

The Mission of the Church: What Are We Sent Into the World to Do?

Introduction

Good morning, dear RCF family. We're continuing our course entitled "The Mission of the Church" this morning. And today's lesson is entitled "What Are We Sent Into the World to Do?" Our Authors, Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, open this lesson by saying,

"MISSION, AS WE TRIED to demonstrate in the previous chapter, is not everything we do in Jesus's name, nor everything we do in obedience to Christ. Mission is the task we are given to fulfill. It's what Jesus sends us into the world to do. And if we want to figure out what Jesus sends disciples into the world to do, we think the best place to look is the Great Commission.¹"

And we're going to examine five Great Commission texts together this morning, but before we do, let's first consider three,

Alternative Mission Passages

✿ Genesis 12:1-3

Some read this passage and say, "See, God wants us to go and be a blessing to the nations! That's the mission of the Church!" But it would be odd for us to interpret this passage this way since,

"There is no evidence Abraham ever takes his call in chapter 12 as a commission to go find ways to bless the nations²."

In other words, if Abraham didn't think it was a mission, we probably shouldn't either. Further, later in Genesis, we are given more data regarding this global blessing. In Genesis 22, we read,

† Genesis 22:18—"and **in your offspring** shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

So, in Genesis 22, we learn that to be blessed in Abraham is to be blessed in Abraham's offspring. But who is that offspring? The NT tells us that the offspring, through whom the nations are to be blessed, is Christ, and only Christ! Paul says in,

¹ What Is the Mission of the Church? Kevin DeYoung, Greg Gilbert This material may be protected by copyright.

² Ibid

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† Galatians 3:16—“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.”

Thus, this is not a passage that tells the Church what to do. It’s a passage that tells the Church what Jesus alone does! Jesus alone blesses the nations with forgiveness and everlasting life in the glorious presence of God!

Yet, lest we assume that it is somehow wrong to bless people, our authors offer the following necessary clarification. They say,

“This doesn’t in any way mean it’s wrong for Christians to bless others, but it does mean we should not take Genesis 12:1–3 as a moral agenda or as another Great Commission.”³

Transition: We turn now to our third alternative mission passage,

✿ Exodus 19:5-6

Our authors note that,

“Some argue that the language of “kingdom of priests” indicates that we are intermediaries for the presence of God in the world. The logic usually works like this: “The Bible says we are priests. And what do priests do? They mediate God’s presence. So what is our mission? We are supposed to be a kingdom of priests mediating God’s blessing to the world.”

There are several problems with this view. I’ll briefly offer you three of them,

(1) The Levitical priesthood serves a mediatorial role, yes, but they don’t mediate God’s presence; they offer sacrifices that placate his anger.

(2) Second, our authors say,

“If God were giving the Israelites a missionary task to bless the non-Israelites, we might expect to see this task specified and elaborated in the Mosaic Law. Yet the rules and regulations of Sinai say nothing about a mission to the Gentiles. There are commands for Israel to express care for sojourners and foreigners in its midst, but not explicit instructions for Israel to go into the world and meet the needs of the nations.”⁴

(3) And third, our authors again state,

“The prophets never fault Israel for neglecting its [alleged] missionary mandate. God certainly cares about how his chosen people will be an attraction or a byword among the nations. But the direction is “come and see” not “go and tell.” If missional engagement

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

The Mission of the Church: *What Are We Sent Into the World to Do?* were a covenant obligation, surely the Israelites would be rebuked for failing to keep this aspect of the law.⁵

Transition: Finally, we consider our fourth alternative mission passage,

✿ Luke 4:16-21

“No doubt, this text is one of the clearest statements of Jesus’s mission and the goals of his ministry. It is also one of the most misunderstood. In popular explanations, Luke 4 underscores that Jesus’s mission focused on the materially destitute and the downtrodden. In this interpretation, Jesus was both Messiah and social liberator. He came to bring the Year of Jubilee to the oppressed. He came to transform social structures and bring God’s creation back to shalom. Therefore, our mission, in keeping with Christ’s mission, is at least in part—if not in its central expression—“to extend the kingdom by infiltrating all segments of society, with preference given to the poor, and allowing no dichotomy between evangelism and social transformation (Luke 4:18–19).”¹⁴ Above all else, Luke 4 (it is argued) shows that Jesus’s mission was to serve the poor. So shouldn’t that be our mission too?”

