# DEFINITIONS OF MISSION

*Posted on August 21, 2019 by Eddie*

Firstly, the starting point for any definition of mission must be God and not human activity. We are sent out by Jesus in continuation with his mission (John 20:21) and so anything we do is merely a subset of his greater purposes.
**Category:** Observations

Although this blog focuses on the issue of Christian mission, I tend not to worry about defining exactly what mission is. For practical purposes, there is enough common ground to allow conversation without having to thrash out in detail what exactly we mean by the term mission. That being said, even in popular literature there is a fair bit of scope for disagreement; for example what is the place of social action in mission? Some would see it as central to any understanding of mission, others would see it as peripheral and still others would say that it has no place.

In my PhD thesis, I spent a couple of pages looking at a definition of mission and concluding that there was no commonly accepted and shared understanding. That section starts with this paragraph.

> *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).*

Looking in more detail it became clear that there is no overall agreement about the activities which constitute mission, the Biblical basis for mission or even whether mission involves travelling to a different location. Not surprisingly, some people have abandoned the attempt to define mission in theoretical terms, preferring to think of it in terms of their own activities; "mission was defined as what they did" (Baker, 2014, 19).

So, how would I define mission, if pushed? In order to answer that question, the first thing to do is to lay down some principles.

Firstly, the starting point for any definition of mission must be God and not human activity. We are sent out by Jesus in continuation with his mission (John 20:21) and so anything we do is merely a subset of his greater purposes. You can push this further back and see the sending of the Son in the context of the life of the Trinity, but for our purposes we just need to say that our starting point is

God, not human beings.

Secondly, a definition of mission needs to be based on a reading of the whole of Scripture, not on a few proof texts from Matthew and Acts. Because our definition starts with God, we have to look at the totality of his interaction with humanity as revealed in Scripture. The Old Testament provides an ethical framework within which the commands of the "Great Commission" passages need to be worked out.

Finally, the end point of any definition of mission must also be God and not humanity. Evangelism, seeing people converted and becoming disciples are a means to the glory of God, not an end in themselves (desireable though they are). Equally, this end point can only be acheived through divine intervention; the will of the Father, the obedient sacrifice of the Son and the power of the Spirit. Mission starts and end with God and is fully dependant on him.

I should also add, that I reject the Western/Enlightenment tendency to distinguish between the physical and spiritual and to put a greater value on the former. I do not see this reflected in Scripture (though that is an argument for another time).

With that in mind, if you twisted my arm and asked me to define mission, I would probably say something along the lines of:

*Our participation, by the power of the Spirit, in the Father's purpose to reconcile all things in heaven and earth by the blood of the Son shed on the cross.Â* (Derived from Col. 1:20).

This includes, but is not limited to, reaching the unreached with the Gospel. It also includes working for peace and reconciliation in our communities (blessed are the peacemakers) and working for justice and equality.

I think it is perfectly legitimate for an organisation or church to say that *their* mission is to do something specific (reach the unreached, serve the poor in their location or what-have-you). God's mission is far too extensive for any human institution to encompass. We all have our own corner in which to operate. Our job is to be obedient to our bit of the bigger mission and we must avoid the temptation of seeing our bit (no matter how important we see it, or how passionate we are about it) as being the totality of mission.

Please don't hold me to this definition of mission, by the way, I tend to rethink it on a regular basis and next week, I might say something very different.

**References**

Baker, D.P. (2014) Missiology as an interested discipline â€" and where is it happening? *International Bulletin of Missionary Research,* 38(1**)**pp.17-20,

Bosch, D.J. (1991) *Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll

Kim, K. (2009) *Joining in with the Spirit*. Epworth Press, London.

Smith, D.W. (2003) *Mission after Christendom*. Darton, Longman and Todd, London

Stott, J.R.W. and Wright, C.J.H. (2016) *Christian mission in the modern world*. Inter Varsity Press, London.

Stroope, M.W. (2017) *Transcending mission: the eclipse of a modern tradition*. Apollos, London.