

The Mission of God (Part 1)

As I read about the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul and his zeal for making disciples of all nations, I feel a little lost. Why don't I have that burning passion? But then I wonder what I would do with it if I did have that passion. Paul had Jesus telling him what to do and the Holy Spirit often telling him where to go. Sometimes it seems to me that I have no clear direction from Scripture as to what my I am supposed to be doing. If I am not a "missionary," then do I even have a mission?

Here is a popular definition of "Christian mission":

"The Christian mission has been widely defined, since the Lausanne Congress of 1974, as that which is designed 'to form a viable indigenous church-planting movement.' This definition is motivated by a theologically imperative theme of the Bible to make God known, as outlined in the Great Commission. The definition is claimed to summarize the acts of Jesus' ministry, which is taken as a model motivation for all ministries" (Wikipedia).

According to this definition, it is hard to see how I could have a legitimate mission if I am not involved in forming "viable indigenous churches." Do I have something I am supposed to be doing with all my heart and strength? I am convinced that the only way to get a clear understanding of this is to dig into the Scriptures and see what they say about "mission."

What I have been learning about mission throughout the Bible is that the Bible has much more to say about the subject than I ever thought. Notice in the Wikipedia definition, the basis for mission the imperative to make God known "as outlined in the great commission." As Christians we tend to focus on "The Great Commission" as the main and perhaps only command concerning the mission of the church. But I have found that there is so much more about missions in the Scriptures than I ever dreamed- even in the Old Testament.

Some of you might be wondering, **"Does the Old Testament really have a missionary emphasis?"**

Christopher Wright responds to the in his excellent book *The Mission of God*: "Because of the dominant association of the word *missionary* with the activity of sending and with cross-cultural communication of the gospel—that is, with a broadly centrifugal dynamic of mission—I prefer not to use the term in connection with the Old Testament. In my view..., Israel was not mandated by God to send missionaries to the nations. While it will be abundantly clear that I certainly read the Old Testament missiologically, I would not choose to speak of 'the missionary message of the Old Testament' (TMOG, 24).

Centripetal force is the external inward moving force needed to make a body follow a curved path. **Centrifugal force** is the outward moving force associated with rotation. So when Chris Wright says that our understanding of mission has a broadly centrifugal dynamic, that means it is associated with sending someone out from the church, a missionary, into the world to tell them about Christ. In fishing terms centripetal force is like "trolling." You go out looking for the fish. That is very different than Israel's missional (not missionary) role that largely had centripetal force. That is, they did not normally send individual Israelites into the world to tell them about YHWH. Instead, they were to function as a light to the nations and draw them in as they acted like YHWH in justice, mercy, and kindness in the

world. In fishing terms it was more like “chumming” than trolling. You attract the fish to you. I believe the church must must must have both centripetal and centrifugal forces at work in their concept of mission.

In the church, we tend to concentrate on the centrifugal texts. Matthew 28:18-20 being the main one.

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:18-20).

It certainly is an important text but we mustn’t allow it to make us unable to see the missional emphasis of the rest of Scripture. I believe this is a great danger. Only focusing on this text tends to make people think that since they are not going to pack up and move to some foreign land, they don’t really have a mission. I think by focusing only on Matthew 28, we tend to miss the larger mission of God that the whole Bible lays out for us. I tend to think, why search for anything else. This is a clear text. What else do we need? We need the rest of what the Word of God says about mission—there are many riches hidden in the rest of the word that God is waiting to bless us with.

How do we define our “mission”?

Chris Wright gives a helpful definition that is different than the popular definition: “Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation” (Chris Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22-23).

God’s mission is what fills the space or time period between spoiled creation and new creation. Each and every believer plays a small part or has an individual smaller mission that is necessary for the accomplishment of God’s overarching mission.

We learn about God’s mission from the Scriptures. We see that “a text often has its origin in some issue, need, controversy or threat that the people of God needed to address in their mission. The text itself is the product of mission in action” (TMOG, 49). Paul’s epistles are clearly products of mission as they are his letters to groups of people he has met on his missionary journeys and given the gospel to or to people he hopes to travel to see and to encourage in their faith. But I hope to persuade you that the whole of the Scriptures are the product of God’s mission in action.

“The whole Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation” (TMOG, 51).

We need to look at the whole Bible as a book about God’s mission.

Because Jesus says so!

“Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high’ (Luke 24:44-49).

Wright has some helpful comments on these verses: “Jesus’ whole sentence comes under the rubric, ‘this is what is written.’ Luke does not present Jesus as quoting any specific verse from the Old Testament, but he claims that the mission of preaching repentance and forgiveness to the nations in his name is ‘what is written.’ He seems to be saying that the whole of the Scripture (which we now know as the Old Testament) finds its focus and fulfillment *both* in the life, death and resurrection of Israel’s Messiah *and* in the mission to all nations, which flows out from that event. Luke tells us that with these words Jesus ‘opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures,’ or, as we might put it, he was setting their hermeneutical orientation and agenda. The proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read their Scriptures, is *messianically* and *missionally*” (TMOG, 30).

Paul says so!

“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing **but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the *Christ* must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, *he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles*” (Acts 26:19-23).**

I think many of us do well at reading the Old Testament *messianically*, but not so well reading it *missionally*. In order to read the Bible missionally we must read the Bible as an integrated story.

