

# The Role and Identity of the Church in the Biblical Story: Missional By Its Very Nature

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Bingham Conference 2008, McMaster Divinity School

## Introduction

Ecclesiology or the doctrine of the church has become a central issue in theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Many factors have contributed to this renewed interest in ecclesiology<sup>1</sup> but perhaps none is as important as the new missionary situation in which European and North American churches find themselves. In this new missionary situation the rich resources of the church's missionary tradition which have grappled with the church's calling in cross-cultural settings hold much promise for the renewal of ecclesiology.

German theologian Jurgen Moltmann believes that "today one of the strongest impulses towards the renewal of the theological concept of the church comes from the theology of mission."<sup>2</sup> According to Moltmann Western ecclesiologies were formulated in the context of a Christianized culture. European churches were established churches that lacked a missionary self-understanding because they found their identity as part of a larger complex called the *corpus Christianum* or the Christian West. Today that Christian West is disintegrating, both culturally and geographically, and the Western church finds itself in a new missionary situation.

Consequently, a new context is needed for ecclesiology. Here is where Moltmann sees the importance of missionary theology. The new context is what God is doing in world history. God's work in history is best described in terms of the *missio Dei*. The church discovers its place and function within this story of redemptive work of the Triune God in the world. The Father sends the Son and the Son sends the church in the power of the Spirit. As Moltmann puts it: "If the church sees itself to be sent in the same framework as the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, major factors stimulating renewed reflection on the church are the ecumenical movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vatican II, the burgeoning worldwide Pentecostal movement, the emergence of Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America and African Initiated Churches in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 7.

then it also sees itself in the framework of God's history with the world *and discovers its place and function within this history.*"<sup>3</sup> Mission, then, is no longer simply one of the activities of the church; rather it defines the church's existence. "What we have to learn", says Moltmann, "is not that the church 'has' a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own church. Mission does not come from the church; it is from mission and in the light of mission that the church has to be understood."<sup>4</sup>

Understanding the calling of the church in the context of God's mission leads not simply to a fresh look at our mission in the world but to a whole re-evaluation of the nature and ministry of the church, and its role in God's redemptive purpose. In fact, the Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof believes that what is needed is nothing less than a whole reformulation of our entire ecclesiology, from the standpoint of mission.<sup>5</sup>

A good start has been made along these lines in the last half century. However, the church in the West is still a long way from thinking of itself as a missional community. What Moltmann says about European churches is equally valid for the churches in North America: "Yet up to now the European churches have found it hard to discover Europe as a missionary field or to see themselves as missionary churches."<sup>6</sup> This essay joins with the work of others in an attempt to push the North American church toward a fuller missional self-understanding.

There remains much room for good exegetical, theological, historical, and contextual work to be done on this topic. Unfortunately, the concept of missional church is often considered to be trendy, the latest theological flavor of the month that remains on the margins of 'real theology.' And some books on missional church would seem to confirm such a view. But this is a mistake. The problem is that mission is viewed as an activity or strategy (maybe marginal or maybe very important) that can be treated after ecclesiology. But the Roman Catholic scholar John Power is correct when he says that mission is not a "fringe activity of a strongly established Church, a pious cause that [may] be attended to when the home fires [are] first brightly burning. He continues by quoting Jesus in John 20:21: ' . . . so am I sending you'—the very word 'send' means mission and so the whole Church is on mission, and cannot be otherwise. . . . Missionary activity is not so much the

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<sup>3</sup> Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 11. Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith* (trans. Sierd Woudstra; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company), 410.

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 8.

work of the Church as simply the Church at work.”<sup>7</sup> To miss the missional nature of the church is to fundamentally misunderstand what the church is. Emil Brunner is correct when he says that “the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.”<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the New Testament, church and mission belonged together: “Because the church and mission belong together from the beginning, a church without mission or a mission without the church are both contradictions. Such things do exist, but only as pseudostructures.”<sup>9</sup> Mission ought to be central to all theological endeavors if they are faithful to Scripture and this certainly includes ecclesiology.

One could treat missional ecclesiology from a number of theological angles—biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology, and practical theology. Within each of these areas many fruitful approaches are possible. In fact, a variety of perspectives will open up fresh insights into a missional ecclesiology. But in this essay I will approach ecclesiology from the standpoint of biblical theology. Wilbert Shenk is right when he says that “the Bible does not offer a definition of the church or provide us with a doctrinal basis for understanding it. Instead, the Bible relies on images and narrative to disclose the meaning of the church.”<sup>10</sup> While I will only make brief reference to the images of the church, this essay will trace the role and identity of God’s people in the narrative of the Bible.

### **What is Meant by Missional Ecclesiology?**

The dimensions of a missional ecclesiology will emerge as the role of God’s people is traced through the biblical story. But it might be helpful to say up front a few words about what is meant by the adjective ‘missional’ when it is used to describe ecclesiology. A couple of definitions by the British biblical scholar Christopher Wright can clarify the meaning of mission: (1) “*Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of the world for the redemption of God’s creation.*”<sup>11</sup> Mission is first of all what God is doing for the sake of the

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<sup>7</sup> John Power, *Mission Theology Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1971), 41-42.

<sup>8</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), 108.

<sup>9</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 55

<sup>10</sup> Wilbert Shenk, “Foreword”, in John Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 22-23. Emphasis his.

world; it is his long-term purpose to renew the creation. The church is missional by its very nature in that it is taken up into this work for the sake of the world. (2) “God’s mission involves God’s people living in God’s way in the sight of the nations.”<sup>12</sup> This second definition gives us a sense of how God will employ his people in his mission. He will make them a display people who embody God’s original creational intention for human life. He will come and dwell among them and give them his *torah* to direct them to live in the way of the Lord. As such his people will be an attractive sign before all nations of the goal toward which God is moving—the restoration of the creation and human life from the corruption of sin. So, contrary to widespread definitions of mission, Israel’s mission was, in short, “to *be* something, not go somewhere.”<sup>13</sup>

Two orientations define the identity and role of God’s people: ‘Chosen by God’ and ‘for the Sake of the World.’ The church does not exist for itself. Rather, it exists for the sake of God’s mission and for the sake of others toward whom God’s mission is directed. The church is like an ellipse with two fixed focal points that define its existence. The first fixed focal point is ‘chosen by God’: the church’s role and identity can only be understood in terms of being chosen to play a role in God’s mission. The second focal point is ‘for the sake of the world’: God’s purpose is to bring his salvation to all nations, indeed the whole creation. The church exists as the place where God begins his work of restoration and then as a channel whereby that salvation might flow to all peoples.

