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The Biblical Nature of Mission: God's Mission in Action

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Abstract: Professor Eugene Bunkowske, a founder of The Lutheran Society for Missiology, reviews the basic biblical characteristics of Christian mission. He shows how mission is a process, one that started with God and is ongoing. Mission is an expression of God's love for humanity; it shows His desire to bring all peoples to Himself, to live with Him for eternity. To do this He lowered Himself to become a part of the human context, using images, actions, and words relevant to human minds. This process goes on—we do not generally preach in Aramaic in a country, unless it is understood. Martin Luther contextualized the Word of God when he translated that Word into German. The process goes on. God became a human being to contextualize His love. Several basic biblical characteristics are reviewed in the article, and an illustration application is made to a specific context.

Introduction

Picture yourself in the one hundredth largest city in the United States, a Mecca of manufacturing and technology. If this city were blown off the map tonight, the technological infrastructure of the country would take a heavy hit. Imagine yourself in the shoes of Mason, an 18-year-old. He lives in that city with his parents, family, and friends.

Mason's father is a Christian engineer who has moved from the farm to the city, from the spiritual to the secular, and from manufacturing to technology. Mason's dad



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has done well financially, but Mason is not settled. He is searching for “the meaning and purpose of life.” Mason spent his last summer in Mexico and came home in September, late for his first semester in college. People wonder about Mason, but his mother comforts him.

Mason was on a mission in Mexico. It became very much his personal mission. Now, in reflection, Mason wonders, “What will happen now that I am not there? Is the mission over? What is mission? Does it all depend on me?”

Mission is common in daily language. We hear of the mission of the Marriot, the mission of the military, and the mission of the church, even the mission of Mason. What does mission mean in the context of Christianity?

Mission as Movement, as Process

Mission starts with God. God was on a mission when He “created the heaven and the earth.” Not only did God create, but He also ordered and organized a perfect set of relationships between Himself, humankind, and the non-human world (Gn 1:1–2:8). He did it to reflect the glory of His name (Ps 19:1).

When Satan rebelled in heaven, fell to earth, and brought deception and disharmony with him (Rev 12:7–9), things changed. Deception with temptation entered the earthly scene; rebellion and sin quickly climbed on board, followed by destruction of the perfect relationships among God, human beings, and the earth on which they live. Relationship destruction brought with it spiritual and physical separation between God and people (Genesis 3). It looked like God’s mission of bringing glory to His name had ended in catastrophe.

God’s perspective was different. He is a compassionate, merciful, patient, and forgiving God (Ps 86:15). He returned to the garden to continue His mission, to pick up the pieces, as it were, (Gn 3:8–9) and to promise the sending of a Savior (Gn 3:15) to open the way for renewed relationship (Rom 5:10–11).

God’s mission is the golden thread throughout the Old and New Testament, as God sends Abram, blesses him, and promises that through him “every family on earth would be blessed” (Gn 12:1–3). This mission of God was continued through Isaac (Gn 26:4), Jacob (Gn 28:13–14), Joseph, and through the part of Abraham’s family that was called the people of Israel (Ex 19:4–6; 1 Pt 2:9). Moses, Joshua, the Judges, Samuel, David and his family were key players in this progression during the next period of God’s mission.

The New Testament spells out the promised salvation phase (Mt 1:20–21) of God’s mission. In this phase, God made His promise “of crushing (Satan’s) head” (Gn 3:15) and of “blessing every family on earth” through a descendent of Abraham (Gn 12:3). This happened as Jesus, the second person of the Godhead, came into the world as the second Adam through Mary from the line of David right back to

Abraham (Mt 1:1–17).

As the second Adam, Jesus did not follow the destructive ways of the first Adam. He took the place of the first Adam and all of his descendants and fully resisted temptation (Mt 4:1–11). In addition, He freed them from the eternal death that is the result of sin (Rom 6:23) by living perfectly under God’s standards for human beings (Rom 5:19; Is 53:4–5; Heb 2:14–15, 17) and by suffering and then dying for the sin of the world (1 Jn 1:7; 1 Pt 1:18–19). In this way Jesus, the Savior, removed the separation between God and people (Col 1:21–23) in order to draw them into union with God through Himself by faith (2 Cor 5:18–21; Gal 3:26–29; Eph 2:4–10).

He also continued to come to people in the garden of this world by seeking the lost (Lk 19:10). He did this by having compassion on people (Mt 9:35–38), blessing the children (Mk 10:13–16), proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom (Mt 4:23; 13; Mk 1:35–39), and forgiving sins (Lk 7:36–50; Mk 2:1–12). In addition to that, Jesus fed the hungry (Jn 6:1–14), healed the sick (Lk 17:11–19; Mk 7:31–37), cast out demons (Mt 8:14–18; Mk 5:1–20; 7:24–30), raised the dead (Lk 8:40–56), walked on water (Mk 6:45–51), and calmed the storm (Lk 8:22–25).

