

# The Mission of the Church

AN ESSAY BY Kevin DeYoung

## DEFINITION

The mission of the church is the task given by God for the people of God to accomplish in the world.

## SUMMARY

After defining the terminology this essay will explore the nature of the church's mission in light of the *missio Dei* and the apostolic pattern in the New Testament and the book of Acts in particular. It will evaluate contemporary broader ideas of mission and conclude with a re-emphasis on the gospel-centered focus of the New Testament pattern.

The mission of the church is the task given by God for the people of God to accomplish in the world. In simplest terms, the mission of the church is the Great Commission—what Philip Ryken calls “a clear, unambiguous statement of [the church’s] mission to the world.”<sup>1</sup> Our task as the gathered body of Christ is to make disciples, by bearing witness to Jesus Christ the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit to glory of God the Father.<sup>2</sup>

## Defining Our Terms

In talking about the mission of the church, we are not trying to enumerate all the good things Christians can or should do to love their neighbors and to be salt and light in the world. The issue at hand relates to the church as church. What collectively as an organized institution must we be about as God's people if we are to faithfully accomplish his purposes for us in the world?

If the word “church” is important, so is the word “mission.” While “mission” does not appear in most English Bibles, it is still a biblical word. Eckhard Schnabel—who, with almost 2000 pages on *Early Christian Mission* and another 500-page work on *Paul the Missionary*, is probably the world's leading expert on mission in the New Testament—makes this point forcefully:

The argument that the word *mission* does not occur in the New Testament is incorrect. The Latin verb *mittere* corresponds to the Greek verb *apostellein*, which occurs 136 times in the New Testament (97 times in the Gospels, used both for Jesus having been “sent” by God and for the Twelve being “sent” by Jesus).<sup>3</sup>

The apostles, in the broadest sense of the term, were those who had been sent out. This sent-outness is also the first thing we should note relative to the term *missionary*. It is, after all, the first thing Jesus notes about his mission, that he was *sent* to proclaim a message of good news to the poor ([Luke 4:18](#)). Being “on mission” or engaging in mission work suggests intentionality and movement.<sup>4</sup> Mission, at the very least, involves being sent from one place to somewhere else.

Every Christian—if we are going to be obedient to the Great Commission—must be involved in missions, but not every Christian is a missionary. While it is certainly true that we should all be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have ([1Pet. 3:15](#)), and we should all adorn the gospel with our good works ([Titus 2:1](#)), and we should all do our part to make Christ known ([1Thess. 1:8](#); [2Thess. 3:1](#)), we should reserve the term “missionary” for those who are intentionally sent out from one place to another. Strictly speaking, the church is not sent out, but sends out workers from her midst. Our fundamental identity as church (*ekklesia*) is not as those who are sent into the world with a mission, but as those who are called out from darkness into his marvelous light ([1Pet. 2:9](#)).<sup>5</sup>

## Jesus’s Mission and Ours

Before the sixteenth century, “mission” was primarily a word used in connection with the Trinity. The “sending” theologians talked about was the sending of the Son by the Father, and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son. This is a crucial point. We will not rightly understand the mission of the church without the conviction that “the sending of Jesus by Father is still the *essential mission*.”<sup>6</sup>

And what was the nature of Jesus’s ministry? Jesus ministered to bodies as well as souls, but within this holistic ministry, he made preaching his priority. Preaching is why he came out in public ministry and why he moved from town to town ([Mark 1:38-39](#)). The purpose of his Spirit-anointed ministry was to proclaim good news to the poor ([Luke 4:18-19](#)). He came to call sinners to repentance and faith ([Mark 1:15](#); [2:17](#)). Although Jesus frequently attended to the physical needs of those around him, there is not a single example of Jesus going into a town with the purpose of healing or casting out demons. The Son of Man never ventured out on a healing or exorcism tour. His stated purpose was to seek and to save the lost ([Luke 19:10](#)).

