

**‘SPREADING THE WORD’:
ASPECTS OF THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF MISSION
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Where does one begin in attempting to explore the biblical foundation for mission? Thoughtful consideration of the evidence soon leads to the conclusion that the missionary activity of the church is based on something far deeper and fundamental to Christianity than the explicit commands found in the gospels and Acts (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). Harry Boer¹ makes the key observation that the Great Commission played no conscious role in the motivation of the early church. Indeed, after Acts 1:8 there is no mention of the command either by way of reminder or instruction to the growing young churches. Yet mission was a hallmark of the life of these early Christians.

Something in their essential understanding of the faith made missionary endeavour a natural outworking of a new life in Christ. Little evidence exists of a purely dutiful obedience to an external command, practised by the enthusiastic few. Therefore, to explore the full dimensions of our mandate for mission we must return to a fresh examination of the essence of biblical faith.

This presents a task which is beyond the confines of this article. The biblical foundation for mission is not primarily located in proof texts but is to be found in the totality of biblical revelation. With this recognition of the whole Bible as our basis for mission, I intend to highlight five aspects for consideration in exploring this basis. Certain generalizations have been unavoidable and the argument presumes their acceptance. Further reading, as suggested, would help clarify the evidence leading to them.

Before examining the suggested aspects, three areas need comment by way of background.

Preliminary considerations

An historical perspective

Dr John Stott analyses the history of mission as follows, 'It is an observable fact of history, both past and contemporary, that the degree of the church's commitment to world evangelization is commensurate with the degree of its conviction about the authority of the Bible. Whenever Christians lose their confidence in the Bible, they also lose their zeal for evangelism. Conversely, whenever they are convinced about the Bible, then they are determined about evangelism.'²

However, the Reformation stands out as a major exception to this trend. Having brought about the release of new spiritual forces on the principle of *sola scriptura*, there did not emerge any major emphasis on world evangelization. With few exceptions it was not until after the Evangelical Awakening and the personal vision of William Carey in the late eighteenth century, that Protestant churches began to inaugurate a world mission programme. Amidst the many political and social factors involved, the theology of the reformers remains a crucial element. Whether by relegation of the Great Commission to a different period in history, an over emphasis on the sovereignty of God or dismay concerning the future of the world, mission was not seen as a duty or ministry that the church could or should fulfil.

Lessons need to be clearly acknowledged. A solid basis for mission is only found from a position of commitment to biblical authority. However, there needs to be an equal awareness that sincerely held theological positions can serve to blind the church to the biblical priority of mission.

A missiological perspective

This is not to negate theology, but releases us to take a fresh look at the evidence. In approaching the Bible we often rush in to examine the 'trees' without a thorough survey of the 'wood'. When we do the latter we discover that biblical revelation, beyond being our mandate for mission, is by its nature an exercise in missiology.

The Bible is an historical revelation and as such it comes in the context of God's missionary strategy—God engaging in mission to

the nations in calling Israel, then sending his Son and through him the church. This will be developed later. Yet not only does the historical thread earmark the Bible as a missionary book, but the origins of the New Testament in particular indicate its essential nature as a 'mission treatise'.

Dr Chris Wright in his introductory *Users Guide to the Bible*,³ suggests three major concerns behind the writing of the New Testament:

- 1 Spreading the message of Christ;
- 2 Solving the problems in the newly planted churches;
- 3 Defending the faith against heresy and non-Christian alternatives.

What are these if not missionary concerns? The New Testament came into being not as a collection of theological papers, but as living tracts and letters, rooted in the reality of an ongoing missionary endeavour.

From this perspective the Bible not only supports our understanding of mission as central in the life of the church but mission also becomes a central element in our understanding of the Bible.

A theological perspective

But why is mission so central? Quite simply, because God is central. Scripture reveals God—and the study of God is the essence of theology. It is in this study that we find our aspects of a biblical basis of mission. Missiology (the study of mission) must be firmly based on a clear appreciation of the biblical revelation of God. And this revelation, if appropriated in the life of the church, places mission in the centre of that life and not on the fringe, because mission is a central concept in our understanding of God. This gives us a truly theological perspective.

The biblical basis for mission

Mission expresses the person of God

Throughout the New Testament the maxim for Christian life and conduct is that we are to be like Christ. Paul calls us to imitate him as he does Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1) and goes further with a charge to imitate God (Ephesians 5:1). Peter reminds us that God says 'Be holy, because I am holy' (1 Peter 1:15). This direct correlation of the Christian character and the person of God has led

Michael Griffiths to conclude that God is equally saying 'Be missionary because I am a missionary', 'And the great motivation for our missionary outreach is as simple as that.'⁴

So what is the evidence that leads us to view God as a missionary? Firstly, it is that he is the creator. Genesis chapter one is the necessary basis for Matthew 28:19-20. The God who created man is the God who searches for rebellious man in the garden (Genesis 3:8-9) and continues to reach out to him today. God the creator becomes God the redeemer, who takes the initiative in providing for man's salvation.

