

---

# MISSIO DEI: THE MISSION OF GOD

Eddie Arthur

September 2009

## INTRODUCTION

Though at first it might seem straightforward, it is actually quite difficult to define exactly what Christian mission is. It is often said that the terms mission and missionary are not found in Scripture, though these are just Latin equivalents of the Greek verb *apostelo* and its cognates. Historically, the Latin term mission tended to be used to describe the activities of the Triune God as described in John 20:21. The term missionary was first used in its current sense for envoys of the Pope and the royal families of Spain and Portugal who were sent to convert Native Americans and Asians to Catholicism and to bring them under the sway of the European nations<sup>i</sup>. Over the last two hundred years, the evangelical concept of mission has tended to be defined by people such as William Carey and Hudson Taylor and has focussed on the “Great Commission” of Matthew 28.

However, even today there is no clear consensus in the Evangelical world as to exactly what constitutes mission<sup>iiii</sup> because of this, rather than try and examine mission from the point of view of human activity, we will start by looking at the nature of God.

## GOD

Probably the simplest and most important statement that can be made about God is that he is Trinity. One God in three persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That being said, the simple statement is pregnant with all sorts of meaning and has confused Christians down through history. Because of the perceived difficulties in understanding the Trinity, teaching about it has often been sidelined in Christian history so that Karl Rahner could write:

*"...despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are in their practical life, almost mere "monotheists".iv*

Evangelicals have tended to mirror the general Christian neglect of Trinitarian thought, relegating it to chapters in Systematic Theologies or specialist academic works. When Evangelicals have considered the Trinity, they have tended to concentrate on the distinctions between the Father, Son and Spirit and their specific roles in the history of redemption<sup>v</sup>. However, over the last few years there has been a resurgence in study and writing about the Trinity which has tended to focus on a different aspect of the Trinity: the concept of the ‘Social Trinity’.

The ‘Social Trinity’ emphasizes the love which flows between the three persons in communion and is a primarily relational view of the Trinity as a committed community. It also sees love as intrinsic to the nature of God,<sup>vi</sup> This concept of the Trinity has a long history and can be traced back to the fourth century Capadocian Fathers and their notion of “*perichoresis*” or the mutual interdependence, deference and internality of the Trinitarian persons<sup>vii</sup>.

A focus on the social nature of the Trinity shows us that loving relationships lie at the heart things and that they pre-date the creation of humanity. The Triune God did not need to create human beings in order to be in relationship – but he did choose to create us.

Genesis Chapters 1 & 2 show that the divine purpose in creation was that human beings should live in communion with God and with one another, while exercising care over God's good creation.

Genesis 3 describes how the communion which existed between man and God and within humanity were broken at the fall. The next eight chapters of Genesis give a graphic description of the outworking of these broken relationships.

However, despite the damage which is set out in the early chapters of Genesis, God's purpose for creation remains intact. In John 17:20-21 we see the Son praying to the Father that union within humanity and between mankind and God would be re-established.

*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,<sup>21</sup> that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

However, this unity cannot simply be achieved. To restore unity where there is now brokenness implies a reconciliation which can only be achieved at a high price: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is captured clearly in Colossians 1:20

*and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

In Ephesians 2 Paul expresses the way in which the death of Christ on the cross has brought reconciliation to humanity and created a new community.

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, (Eph. 2:14)*

God, then, has a mission; in the sense of an overarching purpose, rather than an individual task to perform. His purpose across history is to restore the relationships which were there in the original creation. The Trinitarian God desires to see a people living in communion with each other and with himself and to bring about reconciliation in a broken cosmos, the Father sent the Son and Spirit and in turn the Son sends the church to participate in carrying out the mission (John 20:21). Mission, then is a divine activity, in which the church is called to participate.

