

## **How are ‘evangelism’ and ‘mission’ related?**

Evangelism and mission are polyvalent terms in contemporary theological discourse. It is vitally important to carefully define evangelism and mission if their relationship is to be correctly understood. An integrated understanding of evangelism and mission will also be informed by and contribute to a number of other major doctrinal loci such as creation, soteriology and eschatology.

The good news or evangel which the church is to make known is that Jesus Christ is Lord and it is her prayerful task in the power of the Spirit to proclaim that gospel to all the nations and to seek to bring all individual and community life consistently under the Lordship of Christ. The mission of the church, then, is not only initial evangelism but it is nothing other than the outworking of the gospel which she proclaims.

### **1. Mission**

#### **Mission as cross-cultural evangelism**

The term mission is sometimes used to refer specifically to cross-cultural evangelism. On this definition the emphasis is on being sent (the meaning of the Latin root, *mitto*) to cross some cultural boundary. Older evangelical understandings of the relationship between mission (or missions) and evangelism would thus see mission(s) as the subset of world evangelisation where the gospel is taken to other peoples.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Mission as pioneer evangelism**

Some have also used the term mission to refer to pioneer evangelism where a group of people is reached with the gospel for the first time. Bosch records that: “some suggest that “mission” has to do with ministry to people (particularly those in the Third

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 17, 26.

World) who are *not yet* Christians and “evangelism” with ministry to those (particularly in the West) who are *no longer* Christians.”<sup>2</sup>

However, mission is now usually taken to be the broader term with evangelism as a more specific task with the overall mission of the church.

### **The *missio Dei* and the mission of the church**

It is a common and indeed a correct, but sometimes an insufficiently examined, assertion of contemporary missiological literature that the church’s mission must be related to the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.

For the Fathers, the *missio Dei* is the Father’s sending of the Son to redeem the world<sup>3</sup>. A missiological understanding of the Father’s sending of the Son focuses attention on the Triune God’s plan of salvation and thus suggests the centrality of evangelism in God’s purposes.

Yet the concept of the *missio Dei* has been greatly expanded in recent missiological discussion. A. Scott Moreau describes the concept of the *missio Dei* thus:

*missio Dei* focuses on everything God does in his task of establishing his kingdom in all its fullness in all the world. While it includes what the church does, it is not limited to that, for God works both in and out of the church.<sup>4</sup>

This broader understanding of God’s mission risks the confusion of labelling “any good enterprise”<sup>5</sup> as part of the *missio Dei* and therefore the proper task of the church. To so broaden the definition of mission so that it includes any admirable activity actually evacuates the term of its meaning. If everything is mission then nothing is

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Bosh, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (American Society of Missiology Series, No. 16; New York, Orbis Books, 1991), 409.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Augustine, *De Trinitate* Bk. 4 ch. 20 par 27 and Hilary, *De Trinitate* Bk. 3, ch. 12 and Bk. 5, ch. 11 cited in Chris Green, ‘The Incarnation and Mission’ pp110-151 in *The Word Became Flesh: Evangelicals and the Incarnation* Papers from the Sixth Oak Hill College Annual School of Theology (ed. David Peterson; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>4</sup> Scott A. Moreau, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 637.

<sup>5</sup> Glasser and McGavran, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, 15.

mission in a particular or special sense. God's mission and the mission of the church must be more carefully distinguished.

Stott argues that:

... the word 'mission' cannot properly be used to cover everything God is doing in the world. In providence and common grace he is indeed active in all men and all societies, whether they acknowledge him or not. But this is not his 'mission'. 'Mission' concerns his redeemed people, and what he sends *them* into the world to do.<sup>6</sup>

The church's mission will be shaped by what God is doing in his world. However, it is not obvious that the church's mission will be exactly the same as God's mission. Congruence with the mission of God is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for establishing the mission of the church. Some aspects of God's mission will be achieved by him alone whereas he calls on his church to participate in some aspects of his mission in particular ways. Thus, for example, the Father's sending of the Son is not the mission of the church: the church does not send the Son. Similarly, the work of regeneration is entirely God's work not that of the church. Yet bringing individuals to salvation is achieved through the church's preaching of the gospel. In this case God's mission involves the church in evangelism. God and man both have a distinct part to play within the controlling mission of God.