Secondly, it is because he is sovereign. 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it' (Psalm 24:1; note the reference to creation in verse 2). God made the world and the world belongs to him. He has exclusive rights on the worship of all men everywhere. Mission is his chosen means of establishing those rights.

Thirdly, God is a God of relationships. He is not an isolationist. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. George Peters suggests why this might be: 'The fact that God is spirit, light and love eliminates the idea of the self-containment of God. He is the God of history—a God of relationships.'⁵ Jesus' unveiling of God as Spirit (John 4:24) has a two-fold emphasis. It shows us God as the absolute, the totally other. Yet this same God *seeks* worshippers. He is beyond limitations, so much so that he moves outside the seeming restrictiveness of his otherness and seeks to relate himself to man. As an outgoing Spirit he is a missionary God.

The majestic statement that God is light (1 John 1:5) conveys the concept of his holiness. As such he is unapproachable. Again Peters grasps another angle: 'It implies that it is the nature of God to illumine darkened man, to shine upon his path . . . As man turns to the light in repentance and faith, He imparts Himself . . . in order to quicken, and liven, cleanse and glorify man. The fact that God is light imparts hope and suggests that He will make . . . provision for the salvation of fallen and darkened man in accordance with His own purpose and commensurate with His own nature. He is the outshining God; He is the God of missions.'⁶

Perhaps the sublime statement that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16) is more readily accepted as a foundation for mission. On this Peters comments: 'Divine love is that impelling and dynamic quality in which God moves out of Himself and in which He relates Himself in all benefits and sufficiency to His creation.'⁷ Love brought God to act on our behalf before we acknowledged him (Romans 5:6-8).

In all of this, God is seen to be 'missionary' at the very centre of

his person. It is in full appreciation of this God and in conformity to his image that we should find our primary basis for mission.

Mission reflects the practice of God

As God reveals himself to us in scripture we find him to be a triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each member of the Godhead is seen to express the missionary nature of God as they relate to mankind in mission.

With the revelation of God as Father scripture presents us with a unique teaching and is quick to emphasize the implications for mission. The central element of God's mission to man is the incarnation. On this J Herbert Kane comments: 'It is very clear that the incarnation is God the Father's idea, not man's, not even Christ's. Consistently Jesus reminded His hearers that He did not come of His own volition but was sent by the Father.'⁸ In other words, the Father was the first 'missionary society'—he sent the Son 'to be the Saviour of the world' (1 John 4:14).

And in that sense Jesus was the first 'pioneer missionary'. Max Warren states it more emphatically: 'Jesus Himself is the Great Commission. He is the Man who is sent. He Himself is the Message. In His life and through His teachings and actions, in His dying and His death and by His resurrection, He is the proclamation of His Message. He is its herald.'⁹ As the gift of God's love (John 3:16), and as the presence of God's light (John 1:9-14; 8:12), Jesus was sent into the world. He came with a missionary message of repentance and the good news of the kingdom (Matthew 4:17, 23) and a clear concept of his missionary task of reconciling men to God (Mark 10:45). The means he employed in accomplishing his mission remain as the supreme example of cross-cultural communication (Philippians 2:5-11). He crossed the barrier; he made God relevant to man in the most complete way possible (John 1:14). In his person and actions Jesus shows us what mission is all about.

Acts 1:8 provides us with Jesus' commentary on the events at Pentecost. This outpouring of the Holy Spirit was primarily an empowering for mission. Certainly it was a confirmation that the believers were included in Christ (Ephesians 1:13-14), and he is sent as 'Counsellor' (John chapters 14, 16), with all that implies about his ministry to the church. But the only power promised to those who are in receipt of the Spirit is the power for witness. Indeed it is the Spirit who convicts the world of its need for God (John 16:8-11). He is the missionary Spirit, engaging in mission to

the world and empowering the church for her mission¹⁰ (John 15:26-27).

God's practice is mission (cf *missio*—to 'send'). The Father sent the Son and then the Holy Spirit, and the thrust of their ministry is the salvation of man. We who are in Christ have been on the receiving end of God's missionary activity. If God was not a missionary and did not engage in mission to his world, we would not be who and where we are today. A grateful reflection of God's dealings with us is a further consideration in our basis of mission.