This common approach to Luke 4 is not entirely off base, but it misses two critical observations.

- (1) *“First, this approach overlooks the actual verbs Jesus read from the Isaiah scroll. The Spirit of the Lord, resting upon Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, would anoint him to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. With the exception of “to set at liberty the oppressed” (which we’ll come back to in a moment), these are all words that point to speaking. While it’s certainly true that Jesus healed the sick and gave sight to the blind (as pointers to his deity, signs of the kingdom’s in-breaking, and expressions of his compassion), the messianic mission statement in Luke 4 highlights the announcement of good news. If Luke 4 sets the tone for the mission of the church, then the center of the church’s mission should be the preaching of the gospel.”⁶*
- (2) *“Second, the “missions as social transformation” reading of Luke 4 assumes too much about the economic aspect of “the poor”⁷*

For example, later in chapter 6 of Luke’s gospel, in Luke’s record of the Sermon on the Mount, he records Jesus saying,

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

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† Luke 6:20—“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

Thus, in both Luke 4 and Luke 6, we now need to ask, “Who are the poor?” Using scripture to interpret scripture, we turn to Matthew’s gospel and his record of the Sermon on the Mount, where we read,

† Matthew 5:3—“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

So then, we can conclude that Jesus is saying,

*Blessed are those who come to realize that they are Spiritually BANKRUPT.
Blessed are those who are given eyes to see that they have no spiritual capital
whereby they may purchase their citizenship in the Kingdom of heaven.*

And in Luke 4, Jesus isn’t saying he came to eliminate poverty; he’s saying that he came to proclaim the good news of the gospel to those who, by grace, realize their spiritual impoverishment.

So then, having considered these three passages that some put forth as the mission of the Church, we can conclude that these aren’t mission passages, and these passages don’t teach us that the mission of the Church is:

- Being a blessing to the nations
- Mediating God’s presence
- Or the transformation of society via the elimination of poverty or some other social issue.

Transition: To have a crystal-clear understanding of the mission of the Church, let’s turn now to those passages where our king gives us our mission,

The Great Commission Passages

We’re going to look at five passages together, beginning with,

✿ Matthew 28:18-20

Since Jesus possesses all authority, he alone has the right to assign the Church its mission. Anyone proposing an alternate mission does not possess the authority to do so.

Our authors then rightly note,

“Then we come to the four verbs in verses 19–20—one main verb and three supporting participles. The main verb is the imperative “make disciples.” Jesus’s followers are to make disciples of the nations (ta ethnē). As is now widely known, this is the word not for political

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nation-states but for people groups. Jesus envisions worshipers and followers present among every cultural-linguistic group on the planet.

The remaining participles, which can have the force of imperatives, flesh out what is entailed in the disciple-making process. We go, we baptize, and we teach."

So then, what does it mean to go and make disciples? Jesus explains that making disciples means: baptizing and teaching or, put another way, conversion (signified by baptism) and instruction. But then we might ask, what sort of instruction is in view here? Since Jesus said that we are to teach all that he has commanded, does that mean we need only offer instruction on the red letters of the Bible? Not at all, the whole Bible is about Jesus, and his commands are found throughout scripture. Thus, the Church's mission is, at least in part, to teach the whole Bible to God's people.

And how long will this mission last? Jesus tells us...till the end of the age. Our authors say, *"Such a far-reaching guarantee would not have been necessary if Jesus envisioned the apostles fulfilling the Great Commission. But a promise to the end of the age makes perfect sense if the work of mission also continues to the end of this age. Jesus's promise extends to the end of the age just as his commission does."⁸*

Transition: Now, having looked at the Great Commission in Matthew, let's turn to Mark. In Mark 16:15, Jesus says,

† Mark 16:15—"Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation."

But since there is much debate as to whether verses 9-20 were actually written by Mark, we'll consider, instead, two other passages from Mark that speak directly to the Church's mission.