### **Mission and the Kingdom of God**

It has been common to equate the *missio Dei* with the advancement of the Kingdom of God, understood as God's rule or reign. Stott rightly rejects what he terms the Ecumenical view of mission, that the Kingdom of God is present wherever there is *shalom* (peace), defined in terms of social harmony and demonstrated in, for example, racial and industrial harmony and economic justice.<sup>7</sup> True *shalom* must involve peace with God which can only be realised through the gospel (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2). Citizenship of the kingdom depends on conscious trust in Christ. We must reject Karl

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<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Stott, *Christian Mission*, 17.

Rahner's proposal that there are 'anonymous Christians' who are saved by the work of Christ without knowing it.

### **Mission and the New Creation**

Our understanding of the *missio Dei* will depend on our eschatological convictions. The nature of what we hope for will shape what we do. If God's plan were simply to rescue elect souls for heaven, then it would be difficult to give a rationale for the mission of the church being anything more than evangelism. However, if God's plan is the renewal of this world through the gospel then other aspects of Christian vocation take on greater importance. God's original purposes for this creation will be fulfilled and the curse on sin is undone by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 (c.f. also Genesis 9:1ff; Hebrews 2:5-8) of filling and subduing the world continues to be in force and this is part of what the church is sent into the world to do. The mission of humanity restored in Christ is thus to exercise God's loving rule over the world as his vicegerents. Every area of the believer's life is to be brought under the Lordship of Christ and the believer's task is not limited to soul-winning. The mission of the church may therefore be understood as the working out of the implications of the gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord for every area of life.

Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order*<sup>8</sup> suggests that the bodily resurrection of Jesus provides a paradigm for relating creation and redemption. Just as Jesus' physical body is raised and glorified, so there is continuity and discontinuity between this creation and the new creation. The continuity between this world and the world to come gives lasting significance to Christian endeavour for cultural transformation since it is this world that is to be glorified.

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<sup>8</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* second edition (Leicester: Apollos, 1994)

## Mission and the hope of world transformation

The post-millennialist<sup>9</sup> (or strongly optimistic amillennialist) also expects the spread of the gospel to result in large-scale social and political transformation this side of the eschaton. It might be said that the mission of the church is the transformation of society but this transformation is the result of the success of the church's evangelistic missionary task to disciple the nations as nations (rather than merely as individuals), with those in power seeking to shape every aspect of life according to all that Jesus has taught. On this view Jesus' prayer that God's will be done on earth as in heaven is increasingly answered before the final consummation of all things. The Lordship of Jesus implies a whole Christian culture and civilization.

## 2. Evangelism

We may adopt Bosch's definition of evangelism as:

the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him, calling them to repentance and conversion, announcing forgiveness of sin, and inviting them to become living members of Christ's earthly community and to begin a life of service to others in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Just as a precise definition of mission is necessary, so with evangelism, Andrew Kirk argues that: "... if everything the Church does is called evangelism (because in some way it proclaims the reality of Jesus Christ), then nothing is really evangelism."<sup>11</sup>

The New Testament usage of *εὐαγγελίζω* suggests that evangelism is a verbal proclamation. Words are essential to explaining the witness of believers' lifestyles to the gospel.

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<sup>9</sup> E.g., Kenneth L. Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992)

<sup>10</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew J. Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), 57.

Some have argued that the mission of the church is exclusively evangelism. For example Johnston argues that: “Historically the mission of the church is evangelism alone.” and for McGavran: “Theologically mission was evangelism by every means possible”<sup>12</sup>.