### **Discontinuity and Continuity of the Church with Old Testament Israel**

The Bible tells the true story of the world.<sup>14</sup> To properly understand the church we must enquire into the role and identity of God’s people in the story of the Bible. Our starting point is the observation that, on the one hand, with the work of Christ and the coming of the Spirit something new has take place in history: in the church a new community has emerged in God’s plan. Yet, on the other hand, this community called ‘church’ is the continuation of a people who have existed for several thousand years. Paul, in his reflection on the gospel and the Old Testament people of Israel,

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<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 470.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, “Old Testament Perspectives on Mission”, *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (ed. John Corrie; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 271.

<sup>14</sup> See Michael W. Goheen, “The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story”, *Theology Today*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (January 2008), 469-483.

makes this clear with a vivid image. Those who believe the gospel, Gentiles who are taken up into God's saving work in Christ, are like branches that are grafted onto a tree that has been growing for some time (Romans 11:17-24). They join and become part of an ancient community, and enter into a long story.

Gerhard Lohfink's observation concerning the disciple-community that Jesus formed is helpful to clarify the approach we will take: "After a history of more than a millenium [sic], the people of God could neither be founded nor established, but only *gathered* and *restored*."<sup>15</sup> The church is not something that is founded or established for the first time with Jesus and the Spirit. Ecclesiology may not begin with the New Testament. Rather, it is a covenant community that has been gathered and restored to its original calling. Thus we must first probe the nature of God's people in the Old Testament. Along this line Johannes Blauw rightly notes:

When we speak about the Church as 'the people of God in the world' and enquire into the real nature of this Church, we cannot avoid speaking about the *roots* of the Church which are to be found in the Old Testament idea of Israel as the people of the covenant. So the question of the *missionary* nature of the Church, that is, the real relationship between the people of God and the world, cannot be solved until we have investigated the relation between Israel and the nations of the earth.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, to properly understand the church we must *first* understand the role and identity of God's people in the Old Testament. But *then* we must attend to what is new in this community we call 'ekklesia' or church. What difference has the coming of Jesus and the outpouring of his Spirit had on the community of God's people? What do the images employed by New Testament authors to describe the church divulge about its new identity? That is how we will proceed in this brief essay. What will emerge is that both the continuity and the discontinuity of the church with Israel make clear the missional identity of the people of God.

## **Two Texts—One Hermeneutical Lens for Reading the Biblical Story**

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<sup>15</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of the Christian Faith* (trans. John P. Galvin; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 71.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes Blauw, "The Mission of the People of God", in *The Missionary Church in East and West*, eds. Charles C. West and David M. Paton (London: SCM Press, 1959), 91.

There are two texts in the Old Testament which together offer a helpful hermeneutical lens to view the role and identity of God's people in the biblical story. In Genesis 12:2-3, God outlines his redemptive plan to Abraham in a promise. God will make Abraham into a great nation, and through that nation bring blessing to all nations. In Exodus 19:3-6, God spells out the role this nation will play in bringing blessing to the nations. The remainder of the Old Testament traces a story of how faithful Israel is to their calling.

*Genesis 12:2-3: Blessed to Be a Blessing*

“I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2-3 TNIV)

This “stupendous utterance”<sup>17</sup> made to Abraham in Genesis 12 is set in the context of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Indeed, those first chapters pose the problem to which the promise to Abraham is the solution. These chapters are universal in scope: God is the creator the heavens and the earth, and is Lord of all the nations. Sin pollutes all cultures of humankind and likewise God's judgment on sin is universal. In reference to Genesis 3-11 Gerhard Von Rad speaks of the author's “great hamartiology”, his focus on sin, its effects, consequences and God's judgment. Now, in Genesis 12 the biblical story narrows from its universal scope to a particular focus; from all nations God centers his attention on one man and one nation. The bad news of sin, alienation, and curse on

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwist,” (trans. Wilbur A. Benware) *Interpretation* 20, 2 (1966), 140.

all nations is met with a promise of good news: God has chosen one man to bring blessing back to his creation and all peoples.

Paul Williamson speaks correctly of a “twofold purpose” in Genesis 12:1-3.<sup>18</sup> Abraham is first of all to be formed into a great nation and be a recipient of God’s covenantal blessing. The purpose is so that all nations on earth might be blessed. This final clause ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ is a “the principal statement of these three verses.” It is a “result clause” which indicates that the final goal of God’s election and blessing of Abraham is the salvation of the nations.<sup>19</sup> Thus the “*election of [Abraham and] Israel is fundamentally missional, not just soteriological. . . . God’s calling and election of Abraham was not merely so that he should be saved . . . It was rather, and more explicitly, that he and his people should be instruments through whom God would gather that multinational multitude that no man or woman can number. . . . it is first of all election into mission.*”<sup>20</sup>

We are not told precisely how Abraham will be a blessing to all nations. That will be given further clarification in Exodus 19:3-6. However, already in Genesis 18:18-19 we are given a clue. It will happen as Abraham and his family “keep the way of the Lord” and do “what is right and just.” Both phrases point to a life that lives in God’s way before the nations.

#### *Exodus 19:3-6: Priestly Kingdom and Holy Nation*

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the house of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites” (Ex. 19:3-6 TNIV).

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<sup>18</sup> Paul R. Williamson, “Covenant”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 145.

<sup>19</sup> William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Publishers, 1984), 64-65.

<sup>20</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 263-264.