The Storyline of the Bible

Let’s talk about the story of the Bible for a moment. The Bible has a story line. In its simplest form it goes something like this: **Creation, Fall, Redemption, New Creation** (Future Hope). This can also be put in the form of foundational questions and answers:

Where are we? (What is the nature of the world around us?)

Answer: we inhabit the earth, which is part of the good creation of the one living, personal God, YHWH.

Who are we? (What is the essential nature of man?)

Answer: We are human persons made by this God in God’s own image, one of God’s creatures but unique among them in spiritual and moral relationships and responsibility.

What's gone wrong? (Why is the world in such a mess?)

Answer: Through rebellion and disobedience against our Creator God, we have generated the mess that we now see around us at every level of our lives, relationships and environment.

What is the solution? (What can we do about it?)

Answer: Nothing in and of ourselves. But the solution has been initiated by God through his choice and creation of a people, Israel, through whom God intends eventually to bring blessing to all nations of the earth ultimately to renew the whole creation.

This is the story of the Bible. Notice how the solution is stated in terms of Israel rather than in terms of a full-orbed gospel presentation. There is a reason for this. The book of Genesis presents the solution as Israel-to-the-nations and the book of Revelation gives us a glimpse at God's finished work as a renewed creation. There is a lot that happens in-between the announcement of God's mission in Genesis the result of God's mission in Revelation that we need to think about deeply. But for our purposes we must begin in the beginning.

When I say that we must begin in the beginning, I mean Genesis 12 and the first mention of the Abrahamic Covenant. But there is a critical observation we must make at this point or we really won't understand the mission of God. Genesis 12 is preceded by Genesis 1-11. I know it sounds like a rather mundane observation but it is really very helpful when you stop and think about it. In Genesis 1-2 we find that God created the world and mankind good. He gave them a mission: the care and keeping of creation as vice-kings under God the great King. In Genesis 3-6 we see the fall and its effect- the rejection of God's authority/the desire to be the great King and the curse on creation and on man leading to a life filled with toil and sin. In Genesis 7-9 we see God's judgment on sinners and God's salvation of a remnant to start over with:

“In the aftermath of the flood, God renews his promise to creation under God's blessing and human beings are again set forth to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1). The two following chapters need to be seen as complementary accounts of what happened next” (TMOG, 196).

By this, Wright means that in chapter 10 scattering is a neutral thing. The people needed to fill the earth so they scattered and accomplished it. But in chapter 11 we find that the people were scattered by God because they wanted “to make a name for themselves” with their big tower. They wanted to be the great King again rather than vice-kings caring and keeping God's creation. Do you hear the echoes of the fall in this? So God made them into babbling fools and scattered them. Do you hear the echoes of the exile from Eden and the flood in this? When you get done reading Genesis 11 you naturally begin to wonder if life will continue on forever with an endless cycle of sin and judgment.

Chris Wright comments: “What can God do next? Something that only God could have thought of. He sees an elderly childless couple in the land of Babel and decides to make them the fountainhead, the launch pad of his whole new mission of cosmic redemption” (TMOG, 199).

Go and I will make you...and bless you “so that” you can be a blessing to all nations

“Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. **2** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

The solution to the fall (which is God's mission) is God creating a people through Abraham who will “go” to the nations and “be a blessing.” So here is the passage boiled down: God says to Abram, you need to “go” to the land I tell you and I will make you a great nation and make your name great “so that” (in order that, for the purpose of) the Israelites to “be a blessing” to all the families of the earth. Abraham is to obey God by going. In turn God is going to do great things with Abraham and his descendants (bless them), but God has a purpose for blessing Abraham and his family and that purpose is global blessing through Abraham's family!

Abram goes and the mission is launched.

Contrast with the Abrahamic Mission (God's Mission) with the Babel Mission (Man's Mission)

It is very crucial that we see the direct contrast between the babel account in Genesis 11 and the account of God covenanting with Abram in Genesis 12:

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves’” (Genesis 11:4ab).

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great” (Genesis 12:2).

“lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4c; also see v. 8 and 9 for the emphasis on “the whole earth”).

“and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3c).

The builders of the tower were against the mission of God. They wanted to make their own name great and they wanted to keep to themselves. God shuts down their attempt to destroy His mission by confusing their language. God then finds a man whom God will make a great name for and whom God will bless. This man, through his offspring, will not keep the blessing to himself but rather will bless the world with it.

The Great Commission is a “christological mutation” of the Abrahamic Commission

Jesus is commissioning us to the same mission as Abraham. We are to “go and be a blessing” to the world. Yes, there is far more revelation about what we are to do, but it is the same mission! Yes, we have to add a centrifugal force to our walking out of this commission, but it is the same mission of God of which Jesus is asking us to be a part. Paul writes about the Abrahamic Covenant as the gospel in advance (Galatians 3:8) and he tells us

that we are Abraham's children (Galatians 3:29). The mission finally ends with all the nations blessed. The children of Abraham will have completed their mission, God's mission, of discipling the nations. And the mission ends with worship:

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, **10** and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9, 10).

Sneak Peek at Next Week

The Mission of Israel

Exodus 19:5-6

Why would God need a nation of priests? A priest represents the people to God. What was God planning on doing with the people of Israel?