QUESTIONS 1: WHAT IS MISSION?

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The church's mission is our participation (in the power of the Spirit) in the Father's purpose to reconcile everything to himself through the death of the Son. We do this through making disciples by bearing witness to Jesus in word and deed.Â

Category: Observations

Over the next few weeks, I want to try and answer some questions that people have about mission, the global church, Bible translation and other issues that I cover in this blog. Inevitably, this means that I'll be repeating things that I have posted in past, but it will draw a lot of threads together in one place. The answers I give won't necessarily be the ones that you would find in standard mission texts; if you want those answers, read the books. I'm also on the lookout for questions. I'm not particularly looking for questions from "mission people", rather from others involved in churches (particularly, but not exclusively, in the UK) who want to explore more about what mission means. If you have any questions that you'd like me to address - they can be as broad or as narrow as you like - leave them in the comments for this post or contact me via Twitter or Facebook.

So, to kick off the series, what is mission?

To be honest, mission is somewhat of a troublesome term. Its origins are in a Latin translation of the Greek words for "to send" and it wasn't used in its modern sense of "sending missionaries" until around the time of the Reformation. What this means is that there is no clear, biblical definition of mission - at least not one that people agree on.

Broadly speaking, people writing on mission divide into two camps, those who define mission in terms of the "great commission" passages at the end of the Gospels and those who define it more broadly in terms of God's actions throughout Scripture. I fall into the latter camp, but that doesn't mean that I don't take the "great commission" passages seriously.

I believe that missionÂ finds its origin and meaning in the triune God's purposes and actions in history as revealed through the biblical narrative. It is dangerous to pick out one passage to sum this up, but I think Colossians 1:20 gets close to doing so:

> *and through him God reconciledÂ everything to himself.Â He made peace with everything in heaven and on earthÂ by means of Christâ€™s blood on the cross.*

So, as a preliminary definition, the church's mission is our participation (in the power of the Spirit) in the Father's purpose to reconcile everything to himself through the death of the Son.

However, this doesn't help us much in determining what it is that we actually should do. Just a note in passing, this passage shows us that God's purposes and therefore our mission are not restricted to human beings, the whole of creation is in focus. I believe this is backed up by the wider biblical narrative, but it is why I would agree that creation-care is part of the church's mission.

So, with this framework in place, let's briefly look at the "great commission" passages in Acts and Matthew.

> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhereâ€"in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in*

> *Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

The clear call here is to be witnesses to Jesus; to show the reality of his message in word and deed. This will include teaching and preaching, but it will also include other things that Jesus did such as confronting injustice and religious hypocrisy and healing the sick.

> *Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations,Â baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.Â Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Mathew 28:19,20)*

Though it isn't entirely clear from the English translation, the primary command here is not to go, but to make disciples. In both the Acts and the Matthew passage, the implication is that Christians are already going; they are travelling around the world to every nation. This doesn't preclude "professional missionaries" who go with that specific aim, but it certainly isn't limited to them either. We all have a responsibility to make disciples by witnessing to Jesus wherever we are.

So let's pull all of this together into a definition of mission which I suspect will not please any mission scholar - but as long as I upset them all equally, that's fine!

The church's mission is our participation (in the power of the Spirit) in the Father's purpose to reconcile everything to himself through the death of the Son. We do this through making disciples by bearing witness to Jesus in word and deed.Â

It's not about making converts and it goes beyond preaching and teaching - but making disciples must lie at the heart of what we do if something is to be genuinely called mission.

I've added links to a few books which cover issues raised in this post, I don't agree with the position taken by all of them, but they are still worth reading. I'd also recommend my own little ebook on the great commission which you can find here.