*"... mission is first and foremost God's own mission. God sends himself before he sends his church. There is a centrifugal force in God's very being as the Son and the Spirit spiral out from the Father to bring healing to the world. Mission is first of all God sending his Son in the power of the Spirit to reconcile the world to himself and the mission of the church is nothing less than the gift of sharing by the Spirit in the Son's mission to the world on behalf of the Father."<sup>xviii</sup>*

With these thoughts in mind, we can, perhaps, define mission. Chris Wright does so in these words:

“Fundamentally, our mission(if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.”<sup>ix</sup>

## FEATURES OF THE CHURCH’S MISSION IN THE LIGHT OF THE MISSION OF GOD

### MISSION IS GOD’S

The Triune God is the instigator of mission and through the sacrifice of the Son and the empowering presence of the Spirit he is also the one who guarantees the success of mission. However, true to his relational nature the Triune God invites us to participate in mission with him.

"Those who have come to know the life of God through the missionary activity of the Son are themselves given the privilege of becoming 'co-missionaries with God.'"<sup>x</sup>

It is important to stress that we are invited to join in mission. Our motivation should spring out of our relationship with God and our desire to serve him, not because we are propelled by a burden of guilt. Frost and Hirsch catch this nicely:

Many well-intentioned church leaders have simplistically presented the words of Jesus “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”, as some remote order barked by a stern sergeant-major. If Jesus said it, we should do it! But Bosch points out that missionary service that is motivated by blind obedience to an impersonal order from Jesus is built on a flimsy foundation. If our commitment to mission is only based on Jesus’ “order” in Matthew 28, it makes mission an obligation for us rather than an act of love and grace. It’s not unlike a woman who complains that her husband never brings her flowers. When the guilty husband rushes out and buys her a bouquet and presents it to her, she is still dissatisfied, because it wasn’t that she wanted flowers in particular. What she wanted was for him to be motivated by his devotion for her so as to buy a gift. When we engage in mission only because we feel guilty that we haven’t pleased Jesus and his order in the so-called Great Commission, we satisfy neither Jesus, nor our own sense of calling. Rather, says Bosch, mission emerges from a deep, rich relationship with Jesus. The woman whose husband never brings her flowers doesn’t want flowers. She wants him and his devotion.<sup>xi</sup>

Because mission is God’s activity, it is inappropriate to suggest that God needs us to accomplish his purposes. He takes pleasure in us serving him and working with him. But we must never suggest that God is somehow weak and constrained and unable to reach the nations without our help.

Equally, it is inappropriate for us to define the ultimate goals of mission. This is not to say that we cannot set goals for individual projects, or for those activities over which we have some semblance of control. Appropriate goal setting and measurement of results is a necessary tool for our learning as well as being a requirement of many of the partners we work with. However, we must never lose sight of the fact that, first and foremost, our responsibility is to be obedient to the call of God on our lives. With Paul and Appollos we can plant and water, but it is God who produces the fruit (1 Cor. 3:6).

*Following Jesus is about obedience, not success. Ultimately, transforming people and society is something only God can do. All we can do is discern what God is doing and obediently join in.*<sup>xii</sup>

*Obedience is not a formula, nor is it a means to an end, usually assumed to be success. Perhaps it's a more Western ideal, even an American lesson, to put numbers and goals to ministry and heap attention only on those who accomplish this—all others need not apply.*

*If I start defining success in ministry, then I start defining how God should and/or will work in a situation. I am taking away from His mystery, His sovereignty, and His will; in fact, I am wresting power away from Him when I draw that box or map of how this should play out<sup>xiii</sup>.*

Or as another writer puts it:

*In the end, this is the most hopeful thing that any of us can say about spiritual transformation: I cannot transform myself, or anyone else for that matter. What I can do is create the conditions in which spiritual transformation can take place, by ...developing and maintaining a rhythm of spiritual practices that keep me open and available to God.<sup>xiv</sup>*

When we invite people to be involved in God's mission, be that in print, on the web or face to face, we call them to discipleship. We must be very careful to keep the correct balance between human and divine action in mission.