The means by which God will bring blessing to the nations is given more detail in Exodus 19. These “programmatically” verses are the “lens through which one may view the entire Book of Exodus.”<sup>21</sup> This is significant for our subject of ecclesiology because the book of Exodus describes the birth and formation of God’s people. The book of Exodus is not a “literary or theological goulash” but rather has a “theological unity” that is reflected in its literary structure.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the literary structure has profound theological implications for the identity and role of God’s people in the biblical story.

The first eighteen chapters narrate the *redemption* of Israel from slavery in Egypt. For many of us, redemption is just one more word in a large biblical catalogue of theological concepts to describe salvation. However, here in Exodus it draws on a familiar cultural and social image. A redeemer was a family member who was responsible to recover family lives or goods that had fallen into bondage.<sup>23</sup> Redemption could involve the liberation of a relative from slavery and restoring them to their original family relationship (cf. Lev. 25:47-55). Here, as Redeemer, God acts to free his firstborn son from slavery to Pharaoh to restore him to his rightful place in God’s family (Ex. 4:22-23). This redemption of a son “contains the essence of the meaning of the entire exodus story.”<sup>24</sup> Since Pharaoh was considered to be an incarnation of the Egyptian god Re,<sup>25</sup> and since pagan religion shaped all of the political, social, and economic life of Egypt,<sup>26</sup> this redemption was a profoundly *religious* liberation. Israel was freed to serve the LORD in every area of their lives.

This perspective is strengthened by the fact that Egypt ruled their subject peoples with covenants. This made the Pharaoh the covenant lord over Israel. God breaks Pharaoh’s dominion and establishes his covenant Lordship over Israel.

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<sup>21</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “‘Because the Whole Earth is Mine’: Theme and Narrative in Exodus”, *Interpretation* 50, 3 (1996), 229.

<sup>22</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus*. Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), xxi.

<sup>23</sup> Proksch, ‘Luo’, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, Volume IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 266-268.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Magonet, “The Rhetoric of God: Exodus 6.2-8”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (1983), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Mason Curtis, *Man as the Image of God in Genesis in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1984; Reproduced Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1985), 86-96; J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 108-111.

<sup>26</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).



In the Exodus, the power of the suzerain is broken; the pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt, was defeated and therefore lost his right to be Israel's suzerain lord; the Lord conquered the pharaoh and therefore ruled as King over Israel (Exod. 15:18). As their deliverer, God had claimed the right to call for his people's obedient commitment to him in the covenant.<sup>27</sup>

In chapters 19-24 God establishes a covenant people. Covenants were common instruments employed by the Hittite and Egyptian world empires of Moses' day so it should not surprise us that God also employs the familiar notion of covenant to bind his people to himself.<sup>28</sup> But what made this such a suitable image? Peter Craigie offers an answer: "Like the other small nations that surrounded her, Israel was to be a vassal state, but not to Egypt or the Hittites; she owed her allegiance to God alone."<sup>29</sup>

But why had God—the Lord of all nations—liberated this one small nation? What role does God have for them to play? The answer is offered in Exodus 19:3-6. Here we find the "unique identity of the people of God."<sup>30</sup> And it will be this "special role" which will become a "lens through which Israel is viewed throughout the rest of the Bible."<sup>31</sup> God promised that Abraham would become a great nation that would bring blessing to the whole earth. The book of Exodus shows the formation of that nation, and specifically Exodus 19:3-6 tells us how Israel will accomplish that role.

Three terms are used to describe Israel in their identity and role in God's mission: treasured possession, priestly kingdom, and holy nation. We may summarize the significance of these labels in terms of Israel's call to mediate God's salvation to the nations as they lived before the nations a communal life that embodied God's design for human life. As Durham points out, Israel was to "be a display people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a

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<sup>27</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 83.

<sup>28</sup> The remarkable similarity between Old Testament covenants, especially in Exodus 19-24 and Deuteronomy, has been explored thoroughly for the last half decade in biblical scholarship. Cf., for example, George E. Mendenhall, "Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law", *Biblical Archaeologist* 17, 2 (1954): 26-46; Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17, 3 (1954): 49-76. It is much more debatable to suggest, as I intimate here, that the Pharaoh employed a covenant with Israel. Craigie offers evidence that vassal covenants were employed by Egypt to subject foreign labor groups within Egypt. This raises the real possibility that the Pharaoh would have been viewed by Israel as their covenant Lord (*Deuteronomy*, 23, 79-83).

<sup>29</sup> Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Jo Bailey Wells, *God's Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 34.

<sup>31</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, xiii.

people.”<sup>32</sup> As a holy nation Israel was to be “a societal model for the world”, a picture of what God intends for the whole world—human life under God’s authority.<sup>33</sup> Karl Barth describes Israel’s role with the metaphors of sign, light, and exemplary existence with universal significance for all nations.<sup>34</sup> The universal horizon of God’s action in choosing Israel and making them a priestly kingdom and holy nation is seen in the words “because the whole earth is mine” (v. 5).<sup>35</sup> All the nations belong to God and His choice of Israel is to call them back.

Israel was to live out God’s creational intentions for human life as a picture of the goal toward which God was moving—the renewal of all of human life. As such Israel’s life would be attractive. To use the later language of Isaiah, Israel was to be a light to the nations (Is. 42:6). Or to use the older language of missiology, Israel’s mission was centripetal: their life was to be attractive to draw the nations into covenant with God.

God’s people living in God’s way before the nations: this is how we have described mission. Thus we are not surprised that immediately upon the heels of this call the *torah* is given to guide Israel in living out their calling as a holy nation. This instruction, which would be significantly expanded in Deuteronomy before Israel entered the land, covered the full spectrum of human life. It pointed back to God’s creational intention for human life, now set contextually in this ancient near eastern setting. “The people of God in both testaments are called to be a light to the nations. But there can be no light to the nations that is not shining already in transformed lives of a holy people.”<sup>36</sup>

The final chapters of Exodus deal with the tabernacle and the story of Israel’s rebellion with the golden calf (Ex. 25-40). Together we see that the final brick in the building of God’s people in Exodus is God’s *presence*: As holy yet merciful and forgiving (Ex. 34:6-7), God comes to dwell in their midst. God will now carry out his mission to bring blessing to the nations as he lives among Israel as their divine king. Robert Martin-Achard calls attention to the importance of this for

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<sup>32</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, 263.