Of course, Jesus’ mission must not be reduced to verbal proclamation. Unique to his identity as the divine Messiah, Jesus’s mission was vicariously to die for the sins of his people ([Matt. 1:21](#); [Mark 10:45](#)). Concomitant with this purpose, Jesus’s public ministry aimed at the eternal life that could come to the sinner only through faith in Christ ([John 3:16-17](#); [14:6](#); [20:21](#)). We see this in Mark’s Gospel, for example, where the entire narrative builds toward the centurion’s confession in [Mark 15:37](#) where, in fulfillment of the book’s opening sentence ([Mark 1:1](#)), the Roman soldier confesses, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Leading people to this Spirit-given conviction is the purpose of Mark’s gospel and of Jesus’s ministry. The Messiah ministered to bodies as well as souls and made preaching his priority so that those with ears to hear might see his true identity and follow him in faith.

It's no wonder, then, that all four Gospels (plus Acts) include some version of the Great Commission ([Matt. 28:16-20](#); [Mark 13:10; 14:9](#); [Luke 24:44-49](#); [John 20:21](#); [Acts 1:8](#)). The mission given to the bumbling band of disciples was not one of cultural transformation—though that would often come as a result of their message—but a mission of gospel proclamation. To be sure, God's cosmic mission is bigger than the Great Commission, but it is telling that while the church is not commanded to *participate* with God in the renewal of all things—which would, presumably, include not only re-creation but also fiery judgment—we are often told to *bear witness* to the one who will do all these things. In short, while the disciples were never told to be avatars of Christ, it is everywhere stated, either explicitly or implicitly, that they were to be ambassadors for Christ ([2Cor. 5:20](#)).

## A Mission Too Small?

No Christian disagrees with the importance of Jesus' final instructions to the disciples, but many missiological scholars and practitioners have disagreed with the *central* or *controlling* importance of the Great Commission. John Stott, for example, in arguing for social action as an equal partner of evangelism suggested that “we give the Great Commission too prominent a place in our Christian thinking.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Lesslie Newbigin concluded that the “Christian mission is thus to act out in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord.”<sup>8</sup> The mission of the church, in other words, cannot be reduced to our traditional understanding of missions.

In the past fifty years, we have seen, to quote the title of one seminal book, “paradigm shifts in theology of mission.”<sup>2</sup> At the heart of this shift has been a much more expansive view of the mission of the church, one that recasts the identity of the church as missional communities “called and sent to represent the reign of God” or as “communities of common people doing uncommon deeds.”<sup>10</sup> No longer is the role of the church defined mainly as an ambassador or a witness. Instead, we are collaborators with God in the *missio Dei* (mission of God), co-operators in the redemption and renewal of all things. As Christopher Wright puts it, “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>11</sup> The church's task in the world is to partner with God as he establishes shalom and brings his reign and rule to bear on the peoples and places of the earth.

## The Mission of the Church in Acts

As attractive as this newer model may seem, there are a number of problems with the *missio Dei* paradigm for the mission of the church. It undervalues the Great Commission, underemphasizes what is central in the mission of the Son, and overextends our role in God's cosmic mission on earth.

Besides all this, the new model has a hard time accounting for the pattern of mission in the earliest days of the church. Acts is the inspired history of the mission of the church. This

second volume from Luke describes what those commissioned at the end of the first volume were sent out to do ([Luke 24:47-48](#)). If the Luke's Gospel was the book of everything Jesus *began* to do and teach (1:1), then Acts must be the record of all that Jesus *continues* to do and teach.

We could look at almost any chapter in Acts to gain insight into the mission of the church, but [Acts 14](#) is especially instructive, verses 21-23 in particular. At the beginning of [Acts 13](#), the church at Antioch, prompted by the Holy Spirit, set apart Paul and Barnabas "for the work to which I have called them" (v. 2). This isn't the first time the gospel is going to be preached to unbelievers in Acts, neither is it the first gospel work Paul and Barnabas will do. But it is the first time we see a church intentionally sending out Christian workers with a mission to another location.

