

Continuing the Kingdom Mission of Jesus Today

Michael W. Goheen

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A New Understanding of Mission

When the words 'mission' or 'missions' or 'missionary' or 'mission field' are used in many Christian circles today the idea of *geographical expansion* still dominates. That is, mission or missions is primarily a geographical movement that proceeds in one direction from the Christian West to other parts of the world. It coincides with the course of Western Christianity's expansion around the world. A missionary is one who is an agent of this expansion; a mission field is a potential area outside the West where this expansion is being carried out. In my experience I would say this idea still dominates in many churches.

Yet there are many factors today that render this understanding of mission obsolete. Two factors are especially noteworthy. The first is the growth of the third world church, the traditional 'mission field.' Today about two-thirds of the world church exists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—the traditional mission field. Add to that the vitality of the third-world church and the fact that they now send out more cross-cultural missionaries than the West, and it is clear that reference to the third world as a mission field is outdated. The second factor is the demise of the Western church. According to David Barrett, perhaps the church's leading statistician, during the 1980s the Western church lost 7600 members per day.¹ Again adding the growing nominalism of Western churches, its capitulation in many ways to the secular-humanist worldview, and the decreasing interest in cross-cultural missions one might ask where the mission field really is!

While we can no longer speak of mission in the same way we must not discount the missionary movement that has dominated the 19th and 20th centuries. The concern to take the gospel to places where it has not yet been embraced dominated the modern missionary movement of this period, and this must remain central to the church's mission today. Nevertheless we must seek a new understanding of mission compatible with a church that exists in every country of the world.

Scripture as a Foundation for Mission

A new understanding of mission must be deeply rooted in Scripture. But the question of how the Bible should function as a foundation for mission is not an easy one. David Bosch has a helpful article that discusses the way the Bible has been used in the past and how it should be used in the future.² In the past there was an assumption that we already knew what mission was—a geographical expansionist and cross-cultural venture—and then we went to the Bible to find justification for that enterprise. As we mined the Bible, the Old Testament did not readily yield

¹ David Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia. A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World AD 1900-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1982), 7.

² David Bosch, Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission, in eds. James Phillips and Robert Coote, *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, (1993), 175-192.

its gold since geographical expansion did not easily fit God's redemptive work in and through Israel. In the New Testament there were many more texts—like the 'Great Commission' (Matthew 28:18-20)—yet these text were often isolated from the literary context and main storyline of the Bible. These various proof-texts were scattered around the Bible and the task was to discover them to bolster an already existing enterprise. Bosch goes on to suggests that either mission is central to the story of Scripture or not worth troubling oneself about. In fact, mission *is* central to the Biblical narrative; a proper telling of the Biblical story will uncover its fundamental missionary motif.

Israel's Call: Genesis 12.1-3 and Exodus 19.3-6

Against the backdrop of God's creation of the world as His kingdom and the rebellion of humankind, God sets out on the long historical road of redemption to reclaim the world as his kingdom and the lost as His people. The first chapters of Genesis (3-11) describe a period in which God gives his promise to all peoples and nations yet this promise is constantly threatened by sinful apostasy. Beginning with Abraham God embarks on a new path. He chooses one man, one family through whom He will accomplish His redemptive purposes.

God outlines his blueprint for redemptive history in the promise He gives to Abraham (Genesis 12.2-3). God's redemptive work will be carried out in two stages: 1) God will make Abraham into a great nation; 2) All the nations on earth will be blessed through him (cf. Genesis 18.18). God chooses Abraham and promises to make him into a great nation *so that* all nations might be blessed. Abraham's election is to be a channel of blessing to all nations. God's chosen people have a missionary identity from the outset.

Exactly how that nation formed from Abraham will be a blessing to all nations is not made clear at this point to Abraham. That comes about five hundred years later in God's call to Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19.3-6). Israel's missionary role is bound up in three names: treasured possession, priestly kingdom, and holy nation. Israel Perhaps it is in Israel's priesthood that we can best understand what Israel is called to be. Priests in the ancient near east were men set aside for the sacred purpose of ministering in the temple of the deity. This meant that they were to mediate the deity's favour to the people. Moreover, they were to be models of consecration and devotion to the deity. They were to be a pattern and example of a whole-hearted commitment to the deity. As priests held this position among their fellow countrymen so Israel is called to this position among the nations. That is, Israel is to be mediate God's blessing to the nations by being a model and picture of devotion and commitment to the Creator God. She is to be a light to the nations, a people whose attractive life drew the nations. Israel's mission is centripetal. So from the beginning the identity of God's covenant people are shaped by this call to be a channel of God's redemptive blessing to the nations. The remainder of the Old Testament is a commentary on how well Israel carries out this calling.