<sup>33</sup> Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Reconciliation IV*, 3, 1 (eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 56.

<sup>35</sup> Dumbrell rightly notes, contrary to the TNIV, that the phrase “because [ki] the whole earth is mine” should be understood “not as the assertion of the right to choose but as the *reasons* or *goal* for choice” (“The Prospect of the Unconditionality of the Sinaitic Covenant”, in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. A. Gileadi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 146. Cf. Fretheim translates this ‘because the whole earth is mine’ and notes that this links this text with the missional purpose of God first articulated to Abraham in Gen. 12:3 (“Because the Whole Earth is Mine”, 237).

<sup>36</sup> Wright, *Mission of God*, 358.

mission: “The evangelisation of the world is not primarily a matter of words or deeds: it is a matter of presence—the presence of the People of God in the midst of mankind and the presence of God in the midst of His people. And surely it is not in vain that the Old Testament reminds the Church of this truth.”<sup>37</sup>

The book of Exodus renders to us the identity and role of God’s people: they are a redeemed people (Ex. 1-18), a covenant people (Ex. 19-24), and a people in whom God dwells (Ex. 25-40). God’s work of forming a people finds its focus in the calling to be a priestly kingdom and holy nation before the watching eyes of the surrounding nations (Ex. 19:3-6). As Durham says of these verses: “This special role becomes a kind of lens through which Israel is viewed throughout the rest of the Bible. . . . It is this special role, indeed, that weaves the Book of Exodus so completely into the canonical fabric begun with Genesis and ended only with Revelation.”<sup>38</sup> Or, as Dumbrell puts it even more strongly: “The history of Israel from this point on is in reality merely a commentary upon the degree of fidelity with which Israel adhered to this Sinai-given vocation.”<sup>39</sup>

### **On Display in the Land: Mission as the Meaning of Israel’s History**

Thus Genesis 12:2-3 and Exodus 19:3-6 provide a hermeneutical lens through which to read the Old Testament, indeed the entire biblical story. Duane Christensen rightly observes that “‘Israel as a light to the nations’ is no peripheral theme within the canonical process. The nations are the matrix of Israel’s life, the *raison d’être* of her very existence.”<sup>40</sup> Chris Wright agrees: “God’s mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22. It is *God’s mission in relation to the nations*, arguably more than any other theme, that provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative.”<sup>41</sup>

In the Old Testament the ‘nations’ is a theological category:<sup>42</sup> they are viewed from the standpoint of their relation to God and to Israel, God’s covenant people. Negatively, the nations are

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel’s Mission to the World* (trans. John Penney Smith; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 79.

<sup>38</sup> Durham, *Exodus*, xxiii.

<sup>39</sup> Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant*, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Duane L. Christensen, “Nations”, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday 1992), 4:1037.

<sup>41</sup> C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 455. My emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Roger E. Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 67.

alienated from God and under his judgment. In their idolatry they also pose a threat to Israel. Positively, they belong to God by virtue of creation and are subject to his divine rule over all history. Ultimately, they are the object of God's redemptive activity in Israel.

Israel is placed on the land to shine as a light in the midst of and for the sake of the nations. They are placed at the crossroads of the nations and the navel of the universe<sup>43</sup> as an appealing display people visible to the surrounding peoples.<sup>44</sup> From this point on "Israel knew that it lived under constant surveillance of the then contemporary world."<sup>45</sup> Displayed on the land "Israel was visible to the nations." Indeed, the "life of God's people is always directed outward to the watching nations."<sup>46</sup>

However, we note an interesting phenomenon in the remainder of Old Testament history in the way Israel's story is told. Even though God's mission to the nations is "the meaning of Israel's history" yet "during the whole history of Israel this comes to realization little if at all."<sup>47</sup> I will not stop to probe this in detail but for the purpose of this essay the following two observations is important.

The focus of the Old Testament historical narratives is on the work of God in the midst of Israel to form them as a holy nation. There are two sides to this story. The first side is God's work of grace and judgment in their midst according to the covenant. The history of Israel is prophetic as it is narrated from the standpoint of God's covenant word in Deuteronomy. Israel's faithfulness brings blessing, prosperity, and life. Israel's unfaithfulness brings curse, destruction, and death. The second side is Israel's struggle with the idolatry of the nations that surround them.<sup>48</sup> Israel's mission is to be a holy nation in the midst of the nations. The pagan idolatry of the nations poses a constant

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<sup>43</sup>A number of Jewish and rabbinic texts situate Israel at the center of the world, as the navel of the universe. For example, Midrash Tanchuma, Perashat Kedoshim "Just as the navel lies at the center of Man's body, thus the Land of Israel is the navel of the world . . ." This centrality should be interpreted missionally. God puts Israel in the 'centre of the world' so that they might be seen by the nations.

<sup>44</sup>C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 467; Richard R. DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 43-44.

<sup>45</sup>J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, (trans. David Hugh Freeman; Phillipsburgh, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 14.

<sup>46</sup>C. Wright, *Mission of God*, 371.

<sup>47</sup>Blauw, *Missionary Nature of the Church*, 27. Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 30.

<sup>48</sup>This is a very important theme for mission. God's people must always embody the good news of God's renewing work in the midst of peoples who live out of other idolatrous worldviews and serve other gods. If God's people are faithful there will always be a 'missionary encounter' between the story of God's coming kingdom and the stories of these cultures.

threat and temptation to Israel. And, sadly, over and over again the light of Israel's life and worship is overcome by the darkness of this idolatry.

Israel's struggle with idolatry is an important thread in the story but this too must be understood in a missional context. Mission is God's people living in God's way in the sight of the nations. However, those nations are not neutral and passive observers so to speak. In their social and cultural lives they do not serve the LORD but idols. Thus Israel's calling was one of a "missionary encounter"<sup>49</sup> with the idolatrous cultures of the surrounding nations, a confrontation of the pagan gods with the claims of the living God. Israel's life was an alternative shaped by God's *torah* and as such was a light in the midst of pagan darkness. Sadly, Israel's history demonstrated that instead of being a solution to idolatry they often became submerged in it becoming part of the problem.