✿ **Mark 13:10, 14:9**

About these verses, our authors say,

*"We see in these texts not only a prediction that the gospel **will** be proclaimed in the whole world, but a summons that it **must**."⁹*

Let's turn now to Luke's

✿ **Luke 24:44-49**

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

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“Luke, like Matthew, bases the command in divine authority. But whereas the authority in Matthew 28 was Jesus’s authority given to him, here the authority is rooted in the Scriptures. The disciples go forth into the world because Christ has all authority and because the events they will proclaim are the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy and foreshadowing.”

“Moreover, the command to “go and make disciples” in Matthew is stated here in terms of the disciples’ own role in that task: “You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:48). The task set before them by their Lord is to bear witness to Jesus, that is, to proclaim the good news about him. Once again, of course, the disciples do not bear witness by their own power. The Spirit will clothe them with power from on high.

Finally, we see that Jesus makes explicit that this proclamation includes the good news concerning repentance and forgiveness of sin. All this was implied in “baptizing them” in Matthew 28:19, but now it is brought to the forefront.

In summary, the Great Commission in Luke’s Gospel consists in bearing Spirit-empowered witness to the events of Christ’s death and resurrection and calling all nations to repentance for the forgiveness of sins.¹⁰”

Transition: Staying in Luke’s writings, let’s next consider,

✿ Acts 1:8

Our authors say,

“The book of Acts is especially important because in it we can actually see the scope and nature of the earliest Christian mission. If you are looking for a picture of the early church giving itself to creation care, plans for societal renewal, and strategies to serve the community in Jesus’s name, you won’t find them in Acts. But if you are looking for preaching, teaching, and the centrality of the Word, this is your book. The story of Acts is the story of the earliest Christians’ efforts to carry out the commission given them in Acts 1:8.”

And, lest we conclude that the Great Commission was only for the Apostles, the book of Acts ends much as it started. It tells us about how Paul proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom and taught about Jesus with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:31). These words, which record the end of Paul’s days, function as something of a handoff. They say to the reader, “it’s your turn now.” Keep on bearing witness to Jesus all over the world and do it with all boldness, knowing that, by the powerful grace of God, nothing can stop the spread of the gospel, and nothing can stop the Church from fulfilling its mission!

Transition: Finally, let’s look now at John’s gospel,

¹⁰ Ibid

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✿ John 20:21

Let's briefly consider three points of interest in this commission. First, ¹¹

(1) Peace

In session 8, we will dive into this concept. We'll study the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, and we'll discuss how it is often a source of missional confusion. But for now, we'll simply state that the peace given to us is not societal renewal or the promise of a persecution-free, stress-free life. Rather, the peace that Jesus gives us is that, in him, we are forgiven and reconciled to God and united to one another.

(2) The Sending that Matters most

Here, our authors say,

"Jesus's being sent is prior to Jesus's sending. In other words, the sending of Jesus happened first and is more central. As we said earlier, Christian mission is first of all Christ's mission in the world. As we will argue shortly, our mission is not identical with Christ's earthly work. Even less do we think we must complete what the Son somehow failed to accomplish. Nevertheless, in a real way the Son is continuing to do through us what he began to say and do in his earthly ministry (Acts 1:1).¹²"

Transition: This introduces our third point of interest in John's commission text,

(3) Jesus' Mission as Model

Our authors say,

"Jesus's mission is in some ways a model for our mission. But this invites the question, in what ways? How does the exalted Christ carry out his mission through us? "Is it by empowering us to do what he did and to continue his incarnational presence on the earth? Or is it by empowering us to bear witness to all that he taught and accomplished?"

It is very popular to assume that missions is always incarnational. And of course on one level it is. We go and live among the people. We try to emulate the humility and sacrifice of Christ (Phil. 2:5–11). But incarnationalism in missions often means more than this. It means that we model our ministry on Jesus's "ministry. For John Stott, and many others after him, this means the mission of the church is service. "Therefore," says Stott, "our mission, like his, is to be one of service." Evangelism and social action, therefore, are full partners in Christian mission. Since the most crucial form of the Great Commission is the

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

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one we see in John (argues Stott), the simplest way to sum up the missionary enterprise is this: “We are sent into the world, like Jesus, to serve.”