Israel's Failure and Prophetic Hope

The remainder of the Old Testament describes Israel's failure. Instead of being a holy nation and light to the nations, she is co-opted into the idolatrous cultures of the peoples around her. She is unfaithful to the covenant and the calling that God has given her at Sinai. Judges records for us Israel's failure as she is syncretistically absorbed into the idolatrous cultures of the Canaanites. According to the author of Judges, Israel desperately needs a king to enable her to

fulfill her calling to be a light to the nations (Judges 21.25). This cry for a king is first answered in David. However, God's redemptive purposes will not be fulfilled in David but by one of his sons: one of his descendants would rule over a universal and everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7.11-16). Under the gracious rule of one of David's descendants peoples from all the earth will experience the blessings given to Abraham and Israel. Yet before this things would only get worse. The book of Kings describes the decline of Israel under the leadership of unfaithful kings. Israel slides into exile under God's hand of covenant judgement.

Has God's plan to redeem the creation and the nations failed? The prophets offer an answer. Indeed, one of David's descendants will establish a worldwide and everlasting kingdom. The Spirit of God will be poured out in fullness on this Messiah equipping him to fulfill Israel's mission and accomplish God's mighty work of salvation and judgement on Israel and on the nations. He will establish a just and joyful rule over the earth in which the knowledge of God would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Israel will be renewed and draw the nations into this cosmic renewal. But this awaits a later time; it will be an end-time event—an object of eschatological hope.

During the intertestamental period this flame of hope for the coming reign of God ignited by the prophets is fanned into a raging inferno by the oppression and humiliation Israel suffered at the hands of foreign oppressors. By the time Jesus appears on the scene, Palestine is a seething cauldron of eschatological hope—a people longing for the kingdom of God.

In Jesus the Kingdom Comes

Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God has come (Mark 1:14, 15). Indeed the reason the Father sends the Son is to inaugurate and usher in the end-time kingdom. However, the kingdom does not come as expected. Israel expected an *immediate* inauguration of the kingdom in which the old age came to a close and the new age was ushered in. However, God's judgement does not fall; his salvation does not come in fullness. As we listen to the proclamation of Jesus we hear that the kingdom has *already* come but has *not yet* come in fullness. The final judgement and consummation is delayed. A time period begins to open up that the prophets had not foreseen. The salvation of the kingdom has arrived and all people can now experience a foretaste of it but the final judgement and final completion of the kingdom is put off to the future. This is the day of salvation: an opportunity for people to repent, believe the good news, and enter the kingdom of God. It is an era characterized by mission. A time opens up first for the mission of Jesus and then for the mission of God's people. Jesus will proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to Israel and then commission the church to continue that task to all nations. The gospel is to be preached to all nations then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

The parable of the great banquet elucidates the centrality of mission during this time period (Luke 14.15-24). Here a man prepares a great banquet—a common symbol for the kingdom of God in the prophets and intertestamental literature. When the chosen guests (the Jews) refuse to come, the conclusion of the banquet is put off while the servants are sent to invite all who will come to the banquet. In this parable, the present era of redemptive history is represented by the gathering of folk into the banquet.

The mission of Jesus is characterized by the following elements. 1) Jesus announces the kingdom with his words. The end-time reign of God has broken into history and this announcement calls all people to repent, believe the good news, and be converted to new life in the kingdom. 2) Jesus demonstrates the arrival of the reign of God with his deeds. His mighty

deeds or miracles picture the healing and liberation of the kingdom of God. His healing, boundary breaking compassion, his forgiveness, solidarity with the poor and marginalized, exorcism of demons all give a picture of the power of the coming order to renew and heal. 3) Jesus embodies the reign of God with his life. He lives in an Abba-communion with the Father, walks in the power of the Spirit, and lives a life of love, compassion, justice, joy, and righteousness. 4) He prays for God's kingdom to come more fully. 5) Jesus suffers for the sake of the kingdom. His life, deeds, and words are a prophetic challenge to the old order; consequently he bears the brunt of that challenge in suffering. 6) He forms an end-time community. That community is to embody the life of God's kingdom and participate in the mission of Jesus. Jesus spends much time instructing this community on life in God's kingdom.

The kingdom mission of Jesus culminates in the central events of history—the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the death of Jesus God gains a victory over sin, evil, and all its consequences. In the resurrection a new world, the kingdom of God dawns. Jesus opens the door to the inbreaking kingdom and invites others to follow. With the outpouring of the Spirit, people begin to share in the new life of the resurrection.