However, it cannot be maintained that the mission of the church is evangelism only, strictly understood. That is, the church is not simply to so proclaim the gospel that people are given the opportunity for initial repentance and faith. The call of evangelism is to an ongoing life of repentance and faith. The church is to make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything that Christ has commanded (Matthew 28:19f). As Martin Goldsmith observes:

This [Great Commission] includes not only the primary task of going into the world in order to ‘make disciples of all nations’, but also the external forms of the Christian faith in ‘baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. Mission must therefore be more than just evangelism; witness must lead to the planting of visible churches. Disciples and churches then need to be brought into maturity through the biblical teaching of ‘everything I have commanded you’.<sup>13</sup>

The formation of visible churches of the baptized and their conformity to the character Christ is clearly part of the missionary task of the church. Believers are to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16).

### **Evangelism and Social Action in the Mission of the Church**

The question of the relationship between mission and evangelism is often brought into focus by considering the role of social and political action in the life of the church.

Sometimes the debate is terminological: one might recognise that social action is part of the task of the church but argue that social action should not be called mission.

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 410.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Goldsmith, *Get a Grip on Mission: The Challenge of a Changing World* (Leicester: IVP, 2006), 12.

This approach shows a correct concern that social action should not usurp the vital place of evangelism in the task of the church. Certainly social action alone is not the mission of the church. Evangelism is indispensable.

However, verbal proclamation of the gospel does not exhaust the mission of the church in the sense that Christians are to live their whole lives under the Lordship of Christ. The gospel claim that Jesus Christ is Lord has clear political and social implications, implying that Caesar is not the ultimate Lord. As O'Donovan comments:

Theology must be political if it is to be evangelical. Rule out the political questions and you cut short the proclamation of God's saving power; you leave people enslaved where they ought to be set free from sin – their own and others'.<sup>14</sup>

Stott argued on the basis on John 20:21 that:

Deliberately and precisely he [Jesus] made his mission the model of ours.... Therefore our understanding of the church's mission must be deduced from our understanding of the Son's.<sup>15</sup>

For Stott, Jesus loving service in both word and deed indicates the correct synthesis between evangelism and social action. He concludes that:

... social action is *a partner of evangelism*. As partners the two belong to each other and yet are independent of each other. Each stands on its own feet in its own right alongside the other. Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself. Both are expressions of unfeigned love.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Stott, *Christian Mission*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Stott, *Christian Mission*, 27.

Stott rightly argues that life under the Lordship of Christ requires obedience not only to the Great Commission but also to the Great Commandment that “you shall love your neighbour as yourself”.

Similarly, Tim Chester argues that social action is a part of the mission of the church distinct from evangelism, which can follow, precede and accompany evangelism<sup>17</sup>.

Stott and Chester both defend the priority of evangelism. Stott says:

... ‘mission’ denotes the self-giving service which God sends his people into the world to render, and includes both evangelism and socio-political action;... within this broadly conceived mission a certain urgency attaches to evangelism, and priority must be given to it;<sup>18</sup>

Tim Chester argues for the central priority of evangelism because of:

... the priority of the eternal future in the Bible. This means that the greatest need of the poor is to be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ. This takes place through the Holy Spirit as people respond to the word of God. The proclamation of the gospel must therefore be central to Christian work among the poor.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If mission is all that God sends his people into the world to do, then the Christian prayer and task is to look to God for the transformation of the all the nations and every aspect of individual and community life by the proclaimed gospel. Evangelism is thus the indispensable core and priority of the Christian mission, which involves bringing everything in conformity to that gospel. The gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord

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<sup>17</sup> Chester, Tim, *Good News to the Poor: Sharing the gospel through social involvement* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 60.

<sup>18</sup> Stott, *Christian Mission*, 58.

<sup>19</sup> Chester, *Good News*, 58.



which the church proclaims implies the whole of her mission to live under Christ's Lordship.

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