So even though the narrative of the historical books zooms in on God's work in the midst of Israel and Israel's struggle with idolatry amidst the nations, we must not forget the bigger picture in which this drama is set: God's mission in and through Israel. Israel's history is something like narrowing in and focusing attention on certain details of a painting without forgetting the bigger picture. That bigger picture is God's work in Israel for the sake of the nations. Put another way: God has a universal goal (all nations, whole creation) but uses particular means (Israel). Much of the focus of the historical books is on the particular means. However, the universal goal remains the ultimate horizon and backdrop of God's mission and Israel's history in the historical books. So mission remains the meaning of Israel's history even when it is not the explicit focus of the narratives.

A second observation is important: it is primarily in the psalms and the prophetic books that the universal horizon of Israel's election and existence is unmistakably expressed. Israel's role and calling in the midst of the nations was constantly nourished by their liturgy. W. Creighton Marlowe calls the psalms the 'music of missions.'<sup>50</sup> The title of an essay by Mark Boda captures what I am saying: "Declare His Glory Among the Nations: The Psalter as a Missional Collection."<sup>51</sup> George Peters counts over 175 universal references to the nations of the world and says that "the Psalter is

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<sup>49</sup> This is the language of Lesslie Newbigin, e.g., *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 1.

<sup>50</sup> W. Creighton Marlowe, "Music of Missions: Themes of Cross-Cultural Outreach in the Psalms," *Missiology* 26 (1998): 445-456.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Boda, "Declare His Glory Among the Nations: The Psalter as a Missional Collection", in **NEED BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFO WHEN AVAILABLE.**

one of the greatest missionary books in the world, though seldom seen from that point of view.”<sup>52</sup> It is hard to listen to Psalm 67 without a strong sense that Israel is a ‘so-that people’, blessed *so that* they might bring blessing to the nations.

May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face shine on us—  
*so that* your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among all nations.  
May all the peoples praise you, God;  
may all the peoples praise you. . . .  
May God bless us still,  
*so that* all the ends of the earth will fear him (Psalm 67:1-3, 7 TNIV).

Yet this is far from an isolated reference. The psalms are rife with Israel’s orientation to the nations: there are exhortations to Israel to sing of God’s mighty deeds among the nations (Ps. 9:11; 18:49; 96:2-3; 105:1); the psalmists lead Israel in responding to the exhortations with a personal commitment to sing among the nations (Ps. 18:49; 57:9; 108:3); there are numerous summons to the nations to praise God (Ps. 47:1; 66:8; 67:3; 96:7, 10; 100:1; 117:1); there are promises of a future in which the nations will join Israel in praise of the LORD (Ps. 22:27; 66:4; 86:9).

The prophetic message regarding Israel’s future also reveals a universal horizon and Israel’s missional calling within it. As Israel fails in their missional calling, and their history slides increasingly downhill into rebellion, the prophets emerge on the scene. While their first message to Israel is to repent, they turn their attention to the future. Even if Israel fails, God will not fail in his mission to bring salvation to the nations. He will usher in a worldwide kingdom through a Messiah and by the Spirit. At that time he will regather and restore Israel (Ezek. 36:24-27). *Then* the nations will know the LORD (Ezek. 36:22-23). *Then* restored, regathered, and purified Israel will fulfill their calling and be a light to the nations. There will be a ‘pilgrimage of the nations’ to Jerusalem. Joachim Jeremias describes this eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentiles described by the prophets

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<sup>52</sup> George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 116. See also Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 29-38; C. Wright, *Mission of God*, pp. 474-484; Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible*, (trans. Robert R. Barr; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 15-18.

in terms of five features: 1) God will reveal himself to the world (e.g., Is. 40:5); 2) This disclosure is accompanied by his Word which summons the nations to acknowledge him (e.g., Is. 45:20-22); 3) The nations hear this summons and journey to Jerusalem, the mountain of the Lord (e.g., Is. 2:3; 19:23); 4) There the nations see the glory of God and worship him (e.g., Is. 66:18; Zeph. 3:9); and 5) join the people of God in a messianic banquet (Is. 25:6-8). Gerhard Lohfink observes the role of Israel in all this:

A decisive element of the prophetic conception of the pilgrimage of the nations to Zion is that the Gentiles, fascinated by the salvation visible in Israel, are drawn of their own accord to the people of God. They do not become believers as a result of missionary activity; rather, the fascination emitted by the people of God draws them close. In this connection, the prophetic texts speak mostly of the radiant light which shines forth from Jerusalem.<sup>53</sup>

See, darkness covers the earth  
and thick darkness is over the peoples,  
But the LORD rises upon you  
and his glory appears over you.  
Nations will come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn (Is. 60:2-3 TNIV)

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you’ ” (Zech. 8:23 TNIV).

Thus, the prophets foresee that in the last days God’s missional purpose in and through Israel will be fulfilled. The gathering of the nations to a regathered and purified Israel will be an eschatological event when the Messiah and the Spirit bring about the kingdom.

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<sup>53</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 19.

Both the constant refrain in the psalms and the vision of the prophets show that this is the way Israel understood their history. In fact, as Lohfink points out in his discussion of the pilgrimage of the nations in the prophets, this is the way that Jesus himself understood Israel's calling: "The conception of the pilgrimage of the nations demonstrates that Jesus saw the role of Israel in the universal horizon of Isaiah. Israel was not chosen for its own sake, but *as a sign of universal salvation* for all nations."<sup>54</sup>

### **God's People in the Old Testament: Elements of Continuity**

At this point, before proceeding with the conclusion of this story, it would be good for our purpose of sketching an ecclesiology to pause and summarize what we have learned about the people of God from our brief narrative. Again, the reason for this, as we shall see, is that there is a fundamental continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament. We can note the following:

- Israel was a *chosen* people. Out of all the peoples on the earth God chose Abraham and Israel to be his treasured possession.
- Israel was a *redeemed* people. Israel was liberated from service to Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt to serve the living God with the whole of their lives.
- Israel was a *covenant* people. God bound Israel to himself in a covenant relationship in which God promised to be their God and they were pledged to be his people.
- Israel was to be a *holy* people. From the beginning God called his people to walk in his way, a way of justice and righteousness. God gave his people the *torah* to shape their lives according to his creational purposes. Much of Israel's history was bound up with God's work in their midst in their battle with idolatry.
- Israel was a people that knew God's *presence*. This meant that Israel enjoyed an ongoing relationship with God. It also meant a covenantally faithful response of love, faith, and obedience to their covenant Lord who lived in their midst. Further, Israel was to be a people who responded to God's presence in worship.