Paul and Barnabas traveled to Cyprus, then to Pisidian Antioch, then to Iconium, then to Lystra, then to Derbe, and from there back through Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, and then to Perga, and back to Antioch in Syria. The final section in [Acts 14](#) is not only a good summary of Paul's missionary work, it is the sort of information Paul would have shared with the church in Antioch when he returned (v. 27). These verses are like the power point presentation Paul and Barnabas shared with their sending church. "This is how we saw God at work. Here's what where we went and what we did." In other words, if any verses are going to give us a succinct description of what mission was about in the early church, it's verses like these at the end of [Acts 14](#).

[Acts 14:21-23](#) presents us with the three-legged stool of the church's mission. Through the missionary work of the Apostle Paul, the early church aimed for:

- **New converts:** "when they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples" (v. 21)
- **New communities:** "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church" (v. 23)
- **Nurtured churches:** "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith" (v. 22).

If the apostles are meant to be the church's model for mission, then we should expect our missionaries to be engaged in these activities and pray for them to that end. The goal of mission work is to win new converts, establish these young disciples in the faith, and incorporate them into a local church.<sup>12</sup>

Schnabel's definition of missionary work sounds the same note:

- "Missionaries communicate the news of Jesus the Messiah and Savior to people who have not heard or accepted this news."
- "Missionaries communicate a new way of life that replaces, at least partially, the social norms and the behavioral patterns of the society in which the new believers have been converted."
- "Missionaries integrate the new believers into a new community."<sup>13</sup>

Evangelism, discipleship, church planting—that’s what the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to do, and these should be the goals of all mission work. Missionaries may aim at one of these components more than the other two, but all three should be present in the church’s overall mission strategy.

## Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

As is true with almost every Christian doctrine, there are ditches on either side of the road when trying to define the mission of the church. On the one hand, we want to avoid the danger of making our mission too small. Some well-meaning Christians act like conversion is the only thing that counts. They put all their efforts into getting to the field as quickly as possible, speaking to as many people as possible, and then leaving as soon as possible. Mission becomes synonymous with first-time gospel proclamation. Clearly, Paul’s did not practice blitzkrieg evangelism, nor was he motivated by an impatient hankering for numbers to report back home.

On the other hand, we want to avoid the danger of making our mission too broad. Some well-meaning Christians act like *everything* counts as mission. They put all their efforts into improving job skills, digging wells, setting up medical centers, establishing great schools, and working for better crop yields—all of which can be wonderful expressions of Christian love, but bear little resemblance to what we see Paul and Barnabas sent out to do on their mission in Acts.

Without denigrating the good work Christians do as salt and light in the world, we must conclude from [Acts 14](#)—and from the New Testament more broadly, that the church’s mission is more specific than common people doing uncommon deeds. As Schnabel argues, those demanding a “‘revolution’ in our understanding of mission—away from the traditional missionary focus on winning people to faith in Jesus Christ, concentrating rather on a ‘holistic’ understanding of Jesus’ claims” do so without strong supporting evidence.<sup>14</sup> We see over and over in Paul’s missionary journeys, and again in his letters, that the central work to which he was been called was the verbal proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord ([Rom. 10:14-17](#); [15:18](#); [1Cor. 15:1-2, 11](#); [Col. 1:28](#)). Paul saw his identity as an apostle, as a sent-out one, in terms of being set apart for the gospel of God ([Rom. 1:1](#)). That’s why in [Acts 14:27](#) the singular summary of his just-completed mission work is that God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. His goal as a missionary was the conversion of Jews and pagans, the transformation of their hearts and minds, and the incorporation of these new believers into a mature, duly constituted church. What Paul aimed to accomplish as a missionary in the first century is an apt description of the mission of the church for every century.