## MISSION IS MORE THAN THE GREAT COMMISSION

For many evangelical Christians, mission and the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20 are virtually synonymous. Mission, it is said, involves making disciples and we should avoid anything which distracts us from that goal. However, as we have seen, God's mission, to which we are invited, is much broader than making individual disciples.

*Discipleship involves a commitment to God's reign, to justice and love, and to obedience to the entire will of God. Mission is not narrowed down to an activity of making individuals new creatures, of providing them with 'blessed assurance' so that come what may they will be 'eternally saved.' Mission involves from the beginning and as a matter of course, making new believers sensitive to the needs of others, opening their eyes and hearts to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression and the plight of those who have fallen by the wayside.<sup>xv</sup>*

In this context we do not need to seek for proof texts to defend the place for Bible translation. Seen from the perspective of mission of God, we are freed up to joyfully engage in Bible translation and associated activities, as these are all part of restoring the unity within the human community which God wishes for.

## MISSION INVOLVES COMMUNITIES

The Western mission movement has been deeply influenced by the highly individual nature of the society which gave it birth. Because of this, we have tended to operate in a context which sees the salvation of individual souls as the highest priority of mission and the success of mission could be measured in the number of people making decisions. However, when we consider that mankind is made in the image of the relational, Triune God, we are forced to confront the Western concept of the individual head on. Although the modern Western world is obsessed with individualism a Trinitarian theology is a theology of relationships<sup>xvi</sup> and compels us to be involved in one another's lives<sup>xvii</sup>. Men and women cannot achieve the closeness of the perichoretic life of the Trinity but the life of the community must take precedence over the values of individual achievement and competition. In Viv Thomas' words "the individual is not the centre"<sup>xviii</sup>.

The mission of the Triune, relational, God is to reconcile all things in heaven and earth and this must involve the creation of communities who will live out the reality of the kingdom of God in time and in eternity. People are not simply saved from something, they are saved into a community (see Acts 2: 42-47).

Whatever Western culture may insist upon, mission involves Christian communities responding to God's call in order to see the community of Christians increased and grow.

*"It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that include the Church, creating a church as it goes on its way."<sup>xix</sup>*

## LANGUAGE WORK IS ABOUT MORE THAN GETTING PEOPLE THROUGH THE DOOR

If mission is simply about making disciples, or even making converts, then the role of Bible translation is simply to provide what is needed to give people the information they need in order to make a decision for Christ. However, if we unpack this further, it seems to imply that once people become Christians they will belong to some sort of amorphous Christian culture through which they will be able to function. This is captured in one of the comments in our email discussion which said 'The translated word does bring the knowledge of Christ, but it also ushers in and prefigures God's work of reconciliation. Translation itself, by bringing God's word to a language community, is in effect, is a part of the reconciliation process.'

The Mission of God points to the creation of communities who will worship and show the glories of God through their language for all of time and eternity. In the light of what God is doing, we are all linguistic minorities, but we all have our part to play in bringing together this amazing world-wide movement of indigenous expression. Partnership is then a genuine theological necessity. We are not starting from the point of view of some people who have God's word and others who don't. We are all, working towards being the people and communities that God wants us to be. We cannot make assumptions of superiority or leadership based on ethnic or linguistic values.

## MISSION IS SHAPED BY THE CROSS

At the heart of God's missional engagement with humanity is a profound humility and a willingness to suffer rejection and pain. We see this all the way through the Old Testament narrative as God reaches out to his beloved people who repeatedly reject him to follow after other gods. The prophecy of Hosea, married to an adulterous wife, captures the commitment, humiliation and pain of the creator faced with his ungrateful creation.

This willingness to suffer on behalf of humanity reaches its climax at Calvary. Paul captures the extent of God's cosmic humility in his poem of praise in Philippians 2:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
<sup>7</sup>but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

It is true that Christ's humiliation was followed by an exaltation, but suffering and death was an inescapable part of God's mission.