Stott’s reading of John 20:31 has been very influential. There are, however, two problems.

First, it can be misleading to summarize Jesus’s mission as one of service. There’s no problem with this formulation if we mean “serve” in the Mark 10:45 sense of the word, that Jesus “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” But Stott means more than this. He means that Jesus’s mission was to meet human need, whether spiritual or physical.”

But it is misleading to contend that Jesus’s ministry focused on serving... it simply was not Jesus’s driving ambition to heal the sick and meet the needs of the poor, as much as he cared for them. He was sent into the world to save people from condemnation (John 3:17), that he might be lifted up so believers could have eternal life (3:14–15). He was sent by the Father so that whoever feeds on him might live forever (6:57–58).

Don’t miss this fact: there is not a single example of Jesus going into a town with the stated purpose of healing or casting out demons. He never ventured out on a healing and exorcism tour. He certainly did a lot of this along the way. He was moved with pity at human need (Mark 8:2). But the reason he “came out” was “that [he] may preach” (1:38).

Second, it is unwise to assume that because we are sent as Jesus was sent, we have the exact same mission he had. We must protect the absolute uniqueness of what Jesus came to do... We cannot re-embodiment Christ’s incarnational ministry any more than we can repeat his atonement. Our role is to **bear witness** to what Christ has already done. We are not new incarnations of Christ but his **representatives** offering life in his name, proclaiming his gospel, imploring others to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20). This is how the exalted Christ carries out his mission through us.¹³”

Now, having looked at alternative mission passages, AND the Great Commission passages in the gospels and Acts, let’s try,

Putting it All Together

Our authors state,

“We can summarize this mission by answering seven questions:

Who? Jesus gave this mission verbally to the first disciples, but it did not end with their deaths. As Lord of the church, he expects his followers to carry out this mission “to the end of the age.” Their mission is our mission.

¹³ Ibid

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Why? *The authority for our mission comes from Christ. It is rooted in the Word of God and based on the Father's sending of the Son. We are sent because Christ was sent, and we go in his name, under his authority.*

What? *The mission consists of preaching and teaching, announcing and testifying, making disciples and bearing witness. The mission focuses on the initial and continuing verbal declaration of the gospel, the announcement of Christ's death and resurrection and the life found in him when we repent and believe.*

Where? *We are sent into the world. Our strategy is no longer "come and see" but "go and tell." The message of salvation is for every people group—near, far, and everywhere in between.*

How? *We go out in the power of the Holy Spirit and in submission to the Son just as he was obedient to and dependent upon the Father.*

When? *The mission began at Pentecost when the disciples were clothed with power from on high with the presence of the Holy Spirit. The mission will last as long as the promise of Christ's presence lasts; that is, to the end of the age.*

To whom? *The church should make disciples of the nations. We must go to every people group, proclaiming the good news to the ends of the earth.¹⁴*

Thus, as we close, we see that the Church's

"mission is a specific set of things Jesus has sent his church into the world to accomplish and is significantly narrower than "everything God commands." That's not to say that our broader obligations aren't important. They are! Jesus and the apostles command us to parent our children well, to be loving husbands and wives, to do good to all people, and many other things. Jesus even tells us in the Great Commission itself (as Matthew records it) to teach people "to observe all that I have commanded you." But that doesn't mean that everything we do in obedience to Christ should be understood as part of the church's mission. The mission Jesus gave the church is more specific than that. And that, in turn, doesn't mean that other commands Jesus gives us are unimportant. It means that its Lord has given the church a, and teaching people to obey Christ's commands is a nonnegotiable part of that mission. We go, we proclaim, we baptize, and we teach—all to the end of making lifelong, die-hard disciples of Jesus Christ who obey everything he commanded."

So, here is a one-sentence answer to the question, "What is the mission of the Church?"

"The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they

¹⁴ Ibid

The Mission of the Church: *What Are We Sent Into the World to Do? might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.¹⁵*

¹⁵ Ibid