MISSION IS: PROBLEMATIC

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Mission isn't a term which is found in the Bible. This means that people are able to read all sorts of meanings into it. This is a problem!
Category: Observations

Given that my PhD thesis was about Evangelical Mission Agencies, it seemed sensible to start off by defining what is meant by the various components of the term. However, the job of defining exactly what mission is, is more complex than you might imagine. I wrote:

> *Until the sixteenth century, the term â€œmissionâ€ was used in Christian theology in conjunction with the doctrine of the Trinity; the sending of the Son by the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son (Bosch, 1991, 1). It was first used in terms of the intentional spread of the Christian faith by the Jesuits in the sixteenth century (Bosch, 1991, 1; Kim, 2009, 9; Stroope, 2017, 238). Used in this manner, the word mission became closely associated with European colonial expansion (Bosch, 1991, 1; Smith, 2003, 15). The churchâ€™s understanding of mission has evolved over time as typified by Boschâ€™s suggestion that different paradigms of mission have existed at different points in the churchâ€™s history (Bosch, 1991, 181). Even within a relatively narrow churchmanship and over a short space of time, thoughts about mission can be shown to evolve. In 1975 the Anglican clergyman John Stott published a short book of lectures on mission; in 2016 this book was reprinted with responses to Stottâ€™s lectures by his friend and protege Christopher Wright. While Wright shows a great deal of affection and respect for Stottâ€™s positions, he is clear that over the passage of time the understanding of mission has developed beyond that which Stott had expressed (Stott and Wright, 2016).*
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> *The fact that the churchâ€™s understanding and approach to mission is evolving means that there are often significant disagreements over issues which one might consider to be fundamental to any definition of mission...*
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> *(Arthur, 2020, 18)*

The most fundamental disagreements lie around the issue of what exactly constitutes mission. There are those who would see mission as being limited to evangelism and church planting, whereas others would adopt a much broader view that includes issues such as education and creation-care. Some would see travel or crossing cultural boundaries as being essential components of mission, while others would define all of the church's outward facing activity at home or abroad as being part of its mission. I will return to these issues in more detail in a subsequent post.

The root of this problem lies in the fact that mission *per se* is not a Biblical concept. As my original quote indicates, our current use of terms such as *mission, missions, missionary* and *missional* derives from Roman Catholic practice rather than directly from the Scriptures. This is not to say that the

practices are wrong (far from it), but it does mean that actually defining the terms is problematic.

> *Because mission is not a biblical word like covenant or justification or gospel, determining its meaning for believers is particularly difficult. We could do a study of the word gospel and come to some pretty firm biblical conclusions about â€œWhat is the Gospel?â€ . . . But mission is a bit trickier.Â*
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> *(DeYoung and Gilbert, 2011, 17)*

We can't simply look into the Bible for a description of what mission is. Indeed, the problem gets trickier than that. Michael Stroope has pointed out that because we already have a concept of what mission is, we read our own, modern concepts back into the Bible (Stroope 2017 and see note below). When we say something like the Apostle Paul is the greatest missionary, we will inevitably impose some of our conceptions of what constitutes a missionary back onto Paul. This undoubtedly confuses the picture.

One suggestion is that we should abandon the use of mission language altogether in favour of more historical or biblically accurate terms. Stroope edges towards this view as does Payne in an excellent recent paper which is based on a forthcoming book (Payne, 2021). I have some sympathy for this approach, but I believe that mission language is so entrenched in the life of the church that we will have to continue using it, despite the problems. The fact that Stroope and Payne come up with different alternatives to mission language indicates how difficult this question actually is.

However, if we continue to use terms such as mission, we do so knowing that not everyone will understand them in the same way that we do. At the very least, this could lead to some minor confusion. This possible confusion means that people who write about mission need to define their terms. What exactly do we mean by mission? What does it include and what does it exclude? However, before we define our terms, it is necessary to think through the basis for the definition itself. It is not sufficient to say that "mission is x" without first explaining the underlying reasons for making that statement.

The next posts in this series will explore my rationale for defining mission in the way I do, before actually setting out what that definition might look like.

Note on Michael Stroope's work. Stroope's 2017 book was republished in a condensed form in 2020. I reviewed the shorter version here. I interviewed Professor Stroope in 2021 for those who are interested in

his work but who are not able to access his written work. You can find the interview format here.

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