MISSION IS: BIBLICAL I

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Category: Observations

In the previous posts in this series, I have laid the framework for a discussion about mission by starting with God and his activities in time and eternity. One of the obvious ways that God works is by co-opting human beings to work alongside him. This extends from Adam being given the care of the garden (Genesis 2:15), to Jesus' disciples being sent out into the world on his behalf (John 20:21). As the previous post shows, God's interaction with humanity in this way is not just revealed in the Bible, but it underpins the very existence of the Bible itself.

Having laid this framework, it is now necessary to start focussing on the concept of mission itself. The problem is that mission is a modern term which we read back into the Bible (see Stroope 2017). Any decision about the Biblical basis of mission will involve an aspect of choice or interpretation. As we will see, this interpretation is complicated by the way in which we understand mission in the first place. Those who view mission primarily in terms of evangelism and disciple making will tend to find the Biblical basis of mission in the great commission of Matthew 28, while those who see mission in holistic terms will find a broader basis. There are some complexities here that we will return to in a later post, but ultimately, we need to derive our understanding of mission from the Bible, rather than reading our own view of what mission is into the text.

In a recent paper, Hannes Wiher set out a number of alternative ways in which people have found mission in the Bible. This longish quote is very helpful in summarising much of the discussion.

> *Does mission start with Jesus Christâ€™s propitiatory deathÂ on the cross and his resurrection? The Protestant missionary movement of the nineteenth century adopted this approach, according to which the Great Commission of Matthew 28 carries supreme importance for mission. An important representative of this position, David Bosch, devoted just four of 500 pages in his 1991 bookÂ Transforming MissionÂ to mission in the Old Testament. This option implies a relatively narrow definition of mission and salvation.*
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> *Does mission start with the ministry of Jesus?Â Luke 4:18f. has frequently been cited in this way within the ecumenical movement, by radical evangelicals and by the Micah Network. In Luke 4, the definition of mission and salvation is broad, including not only eternal salvation but also physical, social and political aspects. However, these groups tend not to highlight the effusion of the Holy Spirit (v. 22) and the forgiveness of sins (v. 23). The parallel passage of John 20:21 is also quoted often by these circles and was emphasized by John Stott. Missiology has tended to neglect these two passages in the past.*
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> *Does mission start with Abrahamâ€™s sending in Genesis 12?Â Abraham is blessed and mandated to be a blessing for all the families of the earth. The New Testament often refers to*

> *Abraham. The notion of blessing as stated in the Cape Town Commitment could encompass this creational and missionary mandate. However, certain interpreters introduce a dichotomy between material and spiritual dimensions into the notion of blessing.*
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> *Does mission start with the Fall in Genesis 3?Â In this case, the objective would be the restoration of the relationship between God and mankind. It would be logical for a solution to be offered immediately after the problem has emerged. The representatives of this option tend to distinguish clearly between the creational and the missionary mandate. This implies narrow definitions of mission and salvation, limited to the eternal destiny of man.*
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> *Does mission start with the declaration of biblical monotheism in Genesis 1?Â A distinction between the creational and missionary mandate would become meaningless, or at least difficult to sustain, in this option. On the other hand, the notions of mission and salvation would become quite broad. This is the position of Christopher Wright, coordinator of the Theological Commission of the Lausanne Movement, in his 2006 bookÂ The Mission of God.*
>
> *Wiher 2021*

For my part, I would argue that mission starts at the creation narrative in the book of Genesis. My reasoning for this, is that this is the point at which God first commissions human beings to do things on his behalf. Though I haven't yet defined mission, the last couple of posts have indicated that I see this "partnership" between God and humanity as central to the whole concept. For this reason, I see mission starting at the point where the divine-human partnership started.

There are two key aspects of the "partnership" in the opening chapters of Genesis. The first is that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27). In popular Christian thought, this is taken to say something about the nature of humanity; which indeed it does. However, the first purpose of an image is to represent the one whose image is present. Humanity's primary role as bearers of the image of the Triune God is to show his nature and character to creation (which includes to the rest of humanity). From the very outset of creation God called human beings to display his nature to one another and to the wider cosmos. This role will continue into eternity, despite the problems caused by the fall. The second thing that God calls human beings to do is to name and care for the creation (Genesis 2:15-20). From the outset, our call is not only to declare God's nature through our image bearing, but to care for the world that the has made.

Some readers will agree that God gave these responsibilities to humanity at creation, but will dispute that this should be termed mission and therein lies the dilemma.

References

Stroope, M.W. (2017) *Transcending mission: the eclipse of a modern tradition*. Apollos, London.
Wiher, H. (2021) Holistic Mission in Biblical and Theological Perspective. *Evangelical Review of Theology*, **45:2**, 152-163.