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<sup>54</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 71.



What is important for the purposes of this paper is to recognize clearly the missional fabric into which each of these themes is woven. Indeed, to wrench any of them from their missional context of the biblical story would be to misunderstand them. Israel was *chosen* so that they might mediate God's salvific blessing to the nations. They were *redeemed* to serve the LORD alone so that their *holy* lives might display before the nations what a nation looks like when God dwells in their midst. Indeed, it would be the *presence* of God and the wisdom of the *torah* that would set Israel apart, and make them an attractive model before the watching eyes of the nations (Deut. 4:6-8). The *covenant* God established with Abraham and with Israel at Sinai both had for their goal the salvation of the nations. Thus, Israel's role and identity was missional from the beginning. That is, their life was directed outward toward the nations.

These marks characterize the New Testament church as well. This must be unfolded in the rest of the story but already at this point we can note three things. First, by faith in Christ we are incorporated into the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:8-9; Acts 3:25-26). We become part of the people of God shaped by that covenant. Thus, we too are blessed along with Father Abraham but also called like him to be a blessing. Second, Paul's struggle with the relation of the new covenant people of God to Israel is instructive.<sup>55</sup> Especially helpful is his metaphor of ingrafting (Rom. 11:17-21). Gentiles are ingrafted into an olive root. They become part of this ancient people and their story. And, finally, precisely the text (Ex. 19:3-6) we noted was probably the most programmatic statement regarding Israel's calling is now applied to the church with its full missional implications:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. . . . Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us (1 Pet. 2:9-10, 12 TNIV).

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 80-81.

Yet continuity is not the only word; there is discontinuity as well. God's people are transformed by the coming of the kingdom in Jesus and His Spirit. And when we take up this next chapter in the story we see that the missional character of God's people is intensified.

### **Jesus, the Kingdom, and the People of God**

When Jesus steps onto the public stage of history, he announces that the end-time kingdom has arrived (Mk. 1:15). His announcement is nothing less than this: God is breaking into history and is now acting in the Messiah by the power of the Spirit to restore all of creation and all of human life to again live under the rule of God. God is becoming king again! The last days foreseen by the prophets have arrived.

The kingdom has already arrived in Jesus by the Spirit; but it has not yet fully come. It is this intervening period between the advent of the kingdom and its final completion that gathering can take place. In the parable of the great banquet the 'delay' between the announcement that the banquet is ready and its full enjoyment is taken up with gathering. Referring to this parable and others, J. H. Bavinck comments that "According to the above parables such work consists particularly in going out into the highways and byways to invite all to the marriage feast of the king. One may say thus that the interim is preoccupied with the command of missions, and it is the command of missions that gives the interim meaning."<sup>56</sup>

The prophets had made clear in a variety of ways and in many places that with the dawning of the kingdom the Gentiles would be gathered in to the people of God.

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD'S temple will be established  
as the highest of the mountains;  
it will be exalted above the hills,  
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

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<sup>56</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 32.

“Come, let us go to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob.  
He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths” (Is. 2:2-3 TNIV).

And Jesus affirmed this prophetic perspective throughout his ministry: “I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:11 TNIV). Yet, while affirming this ingathering of the nations, he limited his own mission and that of his disciples to the Jews: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24; cf. Matt. 10:5-6). How are we to explain the seeming contradiction between Jesus’ universal scope of all nations and his particular focus on Israel?

Joachim Jeremias has taken up this problem.<sup>57</sup> His conclusion is that Jesus fulfilled the prophets. The pattern of God’s plan must be observed. Since God had chosen Israel to be a light to the nations, and they had failed, then God’s plan for the last days was first, to regather and restore Israel, and then, draw the Gentiles into his covenant family. Jeremias says: “. . . we have to do with two successive events, first the call to Israel, and subsequently the redemptive incorporation of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God.”<sup>58</sup> Jeremias further concludes that there are two prior conditions that must be fulfilled before God’s call could go out to the Gentiles: the announcement and invitation of the good news of the kingdom to Israel and his vicarious death on the cross.<sup>59</sup>

The first condition was to prepare Israel to carry out their role to draw the nations. For that to happen Israel must be regathered and be renewed so that they might live in obedience to God’s *torah* and shine as a light to the nations. Ezekiel offers a glimpse of both of these features—gathering and purifying—in God’s eschatological future. Israel has failed in their mission and profaned the LORD’S name among the nations (Ezek 37:16-21). However, God says to Israel that he will act so that the nations would know that he is the LORD when he is “proved holy *through you* before their eyes.” (Ezek 37:22-23). Thus God will act to complete his mission through Israel:

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<sup>57</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (trans. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM Press, 1958).

<sup>58</sup> Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise*, 71.

<sup>59</sup> Jeremias, *Jesus Promise*, 71-73. Blauw speaks in a similar vein. Two events must happen before the nations are gathered: 1) the salvation of the kingdom must first be offered to Israel and 2) the blood of the true Passover lamb must be shed. (*Missionary Nature of the Church*, 71).

For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezek 36:24-27).