Mission fulfils the purpose of God

The ultimate purpose of God is expressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:28 'so that God may be all in all'. God is in the business of establishing his kingdom. The primary meaning of kingdom in scripture is the rank, authority and sovereignty exercised by a king.¹¹ God's kingdom is his reign and this is his purpose, the recognition of his rule and his filling of all things.

Throughout history God has acted in mission to bring this purpose about. With the coming of Jesus, God's kingdom has broken into this world. It is a present reality, yet has its full realization in the future when Jesus comes again. And when the disciples questioned Jesus about this his only reply was in terms of mission (Acts 1:6-8). Indeed in Matthew 24:14 Jesus links the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom to all nations with the complete realization of the kingdom.

It is impossible to be dogmatic concerning the precise details of how world evangelization is related to our Lord's second coming. However the clear implication is that it has a part to play in bringing about the realization of God's ultimate purpose. The structure of Matthew's gospel—with Jesus announcing the kingdom and preaching the good news of the kingdom (chapter 4); sending the twelve to do the same (chapter 10); stating that this must take place throughout the whole world before the end (chapter 24) and then commanding the disciples to 'Go and make disciples of all nations'—lends weight to this implication, as does the vision of a fulfilled task, given to John in Revelation (Revelation 5:9-10; 7:9-17).

So while we refrain from dogmatism in detailing what Christ meant, Matthew 24:14 is unambiguous in linking world evangelization to the consummation of this age—'and then the end will come'. Clearly whatever was meant has not been completed: 'Until the

time comes that God decides that it is complete we are responsible to continue the work in His strength, using the resources He has entrusted to us.'¹² How amazing that God has given the church a part in fulfilling his purposes through mission! A desire to see Jesus return and God's kingdom established merits recognition as a basis of mission.

Mission derives its pattern from God

Having established our motivational basis for mission in the biblical understanding of God's nature, plan and purpose, we can recognize that it is perhaps the failure to return there in order to understand the nature of mission, that has resulted in the polarized debate often characteristic of much discussion about mission. The emphasis we give to evangelism and church planting as opposed to social action, or vice versa, is to a certain extent dependent on our starting point.

Starting with the Great Commission as found in the synoptic gospels and Acts, priority can be established for preaching the good news of 'repentance and forgiveness of sins' (Luke 24:47). Stress is then put on witness resulting in the making of disciples and the building of the church through baptism and teaching. From this some go further and define mission *solely* in terms of evangelism and church planting. Such a narrow definition is, on reflection, untenable.

Firstly, by implication from Matthew 28:20, social action must be seen as a consequence of evangelism. Jesus instructs that new disciples are to be taught everything he has commanded. Social action, in terms of responsibility and duty to our neighbour, is a key element in his instruction about Christian behaviour. And for Jesus our neighbour is our fellow human being (Luke 10:9-37; Matthew 5:43-48). Such action is indispensable evidence of salvation, a point clearly applied by James in James 2:14-17. (See also Titus 2:14; Ephesians 2:10.)

Secondly, the reality of suffering, oppression, alienation and loneliness calls for action if the message of God's love is to be authenticated in today's world. In this way social action acts as a bridge to evangelism, not a bribe, as we meet people's felt needs and gain permission to relate to their deeper needs.

If, alternatively, we take as our starting point the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:34-40) then another equally valid perspective arises. For Jesus, loving our neighbour as oneself is second only to loving God with our whole being. Both sum up the totality of Old Testament revelation. Here love of our neighbour

(fellow human being) is the clear definition of our relationship to the world. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus defines love (Matthew 5:43-45) in terms of doing good. John Stott elaborates this as an injunction 'to give ourselves actively and constructively to serve our neighbours' welfare'.¹³

In this context social action is set on its own without reference to evangelism, and from this some have defined mission solely as our involvement in social action. In reaction, loving our neighbour has been restricted to sharing the gospel with them. Neither is correct. Sharing the gospel, 'neither explains, nor exhausts, nor supersedes the Great Commandment'.¹⁴ Equally, if we claim to love and, having the knowledge of salvation, fail to share the good news of Jesus, we have neglected our call to 'serve our neighbours' welfare'.

Exclusive emphasis on either of these starting points can lead to distortion. However, with balanced reflection on both and taking them together, they support mission as both social action and evangelism/church planting. Yet imbalance can still remain when we question priority. It is to resolve this that we must return to our understanding of God.

Probably the most remarkable words of Jesus are found in John 20:21. 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' Here Jesus does more than parallel our mission to his. He deliberately and precisely made his mission a model for ours. Jesus is our pattern for mission, and in him the tension is resolved.

For Jesus teaching, preaching and healing were integral to his ministry (Matthew 9:35; Luke 4:18-19 amongst others). On occasions he healed, on others he preached, sometimes he taught and often we find a combination. What is clear is that each were equally valid expressions of his mission in their own right. As the situation demanded, he ministered to needs, and healing, preaching and teaching often stand *alone* as the fulfilment of his mission.

