

Theology 2.5 The Mission of the Church to the World

DEFINITION

The mission of the church is the task given by God for the people of God to accomplish in the world.

In talking about the mission of the church, we are not trying to enumerate all the good things Christians can or should do to love their neighbors and to be salt and light in the world. The issue at hand relates to the church as church. What collectively as an organized institution must we be about as God's people if we are to faithfully accomplish his purposes for us in the world? The Latin verb *mittere* corresponds to the Greek verb *apostellein*, which occurs 136 times in the New Testament (97 times in the Gospels, used both for Jesus having been "sent" by God and for the Twelve being "sent" by Jesus).³

The apostles, in the broadest sense of the term, were those who had been sent out. This sent-outness is also the first thing we should note relative to the term missionary. It is, after all, the first thing Jesus notes about his mission, that he was sent to proclaim a message of good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). Being "on mission" or engaging in mission work suggests intentionality and movement.⁴ Mission, at the very least, involves being sent from one place to somewhere else.

Every Christian—if we are going to be obedient to the Great Commission—must be involved in missions, but not every Christian is a missionary. While it is certainly true that we should all be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have (1Pet. 3:15), and we should all adorn the gospel with our good works (Titus 2:1), and we should all do our part to make Christ known (1Thess. 1:8; 2Thess. 3:1), we should reserve the term "missionary" for those who are intentionally sent out from one place to another. Strictly speaking, the church is not sent out, but sends out workers from her midst. Our fundamental identity as church (*ekklesia*) is not as those who are sent into the world with a mission, but as those who are called out from darkness into his marvelous light (1Pet. 2:9).⁵

GOD'S MISSIONARY HEART

Missions of the church begins with the very heart of God.

1. Mission

"The *missio Dei*, that is, God's mission, God's plan through all ages, to redeem and save the world through His own initiative."

2. Missions

"The various tasks which the church is called to in order to fulfill the Great Commission and be obedient to our Lord Jesus Christ."

The obedient, spirit lead strategy and implementation of plans to fulfill God's mission to the world.

Missions must flow from God's mission (first coined by the early Jesuit missionary)

Divine Initiative ("*praeparatio evangelica*" -preparation the soil, of the gospel in people's heart)
"The missionaries did not bring the gospel to Africa, God brought the missionary to Africa."

1. Old Testament

Mission of God lies behind the whole of the Old Testament

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A. Genesis 12:2-3 "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."³

- personal numerical blessing (descendants)
- national geographic blessing to Israel ("look to the north south east west , this land will belong to you and your descendant" promise land)
- spiritual blessings to all people (through your seed all people will be blessed through you)

B. Genesis 22

Promise to Abraham is repeated

D. Isaiah 49 Isaiah 49:6... To the suffering messiah (Christ) ⁶ "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

- Blessing and promise to be extended beyond Israel to the Gentiles.

2. New Testament

What was the nature of Jesus's ministry? Jesus ministered to bodies as well as souls, but within this holistic ministry, he made preaching his priority. Preaching is why he came out in public ministry and why he moved from town to town (Mark 1:38-39).

The purpose of his Spirit-anointed ministry was to proclaim good news to the poor (Luke 4:18-19). He came to call sinners to repentance and faith (Mark 1:15; 2:17). Although Jesus frequently attended to the physical needs of those around him, there is not a single example of Jesus going into a town with the purpose of healing or casting out demons. The Son of Man never ventured out on a healing or exorcism tour. His stated purpose was to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

Of course, Jesus' mission must not be reduced to verbal proclamation. Unique to his identity as the divine Messiah, Jesus's mission was to die for the sins of his people (Matt. 1:21; Mark 10:45). With this purpose, Jesus's public ministry aimed at the eternal life that could come to the sinner only through faith in Christ (John 3:16-17; 14:6; 20:21). We see this in Mark's Gospel, for example, where the entire narrative builds toward the centurion's confession in Mark 15:37 where, in fulfillment of the book's opening sentence (Mark 1:1), the Roman soldier confesses, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" Leading people to this Spirit-given conviction is the purpose of Mark's gospel and of Jesus's ministry. The Messiah ministered to bodies as well as souls and made preaching his priority so that those with ears to hear might see his true identity and follow him in faith.

The promise of blessing made about Christ in the Old Testament is brought to the world through the obedience of the Church to satisfy the Great Commission. It is then that no wonder all four Gospels (plus Acts) include some version of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). The mission given to the disciples was not one of

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cultural transformation—though that would often come as a result of their message—but a mission of gospel proclamation.

18 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

Acts 13:46-47

⁴⁶ And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Acts is the inspired history of the mission of the church. This second volume from Luke describes what those commissioned at the end of the first volume were sent out to do (Luke 24:47-48). If the Luke’s Gospel was the book of everything Jesus began to do and teach (1:1), then Acts must be the record of all that Jesus continues to do and teach.

We could look at almost any chapter in Acts to gain insight into the mission of the church, but Acts 14 is especially instructive, verses 21-23 in particular. At the beginning of Acts 13, the church at Antioch, prompted by the Holy Spirit, set apart Paul and Barnabas “for the work to which I have called them” (v. 2). This isn’t the first time the gospel is going to be preached to unbelievers in Acts, neither is it the first gospel work Paul and Barnabas will do. But it is the first time we see a church intentionally sending out Christian workers with a mission to another location.

Paul and Barnabas traveled to Cyprus, then to Pisidian Antioch, then to Iconium, then to Lystra, then to Derbe, and from there back through Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, and then to Perga, and back to Antioch in Syria. The final section in Acts 14 is not only a good summary of Paul’s missionary work, it is the sort of information Paul would have shared with the church in Antioch when he returned (v. 27). These verses are like the power point presentation Paul and Barnabas shared with their sending church. “This is how we saw God at work. Here’s what where we went and what we did.” In other words, if any verses are going to give us a succinct description of what mission was about in the early church, it’s verses like these at the end of Acts 14.

Acts 14:21-23 presents us with the three-legged stool of the church’s mission. Through the missionary work of the Apostle Paul, the early church aimed for:

- New converts: “when they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples” (v. 21)
- New communities: “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church” (v. 23)
- Nurtured churches: “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith” (v. 22).

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If the apostles are meant to be the church's model for mission, then we should expect our missionaries to be engaged in these activities and pray for them to that end. The goal of mission work is to win new converts, establish these young disciples in the faith, and incorporate them into a local church.