Jesus' task, then, is in keeping with "the historic context of revelation" that begins with the conversion of the Jews.<sup>60</sup> In keeping with Ezekiel's imagery of a shepherd gathering his lost sheep (Ezek. 34:23-34), Jesus begins to assemble the lost sheep and tribes of Israel, forming them into a little flock to whom he will give the kingdom (Lk. 12:32). Against this background, when Jesus appoints his twelve this must be seen as a "*symbolic prophetic action*"<sup>61</sup> of the beginning of the new Israel (Mk. 3:13-19). N. T. Wright comments:

The very existence of the twelve speaks, of course, of the reconstitution of Israel; Israel had not had twelve visible tribes since the Assyrian invasion of 734 BC, and for Jesus to give twelve followers a place of prominence, let alone to make comments about them sitting on thrones judging the twelve tribes, indicates pretty clearly that he was thinking in terms of the eschatological restoration of Israel.<sup>62</sup>

This renewed Israel begins to take part in Jesus' mission of gathering the lost sheep of Israel (Mk 3:14; Matt 10). Jesus applies to this renewed Israel Old Testament images that portray Israel's mission. Especially significant are Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says to the disciples: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14-16 TNIV). Together the images of light and city refer to "the eschatological Jerusalem, which the prophets foretell will one day be raised above all

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<sup>60</sup>Blauw, *Missionary Nature of the Church*, 68; DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, 146-155.

<sup>61</sup>Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 10. Emphasis his.

<sup>62</sup>N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 300.

mountains and illumine the nations with its light (cf. Isa. 2:2-5).”<sup>63</sup> The Torah goes forth from Zion and the disciples mission can only be effective through their good deeds if they build their lives upon the rock foundation of Jesus’ teaching (Matt 7:24-27). In the mission of Jesus Israel is being restored to be a light to the nations.

This gives us the proper perspective on the kingdom mission of Jesus. His gathering and formation of a restored community, the (re)new(ed) Israel is a sign that the kingdom has arrived. Rudolf Schnackenburg rightly says that “the company gathered around Jesus the Messiah is just as much a sign of the powerful presence of God’s reign as his word and deeds, the forgiveness of sins, his expulsions devils and the cures.”<sup>64</sup>

Before Gentiles can be gathered in to this community three events must take place: Jesus must pour out his blood for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28)<sup>65</sup>; Jesus must rise from the dead inaugurating the age to come; Jesus must pour out his Spirit to give this newly gathered Israel the life of the kingdom (Lk. 24:49; cf. Ezek. 36:26). These central events constitute the hinge of history.<sup>66</sup> With the death of Christ the old age dominated by sin, death, and Satanic power has been defeated and its dominion has come to an end. With the resurrection of Christ the age to come promised by the prophets has arrived. The outpouring of the Spirit gives his people a share in this new creation. By these events regathered Israel is renewed Israel.<sup>67</sup> To employ the language of Ezekiel, Israel has been gathered, cleansed and given a new heart and Spirit. They are now ready to continuing the gathering process that Jesus had initiated: first, the rest of the Israelite nation (to the Jew first) and then the Gentiles.

The gospels end with the commissioning of this new Israel to their task of gathering in the nations. Perhaps Matthew 28:18-20 is the best known since it has been at the center of the Western missionary enterprise since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, it has been interpreted primarily as a command to go applied to missionaries. Yet it is fundamentally an ecclesiological statement. In it

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<sup>63</sup>Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 65.

<sup>64</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *God’s Rule and Kingdom* (trans. John Murray; New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 223.

<sup>65</sup> See Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (trans. from 3<sup>rd</sup> German edition Arnold Ehrhardt; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 123-125, 148-152 for the meaning of *polloi* (many) as a great multitude from the nations.

<sup>66</sup> This image is employed a number of times by Lesslie Newbigin. E.g., *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 50; “Bible Studies on John 17: 1. “The Hinge of History”, *Lutheran Standard: USA* (4 April 1967), 10-11.

<sup>67</sup> This reconstitution of the nucleus of the New Israel in the twelve also assumes God’s severe judgment on Jews who refused be gathered. It now becomes this regathered community, along with those who are added to it that become the new body employed by God in his missional purposes.

the identity of this new Israel is given. They are a people who are now sent to all nations to continue the gathering process in this interim period. John 20:21 gives us a similar statement: This nucleus of the new Israel is sent to continue the mission that Jesus has begun. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

### **The Church After Pentecost**

The ‘delay’ of God’s judgment and the final completion of the banquet of the kingdom continue. The already-not yet period of the kingdom remains the era in which we live. And, as Newbigin has noted so strongly:

The meaning of this “overlap of the ages” in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is—so to say—held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology.<sup>68</sup>

This newly gathered Israel remains in Jerusalem, a Jewish community who begins the gathering of Jews into the newly constituted Israel. Acts 2:42-47 gives us a picture of this community in mission after Pentecost. They are a people committed to four things that will enable them to more and more take hold of the life of the kingdom—apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). As such they are an attractive community, a light shining in the midst of Jerusalem (Acts 2:43-47). Their lives of compassion, justice, joy, worship, and power emits a radiant light and “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

However, it would take persecution to send this community beyond Jerusalem. Perhaps they still thought in terms of the prophets’ words that the nations would stream to Jerusalem. In any case, persecution drives them far afield yet still spreading the gospel among the Jews (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19).

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<sup>68</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, American edition (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), 153.

But in Antioch a new thing begins to take place, and a new kind of community is formed. The good news is preached to the Greeks, and a community is formed made up of both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:19-21). While the description of this church mirrors Jerusalem, a new thing takes place. The Spirit moves that church to set aside Barnabas and Saul to travel throughout the Roman empire planting new communities that embody the light of the gospel in the midst of the nations (Acts 13:1-3). This disturbs the eschatological expectations of the Jewish church in Jerusalem but the concern is settled at a council in Jerusalem when the words of the prophets concerning the gathering of Gentiles is invoked (Acts 15:12-19). The planting of new communities, and the gathering of Jews first and then Gentiles into these communities continues throughout the rest of the story Luke tells in Acts. It ends on a rather abrupt note. The inconclusive ending is a literary strategy of Luke to invite the reader into the story<sup>69</sup>—to repent and believe in Jesus, and to become part of this growing worldwide community called to embody and announce the good news of the kingdom.