Jesus taught that his followers would also suffer if they were faithful to him (REFS) and Paul outlines an impressive list of hardships that he went through. The subsequent history of the Church has been an illustration of this Biblical principle that suffering and sacrifice is a part of spreading the Christian Gospel. As Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

However, in our present age (particularly in the Western world) we tend to de-emphasize this aspect of discipleship. The idea of sacrifice and suffering do not feature very highly in a world in which Christianity is often presented as a way to worldly success and the avoidance of pain.

When we invite people to be involved in God's mission, we must not minimize the fact that it will inevitably involve some sort of sacrifice. Those who pray, give or go will almost certainly find themselves facing some sort of hardship if they are truly involved and truly effective.

*"problems arise when this biblical vision becomes distorted through a one-sided focus on progress and conquest which ignores the reality of setbacks, sufferings and periods of decline and loss which seem to form an integral part of the wider divine purpose in the world."*<sup>xxx</sup>

## MISSION WILL BE SUCCESSFUL

We have the assurance in Scripture that God's mission will be successful. We can be fully confident that his work will be complete. This doesn't necessarily mean that our conception of what his work is will succeed in every way, but we can be confident that God's Mission is a 100% sure venture. We should be encouraged by that.

*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.*

## ENDNOTES: SOURCES CITED IN THE TEXT.

---

- <sup>i</sup> Peskett, H., Ramachandra, V., 2003. The Message of Mission. InterVarsity Press, Leicester. (p.29)
- <sup>ii</sup> Winter, R.D., 2009. Understanding the Polarization between Fundamentalist and Modernist Missions. International Journal of Frontier Missions 26, 5-11. (p.10)
- <sup>iii</sup> Little, C., 2006. What Makes Mission Christian. Evangelicals Missions Quarterly.
- <sup>iv</sup> Rahner, K., 1970. The Trinity. Burns and Oates, London.(p.10)
- <sup>v</sup> Daugherty, K., 2007. Mission Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions. Evangelical Review of Theology 31, 151-168.(p.151) *"when Evangelical missiologists defend the importance of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity for missions, the focus is often on the individual roles of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. While this is certainly legitimate, it falls short of a treatment of the Trinity as such."*
- <sup>vi</sup> Accad, M., Corrie, J., 2007. Trinity. In: Corrie, J. (Ed.), Dictionary of Mission Theology. Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, pp. 396-401.
- <sup>vii</sup> Volf, M., 1998. After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.(p.206 ff.)
- <sup>viii</sup> Parry, R., 2005. Worshipping Trinity: Coming back to the heart of worship. Paternoster, Milton Keynes. (p.58)
- <sup>ix</sup> Wright, C.J.H., 2006. The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative. Inter Varsity Press, Nottingham. (p.22)
- <sup>x</sup> Edgar, B., 2004. The Message of the Trinity. Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, (p.191).
- <sup>xi</sup> Frost, M., Hirsch, A., 2009. ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA. (p.50)
- <sup>xii</sup> Myers, B.L., 1999. Walking with the poor : principles and practices of transformational development. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.(p.163)
- <sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.missionaryconfidential.com/disappointment-avoidance/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Barton, Ruth, H., 2006 Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation, IVP Books, Leicester. (p. 12.)
- <sup>xv</sup> Bosch, D.J., 1991. Transforming mission : paradigm shifts in theology of mission. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y. (p.81)
- <sup>xvi</sup> Myers, B.L., 1999 (p.24)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Cunningham, D.S., 1998. These Three are One; The Practice of Trinitarian Theology. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford. (p.183)
- <sup>xviii</sup> Thomas, V., 2004. Paper Boys: A vision for the contemporary church. From delivery to dance through God as Trinity. Authentic, Milton Keynes. (p.44)
- <sup>xix</sup> Moltman quoted in: Daugherty, K., 2007. Mission Dei: The Trinity and Christian Missions. Evangelical Review of Theology 31, 151-168. (p.163)
- <sup>xx</sup> Smith, D.W., 2003. Against the Stream: Christianity and Mission in an Age of Globalization. Inter Varsity Press, Leicester. (p.55)