MISSION IS THEOCENTRIC I

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Category: Observations

In the previous post in this series, I raised the problem of mission language and suggested that those of us who write and talk about mission actually need to define our terms, so that others can know what it is that we are talking about. However, before we can define our terms, we have to set the presuppositions that our definition is based on. Let's take an example; if we say that mission is defined by the "great commission" in Matthew 28, we need to explain why other passages from the Gospels do not form part of the definition (for example, Matthew 22:36-40 - the "great commandment").

In the next few posts, I will be laying the framework for my approach to defining mission. This may sound a bit geeky, but I think it is important.

Most definitions and descriptions of mission start out by talking about what people do; evangelism, works of service and so on. However, I'm not convinced that this is a good approach. My view is that in all theological discussions, our starting point should be the Triune God and not humanity. Ultimately, God and his purposes in creation and redemption are at the basis of all theology. If I were a better systematician, I could probably give references for that, but I'm not - sorry.

So, I regard it as axiomatic that any definition of mission must start with God; in other words, mission is theocentric. It would be possible to explore this theme in many different ways. However, for our purposes I think that two particular issues will suffice:

- The end point of mission is the glory of God.
- God, himself, is the prime mover in mission.

The rest of this post will briefly consider the first point and the next one in the series will look at the second one.

The end point of mission is the glory of God.

Actually, the purpose of creation itself is the glory of God.

> *The heavens declare the glory of God*
>
> *Psalm 19:1*

> *For since the creation of the world Godâ€™s invisible qualitiesâ€"his eternal power and divine natureâ€"have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,*
>
> *Romans 1:20*

It is possible to multiply passages like these from both the Old and New Testaments. The Westminster Shorter Catechism famously captures this principle.

> ***Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?***
>
> *A. Manâ€™s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.*
>
> *https://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/shorter-catechism/*

Mission is, by its nature, an activity which finds its place within the realm of God's creation. So if the purpose of creation (and humanity) is to glorify God, then mission shares that purpose. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in Revelation 7:9-12 when we see the multitude gathered from the nations praising God. This is memorably captures by John Piper:

> *Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.*
>
> *(Piper, 1993, 11)*

What this means in practical terms is that the activities that we engage in in mission and - crucially - the way that we engage in them must be aimed at the glory of God. Those things that we tend to see as the end points or purposes of mission; churches planted, people saved, increased education, reconciliation, translated Bible and the rest, are steps on the way to the greater purpose of God's glory. They are not, in and of themselves, the reason why mission exists. If we think this through, it should shape how we go about mission.

References

Piper, J. (1993) *Let the nations be glad! : the supremacy of God in missions*. IVP,