The astounding revelation of Jesus as the servant is the key to our understanding here. This is at the heart of Paul's comprehension and appreciation of Jesus (Philippians 2:5-11 especially verse 7; 2 Corinthians 8:9). Jesus was sent to serve and his ransoming of mankind is the climax to a life of service (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27). Service was his mission, not preaching, teaching or healing. They were the means by which he engaged in service. In this way his words and works are uniquely bound in the concept of service, service that ultimately resulted in death on behalf of those he sought to serve (Philippians 2:8).

It is as servant that Jesus sends the church. Only in servanthood can we recover the balance between evangelism/church planting

and social action. Sometimes need will express itself in an overwhelming demand for one or the other, more often both. Ultimately the partnership of both in a 'life of service' will lead to men knowing the ransoming power of Christ. But any choice of priority in the immediate situation is a choice between equal partners that together are the service which will bring men to Christ. The call to mission is primarily a call to servanthood.

Mission characterizes the people of God

This final aspect brings us back to the beginning—God. Those who have entered a relationship with God on his conditions and as a result of his action, are now his people. As such they are to be like God, sharing his nature, reflecting his action, fulfilling his purposes and following his pattern. Mission then becomes a characteristic of their life.

But can we go further? 'Church and mission are one and cannot be . . . broken apart. Mission can never be thought of as only one of the marks of the church. It is *the* mark of the church. All other church activities are derived from this essential task and must be judged by it.'¹⁵ This position can be established when we consider not only the nature of God's people as they become like him but also the nature of their call to be his people.

In Genesis 12:1-3 we find God calling Abraham and through him Israel, to be his people. God's call is of itself an act of mission towards Abraham. He seeks to relate to him and will bless him. However such blessing comes as Abraham is sent and results in responsibility for Abraham as a blessing to the nations. Ultimately this points to Christ, but there is immediate fulfilment in the life of the people Israel. Blessed by God, they are to be a testimony to the nations (Deuteronomy 4:1-9a; Exodus 19:4-6), drawing the people in (centripetal) as witnesses of God (Isaiah 43:10, 12).

The people of the new covenant maintain a continuity with Israel, their calling in Christ Jesus being God's ultimate act of mission to mankind. With this comes the clear revelation, often misunderstood by Israel, that God is concerned with all nations. This results in the specific command to go (centrifugal) as witnesses of Christ.

However it is the now permanent indwelling by the Holy Spirit of the new covenant people that unites the concepts of the calling and nature of the church. The missionary Spirit builds the church as the *object* of his mission, conferring on her a missionary nature

that results in the church being the *agent* of his mission. Mission is therefore at the heart of all that the church is and does.

The primary function of the church is to worship the God who called her into relationship with himself. Ultimately the key to motivating our churches for mission is not a biblical/theological basis for mission but an understanding of the missionary nature of scripture founded on the missionary nature of theology—of God. This only develops as the church worships God, a worship that will lead to witness because God is missionary. 'The supreme arguments for missions are not found in any specific words. It is in the very being and character of God that the deepest ground of the missionary enterprise is to be found. We cannot think of God except in terms which necessitate the missionary idea. Though words may reveal eternal missionary duties the grounds are in the very being and thought of God, in the character of Christianity, in the aim and purpose of the Christian Church, and in the nature of humanity, its unity and its need.'¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 Harry R Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Eerdmans, 1961) especially chapters 1,2.
- 2 J R W Stott, 'The Bible in World Evangelization' in R Winter and S Hawthorne (eds) *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (William Carey Library, 1981).
- 3 Chris Wright, *Users Guide to the Bible* (Lion, 1984) 88-90.
- 4 Michael Griffiths, *What on Earth are you doing?* (IVP, 1983) 10.
- 5 George Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Moody Press, 1972) 58.
- 6 Ibid 59.
- 7 Ibid 59, 60.
- 8 J Herbert Kane, *The Christian World Mission: Today and Tomorrow* (Baker, 1981) 20. See also John 12:49; 5:19.
- 9 Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission*, 'Introduction' (Hodder and Stoughton, 1976).
- 10 For further reading on the Holy Spirit, see H R Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*.
- 11 See further, G E Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, 1959).
- 12 H H Rowdon, *Turning the Church Inside Out* (BMMF International, 1982) 54.
- 13 J R W Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Falcon, 1975) 29.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 John E Skoglund, *To the Whole Creation* (Judson Press, 1962) 94.
- 16 Robert E Speer, *Christianity and the Nations* (Revell, 1910) 17-18.