### **The Church in the New Testament: Elements of Discontinuity**

This brief narrative enables us to approach the question: “What is new about the New Testament church?” The fundamental continuity is clear. The nucleus of the community that Jesus formed is Israel regathered and purified. Gentiles are engrafted into this community. Thus, the New Testament church shares the missional calling of the Old Testament people of God. Nevertheless, with the coming of Jesus and the outpouring of His Spirit something new has emerged in history.

The fundamental difference is *eschatological*. In Jesus and the Spirit, the end-time kingdom, the last days, the age to come, the new creation, resurrection life has arrived. This means, first of all, that each of the characteristics of Old Testament Israel has been transformed. The church is an elect people but they are chosen in Christ (Eph. 1:4). We are a redeemed people but redeemed not by the mighty act of the Exodus but the much mightier act of the cross (I Pet. 1:18-19). We are a holy people but now the Spirit enables us to live in obedience to the *torah* (Rom. 8:3-4). The church is a covenant people but are bound to God in the new covenant in Christ’s blood (Lk. 22:20). We are a people in whom God dwells now with the intimate presence of Christ’s Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16). Each of these is fulfilled yet the missional implications of each remains.

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<sup>69</sup> Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 24; Luke Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 476.

The new eschatological era has at least three further significant implications for the people of God after Pentecost. First, God's people now experience the end-time salvation of the kingdom, the resurrection life of the new creation. Since the Spirit has been given, the people of God have been given a foretaste of the renewal of human life and creation that is coming at the end of history. As such they are previews of that future salvation. Various images of the church in the New Testament point to the church as being the new humanity (Eph. 2:10-17) that participate in the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) and exhibit the new life of the future in the present (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-11; Rom. 6:4-6). The church is the firstfruits of the final harvest of the kingdom of God (James 1:18), and the eschatological people of the second Adam (Rom. 5:12-21).<sup>70</sup>

The second eschatological implication is concerned with our place in the story. This time is a time of the gathering of Israel and then the nations to the ends of the earth. The gathering of a community to share in the salvation of the kingdom is an eschatological event: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). It has been well-emphasized above that the already-not yet era of the kingdom is a time characterized by mission, specifically the gathering of all nations into the kingdom community. On the one hand, the centripetal movement that characterized Israel remains. The church is to be an attractive community that embodies the end-time salvation. Yet there is a new centrifugal element. The people of God are now sent to live among the nations.

And so, closely connected to this, the *form* of the new covenant people of God is new. God's people are now a non-geographical and non-ethnic community that lives in the midst of all nations. God's people now live as a light in the midst of all the peoples of the earth. This creates a much more difficult prospect for the mission of God's people than in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, Israel lived as a nation with their own story, their own culture, their own social institutions, all shaped by God's word. The nations around them posed an external threat that was, sadly, too often taken into the bosom of their culture. However, the church must live as members and participants of the cultures that are formed by a different story. A missionary encounter in which God's people live in an alternative way or counter to the idolatrous ways of their culture is a

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<sup>70</sup> See Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 105-135; Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission*, 83-123.



much more difficult and complex calling. The church now lives in a constant tension as it embodies the life of the kingdom in the midst of nations where idolatry reigns.<sup>71</sup>

Each of these characteristics intensifies the missional nature of the people of God. The end has been revealed and accomplished by Jesus, and thus the church in the power of the Spirit is empowered to make it known in ways Old Testament Israel could not. The already-not yet era of the kingdom is distinguished precisely by the gathering of all peoples to Christ. The non-geographical and non-ethnic form of God's people renders them suitable precisely for this task. The church is missional by its very nature; its identity and role in God's mission is to make known God's salvation. As Newbigin puts it, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" defines the very being of the Church as mission. In this sense everything that the Church is and does can be and should be part of mission."<sup>72</sup>

The images of the church in the New Testament further explicate the continuity and discontinuity between the church and Israel.<sup>73</sup> Most of the images of the church employed in the New Testament either are borrowed from the Old Testament or indicate the newness of what has come in Christ and by the Spirit. All these images, then, to use Driver's term, are "images of the church in mission."<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Newbigin is correct in his observation concerning these ecclesial images: "Without mission, the Church simply falls to the ground. We must say bluntly that when the Church ceases to be a mission, then she ceases to have any right to the titles by which she is adorned in the New Testament."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John Driver develops this theme in his book showing that this kind of missionary encounter was essential to the New Testament church as seen in the images it employs for its own self-understanding. The church is a "contrast-society set in the midst of the nations as a sign of God's saving purpose for all peoples" (*Images of the Church in Mission*, 33).

<sup>72</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "The Bishop and the Ministry of Mission", in *Today's Church and Today's World*, ed. J. Howe (London: CIO Publishing, 1977), 242.

<sup>73</sup> The classic work on this subject is Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. He discusses 96 New Testament images. For a summary of those 96 images see pages 268-269.

<sup>74</sup> "The church, by its very nature of its calling, must be in mission. Here is the thesis of this book. The church is the human community that experiences and communicates the saving intention of God. Often this vital sense of identity, inspired by the biblical images, is missing; then the church's vision dries up, its missional activity is deformed, and it falls short of following God's saving purpose for all creation" (Driver, *Images of the Church*, 12).

<sup>75</sup> Newbigin, *Household of God*, 163.

## Conclusion

Archbishop William Temple is often quoted as saying that “the church is only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.” Indeed, the church’s mission to the world defines the role they play in the biblical story. We might try to capture what has been said in one phrase—new Israel. The church is the continuation of *Israel* and their mission to be a light to the nations. They are chosen, redeemed, bound in covenant, instructed in the way of life, and indwelt by God to live an exemplary existence before the watching eyes of the world, and to make known in life, word, and deed the good news that God is renewing the creation. But the church is the *new* Israel: in Christ and the Spirit God has broken into history and powers of the future age are flowing into history. The church is that people who have begun to taste of that resurrection life, and in this era are charged with the task of making it known in communities set in every nation of the world. It is this mission that defines the church’s very existence.