Jesus also gathered disciples (Mk 1:14–20; Mt 9:9–12), mentored and taught them (Mt 5–10; 13:36–43; 15–16), encouraged and developed their faith (Mt 9:1–10; 18:1–10), motivated and mentored prayer (Lk 11:1–13), and sent His disciples out to minister (Mt 10; Lk 10:1–23).

On Easter evening, Jesus helped His disciples understand the Scriptures. He told them that by His authority people will be told to turn to God and change the way they think and act so that their sins will be forgiven. This will be told to people from all nations, beginning in the city of Jerusalem, and “You are witnesses to these things” (Lk 24:44–48). On the same evening, Jesus also said to His disciples, “Peace be with you! As my Father has sent me so I am sending you.” Later, just before His Ascension into heaven, Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to you. Then you will be my witnesses to testify about me in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

In bridging to the next phase of God’s mission on earth, we remember the part that Jesus played. While He was on earth, Jesus carried God’s mission forward by placing Himself under God’s law to fulfill it perfectly and by paying for the wages of sin so that people could once again have eternal life with God. With His ascent into heaven, He passed the baton of God’s mission, God’s family business here on earth, to His disciples (Jn 20:21). They were to proclaim the message of restored relationship with God (2 Cor 5:11–6:2) in the place of Jesus. Jesus promised that the Father would send them the Spirit of Truth, who would teach them and help them carry out God’s mission on earth (Jn 14:16–17, 26).

On Pentecost, the Spirit of God came in a very visible way through the wind and

through the tongues of fire. He got all of the disciples present in that place, possibly as many as 120 (Acts 1:15) or even more (1 Cor 15:6), directly involved in God's mission. He gave them the power to speak in languages they had never learned and moved them to proclaim God's message, with the result that three thousand were converted in a single day (Acts 2:1–41). From that beginning, God's mission moved out to many places and peoples through the testimony of God's family members (Acts). God validated the message by doing miraculous signs (Acts 2:43) through His messengers and gave them courage to face all kinds of hardships, including death (Acts 7), for the sake of His name.

The Mission of God is firmly established and centered in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–13, 27–31), the family of God (Eph 2:19–22). It is an expression of faith flowing out of the gathered believers, the church (1 Tim 3:15) in each location.

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Mission Snapshots

The first snapshot focuses on the *where from* of mission, on God as the originator of the mission who started and sustains the mission through Jesus. From this perspective we can say that

Mission is God's *creating* human beings in His image to have a perfect relationship with them. It is also His *determination* to rebuild relationship by bringing estranged humankind back to Himself in Christ (Gn 1:26–30; 2:7, 25; 3:8–24; 1 Tim 2:1–6, Gal 4:4–7, Jn 3:14–17; Lk 19:10; and 2 Cor 5:16–21, etc.).

The second snapshot focuses on the *communication* of the message as the means that God uses to advance His mission. From this perspective we can say that

Mission is the divine Word in oral, written, and sacramental form, used by God to re-create unity and a harmonious working relationship between humankind and Himself. (Jn 1:1–14; Jn 3:16–21; Acts 2:38; Gal 3:27; Ti 3:5–7; Mt 26:26–28); Rom 1:16; Mt 27–28; Jn 14:1–3; Eph 2:8–10; Lk 24:46–47; 1 Jn 1:5–10; 2 Cor 5:1–6:2; Heb 11; Jn 14:15–21, 23; 15:26–27;

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16:5–15; Heb 13:20–21; etc.)

The third snapshot focuses on the *who is to be reached* of mission. It deals with restoring relationship with lost people through faith in Christ. From this perspective we can say that

Mission is human beings being brought back into a harmonious relationship with God by moving from death to life. (Mt 9:35–38; Jn 3; Jn 4:1–42; 4:43–54; Rom 10:9–13; etc.)

The fourth snapshot deals with the *how is this done* dimension of mission. It lifts up the variety of ordinary means that God uses to carry forward His mission. From this perspective we can say that

Mission is the study of how God communicates His Word for restoring relationships in a variety of contexts through His Church and through individual believers for meaningful understanding (Rom 10:8–17; Lk 24:13–49, 1 Pt 2:1–9; Acts 2:14–47; Acts 4:23–31; 2 Cor 5:11–21; and Acts 14:23–31, etc.).

