

The Mission of the Church: A Common Word in Need of a Definition

Introduction

Good morning brothers and sisters. Over the next ten weeks, we will strive to give a thoroughly Biblical answer to a rather important question: **What is the mission of the Church?**

Our course is based on, and will quote extensively from, a fantastic book written by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert entitled, *What is the Mission of the Church?*

Now, some of you might be thinking, "Is this course even necessary? Don't we all know what our mission is?" The question before us might sound like an easy one, we might assume that we all know the answer, but DeYoung and Gilbert point out that,

"The question is deceptively complex and potentially divisive. For starters, what do we even mean by mission? And if that can be settled, we then face more difficult questions. Is the mission of the church discipleship or good deeds or both? Is the mission of the church the same as the mission of God? Is the mission of the church distinct from the responsibilities of individual Christians? Is the mission of the church a continuation of the mission of Jesus? If so, what was his mission anyway?

Related to these questions are others: What should be the church's role in pursuing social justice? Are we right to even use that phrase, and what do we mean by it? Does God expect the church to change the world, to be about the work of transforming its social structures? What about the kingdom? How do we build the kingdom of God? Or are we even capable of building the kingdom? How does the "kingdom relate to the gospel? How does the gospel relate to the whole story line of the Bible? And how does all of this relate to mission?"¹

And we could also ask,

- Does every church have the same mission?
- Are we working on one part of the mission while other churches are working on another part of the mission?
- Does the mission even have parts?

So, you see, this can become a bit of a quagmire. To get us through the quagmire, let's start with the question,

What is Mission?

DeYoung and Gilbert note that,

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

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“Before going any further in answering the question posed in this book’s title, we should acknowledge the difficulty in the question itself. A big part of the problem in defining the mission of the church is defining the word mission. Because mission is not a biblical word like covenant or justification or gospel, determining its meaning for believers is particularly difficult.”²

That said, most of us know that Trinity isn’t a biblical word, but it is most certainly a biblical reality. Inerrancy isn’t a biblical word either, yet we all know that it is critical to our understanding of scripture. Like these other extra-biblical terms, it is wise, perhaps even critical that we all agree on what we mean when we use the term mission. After all, we send people on mission trips, we speak of our mission field, and our own constitution states that part of our purpose as a church is to “have a vital part in missions here and abroad.”³ Truly, it would behoove us to have a clear definition of “mission.”

Yet, over the past several decades, the term mission has broadened significantly. Our authors say,

“It used to be that mission referred pretty narrowly to Christians sent out cross-culturally to convert non-Christians and plant churches. But now mission is understood much more broadly. Environmental stewardship is mission. Community renewal is mission. Blessing our neighbors is mission. Mission is here. Mission is there. Mission is everywhere. We are all missionaries.”⁴

To make things worse, you’ve got the cool kids in the Acts 29 network and other young, restless, and reformed types using the term “missional,” which means who knows what? We’ll discuss this more in a moment.

Yet, establishing a useful definition of mission is not a lost cause. For you see,

“At its most basic, the term mission implies two things to most people: (1) being sent and (2) being given a task. The first point makes sense because mission comes from a Latin word (mittere) meaning “to send.” The second point is implied in the first. When sent on a mission, we are sent to do something—and not everything, either, but rather we are given a particular assignment.”⁵

John Stott applied this helpfully to the Church by saying,

² Ibid

³ RCF Constitution, Article II, Section A.

⁴ Excerpt From *What Is the Mission of the Church?* Kevin DeYoung, Greg Gilbert This material may be protected by copyright.

⁵ Ibid

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“mission is not everything the church does, but rather describes “everything the church is sent into the world to do.”⁶”

And that will be our working definition of mission.

Mission isn't everything the church does, nor is it everything that Jesus commanded Christians to do. Mission is what the Church was sent into the world to accomplish.

A Correction to the Correction

A moment ago, I told you we would further discuss the cool kids in the Acts 29 network and the young, restless, and reformed who love to brandish the vague and unclear term “missional.” Desiring to function as a helpful correction to those who would neglect their devotion to good works because good works aren’t “mission,” this zealous bunch has broadened the definition of mission to include nearly everything. To them,

- ecological stewardship is mission
- helping the poor is mission
- building hospitals is mission
- racial reconciliation is mission
- economic justice (whatever that means) is mission
- practical job training is mission, and on and on it goes

This correction is, in many cases, helpful and needed. Yet, their correction needs loving correction. To this end, our authors lay out three objections/concerns. First, they say,

(1) “ We are concerned that good behaviors are sometimes commended but in the wrong categories.

