

Mission and the local church

'As the father sent me, so I send you'

John 17:18 & 20:21

Mission can be a tricky word. It is commonly used to describe an agenda or objective we set for ourselves — as, for example, when an organisation writes a Mission Statement. However, it comes from the Latin *missio*, signifying ‘sent’, and this is the fundamental idea in the Bible. Jesus’ words, spoken before his death (John 17:18) and repeated after his resurrection (20:21), show his consciousness of having been sent by his Father. For us, mission stems from Jesus’ own sending of his disciples.

The sending of Jesus by the Father

John 3:16 declares, *‘God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son...’*

From the time of mankind’s rebellion God has been lovingly seeking the lost. In the Garden of Eden the questions God addressed to Adam (*‘Where are you?’* and *‘What have you done?’* Genesis 3:8-11) and the promise he made of a saviour (to *‘crush’* the serpent’s head Gen. 3:15) set the framework for his rescue plan. Throughout the Bible God is the missionary and it is his zeal that brings salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 9:7).

The mission of the Son

John 3:16 continues, *‘...that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life’*. This is the purpose for which God sent his son into the world — *‘not to condemn ... but to save’* (3:17).

Isaiah’s second servant song (Is. 49:1-6) contains Jesus’ job description. God says to his servant, *‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you a light for*

the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth'. When his hour had come, Jesus' unique saving work took him to the cross, fulfilling the role of the servant as he submitted himself to *'bearing the sin of many'* (53:12) and opening the way of salvation to Jew and Gentile alike (Acts 1:8; Romans 1:16).

The sending of the disciples by Jesus

'As the Father sent me, so I send you' declared Jesus.

In Jesus' saying, different Greek words are used for each *'sending'* — this cautions against overstating the extent of the parallel. Rather than implying that the disciples would mimic his incarnation or repeat his work, Jesus is making the straightforward point that the disciples must reckon themselves *sent* to carry out their task, just as he had been sent by the Father to accomplish his task. The emphasis is on the fact of being sent, not on the mode of the sending or the content of the task. This agrees with John's insistence, throughout his gospel, that the coming of the Son and the work he came to do are truly unique.

Jesus' prayer for unity between the disciples and those who would believe through their testimony (John 17:20-21) anticipates a oneness in both faith and mission, for which he gives the Spirit (John 20:22). There is to be no special category of Christian designated *'missionary'*, since all disciples are sent. The question for each of us to settle is where to live and in what capacity to work, as we involve ourselves in Jesus' mission, obeying his command to love our neighbour in sharing with them the good news of salvation.

Mission and the local church

The fruit of God's mission is the church, the gathering of believers who will now not perish but inherit eternal life.

The Bible nowhere speaks of *'the mission of the church'*, because mission belongs to God — he is the Missioner and Jesus is the one who is sent. The church is the object of the exercise. *'The New Testament concept of the church is not of an institution. The church is those who have been*

called together by the gospel. All the ‘sending’ has the gathering of God’s people by the gospel as its goal. The gathering, the ‘church’, is not the means to some other goal’. (John Woodhouse)

In his closing vision, Isaiah speaks of ‘survivors’ sent to distant islands ‘*who have not heard of God’s fame or seen his glory*’ (Is. 66:19). This is the first sure mention of mission as we today employ the term — the sending of individuals to distant peoples in order to proclaim God’s glory among them. The result is a new family ‘gathered from all the nations’ (66:20) and we, in these distant islands, can be grateful to God for those with beautiful feet (52:7) who came to our end of the earth.

Gospel priorities

God sees the needs of the world with great intensity, and chooses to delay the return of his son in order to prolong the time for addressing its deepest need. The Apostle Peter urges contentment with this, and obedient living, since God desires that ‘*none should perish but all come to repentance*’ (2 Peter 3:8).

Seeing things from God’s perspective will mean that we will not be satisfied with a church building that is full when men and women are heading for hell all around us; it will mean that we cannot submit to institutional rules holding back church planting when mission is God’s overriding priority; it will mean we cannot be content to see any one group of people being reached by the gospel if another (distinct in its social, ethnic or linguistic profile) is denied the opportunity; it will mean we must not sit loose from his demand to live holy and godly lives, despite the pressures of pagan society; it will mean that we will not tolerate racial discrimination amongst us, since God’s purpose is to draw all people without favouritism to himself; it will mean that we dare not allow ourselves to be preoccupied with the fall-out from mankind’s rebellion when daily God permits it to continue in order to extend time for gospel proclamation; it will mean that we will embrace God’s world-wide agenda and pray that he raise up labourers for his harvest field, as Jesus taught us to do.

Gospel partnerships

The relationship between the local church and believers sent out for gospel work (e.g. Acts 13:3) is that of a special kind of partnership, as it was between the church at Philippi and the Apostle Paul (see Philippians 1:5; 4:15). Such partnerships consist of more than mere support since they involve an active, two-way engagement in giving and in prayer, lived out in a shared commitment to making a stand for the one, true gospel.

It is for the fostering of such gospel partnerships, alongside the enabling of the individuals concerned, that mission agencies exist. Such agencies are not church, and should not attempt to usurp the place of churches. They exist to serve the churches, knowing that God is the Missioner, Jesus is the one God sent and that he, in turn, sends disciples to summon people of every race and language into eternal life.

For further reading

Chris Green Essay *The incarnation and mission in The Word made Flesh*, Oak Hill College 2002

Andreas Kostenberger *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel* (Eerdmans 1998)

Kostenberger & O'Brien *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (IVP Apollos 2001)

John Woodhouse Essay *Evangelism and social responsibility* in Explorations 3, Moore College 1988

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