An Integrating Mission Snapshot

In this integrating snapshot we place the four individual snapshots together in a holistic snapshot that gives us a still picture of the process that God has been carrying out since the beginning of time. From this perspective we can say that

Mission is how the triune God through His Church (including individuals and gathered groups of Christians, past, present and future), in a variety of ways and through a variety of God-ordained and humanly developed institutions, communicates by His oral, written, and visual (sacramental) Word, the Law and Gospel message about human sin and God's grace in Jesus Christ for meaningful understanding to people in each and every condition and context of life, worldwide, in order that they receive forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ, live for the praise of His glory, and are nurtured and equipped to join Him in His ongoing mission of making disciples of all peoples.

So there you are—about the same number of words as in the long Greek sentence in Romans 1:1–7. Some have said that this integrated snapshot is just too much. But how would you shorten it? Every reduction leaves a number of key concepts hidden or at least implicit.

If this longer integrating snapshot is too long it can be summarized as follows:

Mission is how the triune God through His Church communicates His Word about human sin and God's grace in Jesus Christ for meaningful understanding.

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The Mission in Context

Mission is not an island. It is part of a conceptual configuration in which evangel, evangelism, evangelist, mission, and missions function together within the academic discipline of missiology. The short definitions that follow are included to set a more inclusive context for what follows.

Evangel (*euaggelion*) is the Gospel or Good News. It is proclamation. It is witness.¹

Evangelism (*euaggelizesthai*) is Good News proclaimed with great enthusiasm and courage by its advocates, backed up by their own witness and experience.²

Evangelist (*euaggeliztas*) is an eager proclaimer, a positive Good News gossip, who uses every legitimate rhetorical device to meaningfully communicate the message of God's forgiveness and love in Jesus Christ to people of every tribe, language, people, and nation (2 Cor 5:11; Acts 13:43; and Rev 7; 9).³

Mission is God's way of looking at mankind through the eyes of grace. It is God's desire to close the gap between Himself and humankind. It is God's intentionality and instrumentality in carrying out this great work of reconciling human beings to Himself. In the most basic sense, mission is *God's goal for all of missiology and theology*.

Missions are God's ways and works for restoring the relationship between Himself and human beings. These ways and works focus on the human activities that God does through Jesus Christ and through people and institutions to get His mission done.

Missiology is the scholarly discipline that focuses on people who are separated from God and features evangel, evangelism, evangelist, mission, and missions in an integrated context that draws heavily from theology, cultural anthropology, sociology, history, religious studies, area studies, research, and communication theory and practice. Missiology takes the study of God's Word and God's world very seriously. Its academic and research activities take a balanced approach to theology, application, theory, and practice.

Mission Applications

A clear understanding that mission is not foundationally Mason's mission, or my, or your mission, but that it is God's mission is strategic as we go on together in our study of God's means for mission. The challenge for each of us is openness to the mind of Christ. It focuses especially on God's mission-driven desire that "all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). It also includes

an open willingness to be *God's chosen means* for getting the “means of grace” to the lost people of this world. We can do this properly only as we daily nurture ourselves and our fellow Christians with the Word of God and respond to the work of God's Spirit with active prayer, worship, witness, and service.

There certainly is a proper place for the church and for you and me as long as we realize that we are playing second fiddle to the lead fiddle, to our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been sent by the Father to “seek and save the lost” (Lk 19:10). Your and my mission must always play second fiddle to, and totally imitate and fit in with, the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. The second and third chairs in the orchestra always take their lead from the first chair, from the lead player. So it is with believers, as they joyfully use every legitimate rhetorical and nonverbal skill, proficiency, aptitude, and competence that God has given in order to communicate the Gospel to each and every lost person for meaningful understanding.

Incidentally, a good number of those lost people live right next door to us on basically every street in your town and mine and in every part of the main streets and back streets in our world today. This means that God's mission is not just *over there* but *right here where I live*. It is His Mission, His work. He will do it. Yes He will use His church, His family members, and His individual believers; but they are only His means, His instrumentality, His agents for doing His mission.

The point is that Mason and you and I, yes every Christian, does have a purpose, a mission. Our purpose is to let people know the “Way, Truth, and Life” before their city is blown up or their life on earth is naturally over. Yes, each believer is a GOOD NEWS teller—one who has the privilege of telling others about the good and meaningful life with God in Jesus, the promised Christ and Savior. This life goes on through everything and anything in this world and the next.

A beautiful picture of our Christian life and purpose is painted in Hebrews 3:1, where we read, “*Brothers and sisters you are holy partners in a heavenly calling, so keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the apostle and chief priest about whom we make our testimony of faith*” (God's Word Translation). How does this purpose and privilege work itself out in your life?

Endnotes

¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 48.

² *Ibid.*

³ Eugene W. Bunkowske, Personal Communication, New Years, 1998.