For example, many good deeds are promoted under the term social justice, when we think “loving your neighbor” is often a better category. Or, folks will talk about transforming the world, when we think “faithful presence” is a better way to describe what we are trying to do and actually can do in the world. Or, sometimes well-meaning Christians talk about “building the kingdom” or “building for the kingdom,” when [in the bible] the verbs associated with the kingdom are almost always passive (enter, receive, inherit). We’d do better to speak of living as citizens of the kingdom, rather than telling our people that they build the kingdom.

⁶ Ibid

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- (2) **We are concerned that in our newfound missional zeal we sometimes put hard “oughts” on Christians where there should be inviting “cans.”**

You ought to do something about human trafficking. You ought to do something about AIDS. You ought to do something about lack of good public education. When you say “ought,” you imply that if the church does not tackle these problems, we are being disobedient. We think it would be better to invite individual Christians, in keeping with their gifts and calling, to try to solve these problems rather than indicting the church for “not caring.”

- (3) **We are concerned that in all our passion for renewing the city or tackling social problems, we run the risk of marginalizing the one thing that makes Christian mission Christian: namely, making disciples of Jesus Christ.⁷**

Now, having stated their objections and concerns, the authors present a list of affirmations and denials to clarify their aim. I’ll share these with you since they will also clarify our aim in this course. They say,

“We do not want:

- *Christians to be indifferent toward the suffering around them and around the world*
- *Christians to think evangelism is the only thing in life that really counts*
- *Christians who risk their lives and sacrifice for the poor and disadvantaged to think their work is in any way suspect or is praiseworthy only if it results in conversions*
- *Christians to retreat into holy huddles or be blissfully unconcerned to work hard and make an impact in whatever field or career to which the Lord calls them*
- *Christians to stop dreaming of creative, courageous ways to love their neighbors and impact their cities”*

“We want to underline all those bullet points, star them, mark them with highlighter, and write them on our hearts. It’s far too easy to get our heads right, but our hearts and hands wrong.

Having said all that, however, here’s some of,

What we do want:

- *“We want to make sure the gospel—the good news of Christ’s death for sin and subsequent resurrection—is of first importance in our churches.*
- *We want Christians freed from false guilt—from thinking the church is either responsible for most problems in the world or responsible to fix these problems.*

⁷ Ibid

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- We want the crystal-clear and utterly unique task of the church—making disciples of Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father—put front and center, not lost in a flurry of commendable concerns.
- We want Christians to understand the story line of the Bible and think more critically about specific texts within this story.
- We want the church to remember that there is something worse than death and something better than human flourishing. If we hope only for renewed cities and restored bodies in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied.⁸

Clarifications offered,

Back to the Original Question

Our authors continue, saying,

“So what is the mission of the church? We’ve kept you in suspense long enough. In short, we will argue that the mission of the church is summarized in the Great Commission passages—the climactic marching orders Jesus issues at the ends of the Gospels and at the beginning of Acts. We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling⁹”

Now, what exactly does that mean? For both a comprehensive and concise answer to that question, you’ll have to wait until next week.

For now, I’ll close by laying out the rest of the course for you which follows the chapters in DeYoung’s and Gilbert’s book. And they lay out the rest of our course for us by saying,

“in the next chapter, looking both at the Great Commission passages themselves and at several other texts that are often suggested as alternative or additional commissions for the church. The next six chapters (part 2) explore a number of larger theological concepts that are always at issue in these discussions of mission. Chapter 3 asks what the main thrust of the Bible’s story line is and how that affects our understanding of the church’s mission. Chapter 4 seeks to understand the structure and content of the gospel message itself and asks whether the gospel of forgiveness of sins through Jesus is “too small.” Chapter 5 considers the Bible’s teaching on the kingdom of God and how we relate to it. Chapters 6 and 7 form a pair, exploring the idea of “social justice” and looking carefully at several biblical texts relating to justice. In chapter 8 we think about God’s intention to remake the world, and consider what that means for the church’s activity in the world. Chapter 9 is our attempt to think practically

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

The Mission of the Church: *A Common Word in Need of a Definition* about what all this means. If the mission of the church is proclamation and disciple making, then what is the theological motivation for good deeds? And how might a local church think about what it ought to be doing? Finally, chapter 10 offers a concluding perspective and an encouragement to all of us to recommit ourselves to the great work our Lord has given us.¹⁰

And, one final word of clarification from our authors, helpfully, they say,

“One last word before we launch into things: We want to say again that we strongly support churches undertaking mercy ministries in their communities.”

“Though we do not believe that the mission of the church is to build the kingdom or to partner with God in remaking the world, this does not mean we are against cultural engagement. Our point is simply that we must understand these endeavors in the right theological categories and embrace them without sacrificing more explicit priorities. We should not cheapen good deeds by making them only a means to some other end (evangelism), but neither do we want to exaggerate our responsibility by thinking it is our duty to build the kingdom through our good deeds.”

As the church loves the world so loved by God, we will work to relieve suffering wherever we can, but especially eternal suffering.¹¹”

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid