporate mission”, which may well be summed up in a pithy “mission statement”. So to ask the question, “What is the mission of God’s people?” is really to ask, “For what purpose do those who call themselves the people of God actually exist? What are we here on earth for?”

It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God’s mission.

*Chris Wright*²

But to answer that we have to go one step further back and ask, Whose mission is it anyway? And of course, the answer to that has to be—it is the mission of God. God himself has a mission. God has a purpose and goal for his whole creation. Paul called this the “whole will [plan] of God” (Acts 20:27; cf. Eph. 1:9–10). And as part of that divine mission, God has called into existence a people to participate with God in the accomplishment of that mission. All *our* mission flows from the prior mission of God. And that, as we will see, is broad indeed. “Mission arises from the heart of God himself, and is communicated from his heart to ours. Mission is the global outreach of the global people of a global God.”¹

1. John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 335.

2. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 62.

Singular and Plural

That broad definition allows us to include many different *missions* within the category of *mission*. Perhaps the easiest way I can explain the difference that I perceive between talking about mission (singular) and missions (plural) is to use analogies from other human activities.

We can speak about *science* (singular), and we have a generic concept in mind. It speaks of the challenge of discovery, experimentation and explanation. It speaks of a method, an ethos, a system of values, certain paradigms that govern scientific enquiry, a certain kind of faith and a strong kind of commitment. Science is a dimension of human life and civilization.

But then there are *sciences*. When we use the word in the plural, we are speaking of a whole vast range of activities which have scientific aims, methods, criteria and controls. There are physical sciences, with many subdivisions in the exploration of the natural world and our universe. There are social sciences, life sciences, and the like. And then there's the science of economics. And statistics. But let's not stray into science fiction.

My point is, science is a generic word for a whole array of human endeavour that can be characterized as sciences. There is a multitude of activities that can be justly characterized as science, and from time to time scientists themselves argue over whether this or that particular activity is "really science" at all. But (rather like the parts in Paul's description of the body), one legitimate science cannot say to another, "because you are not physics, you are not real science." Nor can one legitimate science say about itself, "because I am not physics, I don't belong to the world of science." There is a universal concept, broadly understood, and there is a multiplicity of embodiments of it in practical life.

One could build the same analogy with regard to *art* and *the arts*, or to *sport* and *sports*. There are all kinds of artistic and sporting activities, but we know what we mean when we use a generic concept like art or sport to include that variety and multiplicity.

So when I speak of *mission*, I am thinking of all that God is doing in his great purpose for the whole of creation and all that he calls us to do in cooperation with that purpose. Mission, like science, has a conceptual, generic breadth, and a word like "missional" can be as broad in significance as "scientific". And I would suggest that the word "missionary" should have the same kind of breadth of possibility as the word "scientist". Like the latter, it is a word you have to fill with specific meaning rather than assume or imagine what the said person actually does.

But when I speak of *missions*, I am thinking of the multitude of activities that God's people can engage in, by means of which they participate in God's mission. And it seems to me there are as many kinds of missions as there are kinds of sciences—probably far more in fact. And in the same way, in the variety of missions

God has entrusted to his church as a whole, it is unseemly for one kind of mission to dismiss another out of a superiority complex, or to undervalue itself as “not real mission” out of an inferiority complex. The body image has powerful resonance here too.

That is why I also dislike the old knock-down line that sought to ring-fence the word “mission” for specifically cross-cultural sending of missionaries for evangelism: “If everything is mission, then nothing is mission.” It would seem more biblical to say, “If everything is mission . . . everything is mission.” Clearly, not everything is *cross-cultural evangelistic* mission, but everything a Christian and a Christian church is, says and does should be missional in its conscious participation in the mission of God in God’s world.

Perhaps you have heard of this definition of mission? “*World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world.*” It comes from the Lausanne Covenant.³ It is a fine ringing slogan, which actually has even earlier roots.⁴ But each of its three phrases leads us into a cluster of questions. It provides a convenient framework to set out some of the issues that our biblical theology of mission will address—though not necessarily in this particular order.