Continuing the Kingdom Mission of Jesus Until the End

This newly gathered community shares in the new life of the Spirit and is now called to continue the mission of Jesus. Jesus gathers the nucleus of the new community after his resurrection and says to them: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). As Jesus embodied the life of the kingdom in a knowledge of God, a life of love, justice, joy, and compassion, so the people of God are to embody that new life as a preview of the kingdom. As Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom and called people to repent, believe this good news, and be converted so the church is called to do the same. As Jesus demonstrated the healing power and love of the kingdom in its deeds, so the church is called to selflessly serve others with deeds of mercy and justice. As Jesus' mission proceeded from a life of prayer in which he cried out for the coming of the kingdom, so the life of the church is to proceed in the same manner. As Jesus suffered for the sake of the kingdom when he challenged the old order, so the church must be willing to prophetically challenge the status quo, the old order and bear the suffering that will come. As Jesus labored to shape a community that would embody the life of the kingdom and continue his mission, so we are called to use our gifts to build up a community that will faithfully continue the life of the kingdom. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

This is our place in the story. We live between the incarnation and return of Jesus. This period is characterized by mission. We are called as a community of the kingdom to take up the task given to Abraham and Israel, and to continue the mission of Jesus to witness to the kingdom among the nations. Acts 1:6 makes this clear. The disciples like every other Jew expected the kingdom to come immediately with the advent of the Messiah. When Jesus rises from the dead they believe the final resurrection has begun. Surely now the kingdom is to come in fullness, right? The disciples ask the obvious question: “Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” His answer is that it is not for them to know when this will be done. The final judgement and consummation is held off precisely so that the good news of the kingdom can be communicated in life, word, and deed by Jesus' newly formed community. This witness is like a movie preview. A movie preview is actual footage of coming attractions. Two things from this illustration are important: it has actual footage in the present but it also points to the future seeking to draw the viewer to want to see it. The church is a preview of the coming kingdom;

footage in the present of the future kingdom. This defines her identity. Their task—our task—is to faithfully witness to that kingdom to the ends of the earth until the end comes.

The church at Antioch gives us a model of how this witness is to be carried out. In Antioch the church embodies an attractive life; they give evidence of the grace of God in their community (Acts 11.23; cf. Acts 2.42-47; 4.32-35). As a consequence a great number of people are drawn to the Lord (Acts 11.24). Their faithfulness at home leads to a vision to take the gospel to places where it has not yet been heard. Witnessing communities must be established throughout the Roman empire as had happened in Antioch. The church sets aside Paul and Barnabas to begin good-news communities in other places (Acts 13:1-2). The remainder of the book of Acts narrates Paul's missionary journeys. Much of the rest of the New Testament is made up of his letters to these communities calling them to be faithful.

Now is a time of gathering. Folk from all nations are being called to enter that end time kingdom and participate in its life until Jesus returns. When Christ returns God will complete that work of renewal of his whole creation and a people from all nations.

And so we continue Jesus' mission today. The Latin American scholar Hugo Echegaray has rightly said: "Jesus did not set up a rigid model for action but, rather, inspired his disciples to prolong the logic of his own action in a creative way amid the new and different historical circumstances in which the community would have to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in word and deed."³ Continuing that mission today does not mean a slavish imitation of Jesus but continuing his mission creatively in new and different historical situations.

Continuing Jesus' Mission Today

Mission can no longer be defined in terms of a cross-cultural movement from the Christian West to the non-Christian Third World. It is a matter of witness to the good news nearby and far away—wherever the church is found. It is not simply the sending of missionaries but the sending of whole church by Jesus. Two well-known slogans capture this: 1) mission is *in, to, and from* all six continents (in every continent we find a home-base and a mission field); and 2) mission is the communication of the whole gospel by the whole church to the whole person in the whole world.

How did Jesus intend this salvation to be communicated and made known throughout the world? It is interesting to contrast Jesus with Mohammed on this point; both believed their message was universally valid and was to be communicated to all people. Mohammed wrote a book: the way Allah's message was to be communicated to others was through the Koran. Jesus did not write a book; he formed a community and entrusted it with the message to embody and proclaim. God intends to communicate the good news to the peoples of the earth through communities formed in each place that embody the new life of the kingdom in that place. That is God's design. These communities manifest the good news in their corporate life together, and in their various callings across the whole spectrum of human life. All of life is mission in the sense that we are called to make known the good news of God's reign in Christ over the whole of life.

Mission begins at home. The church in each place is called to be a living incarnation of the life of Christ in each place. As the Contemporary Testimony puts it: "The Spirit thrusts God's people into worldwide mission. He impels young and old, men and women, to go next door and far away, into science and art, media and marketplace with the good news of God's

³Echegaray, Hugo, *The Practice of Jesus*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books (1980), 94.

grace” (32).

But mission must not end at home. A church filled with a missionary vision to live and bring good news in its own community will also lift up its eyes to the ends of the earth. Are there places in the world where there is no communal witness to the good news? Lesslie Newbigin makes a distinction between mission and missions that makes this clear. For him this was a crucial distinction. He fought a life and death battle to keep the ‘s’ on missions when he became editor of *The International Review of Missions*. What is this distinction and why is it so important?

We can say five things about the relationship between mission and missions: 1) The task of missions is narrower than mission. Mission is the whole calling of the church to witness to the gospel while missions is one part of that task. 2) Missions, also, are a necessary part of the task of the church. It is not the whole but essential. 3) The specific nature of missions is concerned with intentional activities to take the gospel in word and deed to places where the gospel is not known. 4) Missions is mission to the ends of the earth. That is, the ends of the earth is the ultimate horizon of the mission of the church. 5) Missions are finished when a church has been formed as an authentic witness to the gospel. Now mission begins. Like Paul who established a church, then moved on, saying, as it were, “You are now the mission in this place,” so missions must do the same today.

This means that not all activities the church undertakes in another country should be termed missions. For example, theological education in Africa (where the majority of the population is Christian) would not be missions in this definition. Indeed much that goes by the name missions today is not missions; rather it is cross-cultural partnership. This is not to diminish the importance of cross-cultural partnership. Cross-cultural work highlights the universal nature of the gospel with a community that transcends cultural and national boundaries. Moreover, different churches have different gifts and resources that can be contributed to the ongoing mission of the church all over the world. Further, crossing cultural boundaries opens up a marvellous opportunity for mutual enrichment and critique.

So cross-cultural work that is not missions is important. But why is there an urgent need to protect missions—activities that seek to establish a witness to the gospel in places where there is none or where it is weak—as one part of the church’s mission? Why did Newbigin struggle so hard for this distinction? The reason is what Bryant Myers rightly calls the disproportionate allocation of cross-cultural resources a “scandal.”⁴ 90% of all money and personnel given for cross-cultural work are allocated to areas of the world where there is a Christian church and to building up already existing churches. 1.2% of all cross-cultural resources are designated for the 1.1 billion in the least evangelized parts of the world. If the gospel is to be taken to places where it is not yet known we must hold up this task and not allow it to be submerged into the broader (and, of course, necessary and legitimate) cross-cultural work of the church.

Much could be said about missions in a new day. 1) There remains urgent need for missions (e.g., 16 of 26 countries in Asia have less than 1% Christian; 10/40 Window presents and urgent need; etc.). 2) The geographical frontier remains important it can no longer be the only frontier (unreached peoples; cities as new frontiers; etc.). 3) With the church in every part of the world and enormous growth of third world missionaries, there is a need for multidirectional missions and partnership. 4) There is a need for new structures that engender interdependence, multi-lateral relationships and missionary advance in areas where gospel is not known. 5) There

⁴ Bryant Myers, *The New Context of World Mission*, Monrovia: MARC (1996), 55, see also page 48.

is a need for new initiatives, methods and practices in a changing world (short-term service; tentmakers; ecumenical order of missionaries?; etc.).

Where does short-term work fit into the church's mission today? Two things stand out immediately when considering short-term cross-cultural projects. The first is the dramatic growth of short-term work in the past two or three decades. The second is passionate debate over the benefits and drawbacks of this new trend. There are a long a list of both! Those who organize and send short-term teams, and those who go would do well to carefully consider these issues. Good intentions are not enough! (One could start by reading some of the articles on the following website: <http://www.mislinks.org/practical/shterm.htm>). It is necessary to analyze all new methods and practices in the light of a Biblical view of mission. Do these new initiatives contribute to and are they faithful to the continuing mission of Jesus?

In considering the place of short-term projects in the Biblical perspective of this chapter, two points can be made. 1) Most short-term projects are not missions; they are cross-cultural partnership. Simply removing the word 'mission' from their description, and instead calling them 'projects' may help to get us out of a colonial mindset on mission. 2) All cross-cultural work must aim to establish, build up, or contribute to faithful witnessing communities in every location. God's design is to make known the good news through communities established in every place. Short-term projects may not by-pass the local church who bears responsibility for witness in that place but work with it.