THE WHOLE WORLD

The Whole World as the Goal of God’s Mission

“What’s the world coming to?” we sometimes ask when things seem just too much beyond our understanding or control. But it’s a good question to ask when we are thinking about the mission of God’s people too, for it points us towards a future that ultimately lies in God’s hands. As we said above, our mission flows from God’s mission, and God’s mission is for the sake of his whole world—indeed his whole creation.

So we have to start by seeing ourselves within the great flow of God’s mission, and we must make sure that our own missional goals—long term and more immediate—are in line with God’s. For that purpose, we need to know the story we are part of, the great story that the Bible tells that encompasses the past and the future.

But how many churches that are keen on mission, or how many mission agencies that pursue their agendas with urgency and zeal pause to think about that great story—where it has come from so far, what shape it has from the *whole* Bible (not just a few missionary verses), and where it is going? And yet if our mission efforts lose touch with that story or set off on all kinds of tangents from it, we have to ask: Whose mission are we on? Whose agenda are we pursuing?

3. The Lausanne Covenant was the product of the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, convened by Billy Graham in 1974. The Covenant was drafted by a group led by John Stott. It can be read in full at: <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>. The phrase quoted above comes from Paragraph 6.

4. It was used by the World Council of Churches in its New Delhi report in 1961, and even before that in the Lambeth Conference report of 1958.

So our first task in Part 2 will be to gain some necessary orientation by giving attention to the story we are part of if we consider ourselves to be God's people on God's mission. That will be our focus in chapter 2.

The Whole World and the Scope of Our Mission

God's mission, we will find from the Bible, includes the whole of creation. But where does that truth lead us in terms of our mission on earth? Especially, what does it imply for our treatment of that part of creation entrusted to us—planet Earth? It is generally accepted among Christians (and more widely) that we ought to be good stewards of the earth's resources. But do we have a *missional* responsibility beyond that level of moderately responsible living? We are all conscious of the ecological challenges that face the human race. We may rightly feel confused in the welter of alleged facts and scary projections, not knowing how much is objective reality and how much is the result of media frenzy or political machination. Nobody can seriously doubt that we face enormous global problems, but we may well differ widely over the best way forward from where we seem to have reached.

But is this a matter that should be on the agenda of Christian mission? How does our biblical theology help us address that question? At the very least, one might say, if the goal of God's mission is the new creation that we anticipate from the climax of the Bible's story, then mission in the midst of the story ought to have some place for our response to creation as it is now. Traditionally, however, the concept of mission in Christian circles has been confined to the needs of human beings. So, is ecological concern and action a biblically legitimate missional concern, or merely a contemporary obsession driven by the world's agenda? We will think about that question in chapter 3.

The Whole World as the Arena of Our Mission

Where does "missionary" work begin and end? We so easily fall into compartmentalized thinking, splitting up our world into different zones. The very word "mission" often comes along with the notion of "the mission field", which normally means "foreign countries out there, but not here at home." This has been a Western way of looking at the world, but it is also found in other parts of the world that now have strong missionary-sending churches. The reality is, of course, as soon as you think seriously about it, that the mission field is everywhere, including your own street—wherever there is ignorance or rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But another equally damaging false dichotomy is between the so-called sacred and secular realms, and "mission" is located firmly in the first. So mission is something either that specially commissioned Christians manage to do full-time, if they can get enough "support" to do so, or something that other Christians (the vast majority) do in odd moments of time they have to spare from the necessity of having

to work for a living. Maybe they can fit “a mission trip” into a vacation, or go on a “church mission” over the weekend.

But what about the rest of life? What about the rest of the “world” – the world of work, the public arena, the world of business, education, politics, medicine, sports, and the like? In what sense is that world the arena of the mission of God’s people, and what does such mission consist of? Is it only the moments of evangelistic opportunity in that world, or can our work itself participate in God’s mission?

The Church must be seen as the company of pilgrims on the way to the end of the world and the ends of the earth.

*Leslie Newbigin*⁵

To push the question further, do the people of God have any responsibility to the rest of human society in general beyond the imperative of evangelism? What content do we put into biblical phrases like being a blessing to the nations, or seeking the welfare of the city, or being the salt of the earth or the light of the world, or doing good (one of the commonest expressions used by Paul and Peter)? Do these concepts figure in our biblical theology of mission?

Perhaps this sounds like the hoary and familiar debate about the relationship between evangelism and social action, but I hope that our study of biblical theology in the following chapters will take us beyond the traditional polarizing and prioritizing that, in my opinion, so distorts and pulls apart what God intended to be held together.

So even a simple expression like “the whole world”, then, raises all kinds of issues for us. It is geographical (all the earth), but it is also ecological, economic, social and political. And we remember too that the Bible speaks about the “end of the world” – though it is not so much an end as a new beginning. So “the whole world” includes time as well as space. The church needs to relate to both. We are sent to the ends of the earth, and we keep going till the end of the world.

THE WHOLE CHURCH

Who Are the People of God?

“The Mission of God’s People”, announces our title page. Could I not have just used the book’s subtitle, “The Church’s Mission”? Well, yes perhaps, but only if we have got our biblical theology of the church straight, and that is probably an optimistic assumption. For many Christians, the word “church” takes them back only to the supposed birthday of the church in the book of Acts on the day of Pentecost. But is that a valid perception? When and where did the people of God come into existence, and for what reason? How does the existence and mission of this people relate to the mission of God in and for his world? When did their mission begin, and how and when will it end?

5. Leslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London, SCM, 1953), xi.

Or to put this question another way, how does the mission of the church in the New Testament (that most of us can relate to, since if nothing else we are familiar with the so-called Great Commission and vaguely recall that it comes at the end of a gospel) relate to the identity and history of Old Testament Israel? Did Israel have a “mission”, and if so, what was it? Indeed, does the Old Testament have any relevance to Christian mission at all—other than a few popular “call-stories” like Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah (so useful for missionary sermons), and the object lesson of a single reluctant missionary who was embarrassed and angry at his own success (Jonah)?

How many sermons have you heard on a missionary Sunday preached from the Old Testament? How many times have you preached a missionary sermon from the Old Testament yourself, if you are a pastor? If the answer is “lots and lots”, I’d love to hear from you to compare notes, since I try to do it wherever I go. But if the answer is “very few” or “hardly ever”, then the point of my question is clear. Where and when do we start in constructing a *biblical* theology of the mission of God’s people, and what happens if we include the Old Testament?

So we need to think carefully about what the Bible as a whole has to say about who exactly are “God’s people”, and in what sense they are (and always have been) a people with a mission. That is why I make no apology for including so much exposition of Old Testament texts in the chapters that follow. After all, the New Testament church did not actually have a New Testament when they set out on the task of world mission. It was the Scriptures of the Old Testament that provided the motivation and justification for their missional practice, as well as the underlying theological assumptions and expectations that reassured them that what they were doing was “biblical” (as we would say).

What Kind of People Are We?

What kind of person is your postman? The question hardly seems to matter at a functional level. Whoever delivers mail to your address has a job to do, and the point is to make sure that the job gets done, not to worry about the morals of the person who does it. The man may have been cheating on his wife the night before, but so long as you get the mail next morning, so long as the message gets delivered to you, that doesn’t matter (to you).

Unfortunately, there is a danger that the expression “the whole church *taking* the whole gospel to the whole world” turns the church into nothing more than a delivery mechanism for the message. All that matters is “getting the job done”—preferably as soon as possible. And sadly there are some forms of missionary strategy and rhetoric that strongly give that impression.

The Bible, in stark contrast, is passionately concerned about what kind of people they are who claim to be the people of God. If our mission is to share good news,

we need to be good news people. If we preach a gospel of transformation, we need to show some evidence of what transformation looks like. So there is a range of questions we need to ask about “the whole church” that have to do with things like integrity, justice, unity and inclusion, and Christlikeness. The biblical word is “holiness”, and it is as much a part of our missional identity as of our personal sanctification.

But should we include *ethics* in our understanding of *mission* in this way? Does it not lead to “works righteousness” and legalism? Surely we should concentrate exclusively on calling people to *faith*? Well, we may struggle with seeing a tension there, but the apostle Paul saw only integration when he described his own life’s mission as calling all the nations to “faith’s obedience”. The gospel is something to be obeyed (according to Paul), not just believed. That will lead us to some interesting texts and reflections. Chapters 5–8 will explore a variety of biblical texts that stress the ethical dimensions of the mission of God’s people.

What Are the Priorities and Limits of Our Mission?

A postman delivers the mail to your home. That is his prime function in life. His job description requires him to do that. Now of course, he may come in and help you fix a blocked drain, if he has time. Or he may offer to carry out the garbage. Or feed the cats while you are away. He may enjoy serving the social needs of the community in lots of little ways, like Postman Pat in the children’s books. But that’s not what his “real job” is. And some people may even accuse him of wasting his employer’s time on “secondary” things. He should stick to what he’s sent to do and get the job done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

A medical missionary couple I knew had been running a rural hospital in Africa for years when they received a communication from their church in Australia that they had been reclassified as “secondary missionaries”, because they were not directly engaged in evangelism and church planting (even though fruitful evangelistic work was actually happening among staff and patients at the hospital). Needless to say, this brought them little encouragement. But was such “classification” biblically legitimate?

So another question arises in relation to the church’s mission: What exactly is it? Is there something that is primary that makes everything else secondary—however desirable and helpful those other things may be? Once again, the perceived division between evangelism and social action surfaces.

Is the church’s mission *primarily* the delivery of the message of the gospel—in which case the verbal element is all that really matters? Or does the church’s mission include the embodiment of the message in life and action? Sometimes this question is raised as the tension between *proclamation* and *presence*. Or between *words* and *works*. In some of the chapters below we will explore the integration of what the church is meant to *be* as well as what the church is meant to *say*.

THE WHOLE GOSPEL

How Big Is Your Gospel?

This question is clearly linked to those above. What exactly is the gospel that lies at the core of our mission? It is the good news of what God has done through Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world. But what is the scale and scope of God's redemption? The Bible describes God as "Redeemer" from very early on.⁶ What content does the word hold for those who spoke of God in that way, and what does it then imply for those who are among the redeemed? What kind of experience is redemption, and what kind of life is then expected of the redeemed? This is something we shall explore in chapter 6.

One of the dangers with a word like "gospel" is that we all love it so much (rightly), and want to share it so passionately (rightly again), that we don't take time to explore its full biblical content. Who invented the word, for example? What did Jesus and Paul mean when they used it—particularly since, as I've already said, they had no New Testament to read to tell them. Did they find "the gospel" in the Old Testament?

And if it does go back to the Old Testament (as we will see), what does that do to our understanding of what the good news actually is? Once again, we will find that the Bible itself will correct our tendency to reduce the gospel to a solution to our individual sin problem and a swipe card for heaven's door, and replace that reductionist impression with a message that has to do with the cosmic reign of God in Christ that will ultimately eradicate evil from God's universe (and solve our individual sin problem too, of course).

No Other Name

But at the end of the day, mission is a matter of loyalty. The ambassador must have complete loyalty to the government he or she represents. A trusted messenger will faithfully deliver what his sender said, not his own opinions.

So the mission of *God's* people has to start and finish with commitment to the *God* whose mission we are called to share. But that in turn depends on *knowing* our God—knowing God in depth, from experience of his revelation and his salvation. So what exactly is it, then, that we are to *know* and to remain loyal to? In both testaments, God's people are called to nonnegotiable, uncompromising loyalty to the uniqueness of God—revealed as YHWH in the Old Testament, and walking among us in the incarnate life of Jesus of Nazareth in the New.

The mission of God's people flows from the uniqueness of the God of the Bible, supremely revealed to us in the uniqueness of Christ. That is both the *source* of our

6. It first occurs in Gen. 48:16 (NRSV), but then explodes into prominence in Exodus (6:8; 15:13).

mission (for this is the one who sends us into the world in his name), and also the *content* of our mission (for all that we say and do is to bear witness to the truth that the Lord is God and there is no other, that Jesus has been given the Name that is above all names, and that there is “no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved”, Acts 4:12).

As we turn, then, in part 2 to our journey through some of the great texts and themes of a biblical theology of the mission of God’s people, this is a sampling of the questions and issues we will face. As I’ve said, we will not necessarily follow the same order as the framework I have just used to survey those questions. For this is biblical, not systematic, theology, and my hope is that as we expose ourselves to the rich array of biblical texts from both testaments and spend time in the task of exegesis and exposition, we will find broad answers to those broad questions—or even that some of the questions melt away in the wider perspectives of the Bible itself.