

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR MISSION

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As you we can see from the small group exercise there is not a commonly held opinion about the nature of Christian mission in this room, or I would submit among Christians generally. The Episcopal Church, in particular, is unclear about what mission is. Too often the terms mission and ministry are combined as if they are one word with a singular meaning. Priests preach to their parishioners about “mission and ministry.” Bishops announce new priorities for diocesan “mission and ministry.” National church leaders wrestle with budget cutbacks that threaten “mission and ministry.” And standing Commissions of General Convention try to develop new structures that will enliven “mission and ministry.”¹

I believe that The Episcopal Church simply does not give enough thought or attention to our scriptural understandings of mission, our mission theology, or how our missiology affects our understanding of Anglican identity. The undifferentiated linking of the terms mission and ministry reflects a genuine confusion over what God’s mission in the world is and how the faithful are to participate in that mission. Without a clear and well-developed theology of mission, it is difficult to understand what is the nature of our baptismal calling and our ministries in service to God’s mission. Without knowing what mission is, it is difficult to move from “being called to sent as we seek to find our way into Global mission.”

So what I want to do in this first segment is help us all to become more clear about what the nature of Christian mission is. More specifically, in this first reflection I will offer a very brief

¹Portions of this paper appeared previously in short articles published in *Trinity News* and *The Anglican*. Excerpts are taken with appreciation. See: Ian T. Douglas, “Toward a Theology of Mission,” *Trinity News* 42 (Winter, 1995): 4-6, and “Lambeth 1998 and the Challenge of Pluralism,” *The Anglican* 26 (July 1997).

biblical perspective on mission. After our break, we will then consider some of the changes of the world and Church today; and how these changes affect our understanding of, and participation in, God’s mission.

The Biblical Call to God’s Mission

What does Holy Scripture say about mission? To begin with it must be pointed out that the word mission, per se, is not found in the Bible. Yes the seventy are sent out and there are various Pauline references to sending, but mission as has been historically understood by the Church, namely the sending of specific individuals to far away places to convert others, is glaringly absent. The reason why we do not find the word mission, as such in the Bible is because, I want to argue, all of Holy Scripture is the story of mission, is the story of God’s mission. I want to emphasize that the whole Bible, Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament, is a revelation of God’s mission in the world. Notice how I say God’s mission, not the Church’s mission, or your mission, or my mission but God’s mission. For ultimately it is God’s mission that our Lord Jesus came to bear witness to, it is God’s mission that the Church proclaims in the world today, and it is God’s mission that we share in by virtue of our baptisms. So what is this mission? What is God’s mission?

In the opening chapter of Genesis we learn that God is the God of all creation. Out of God’s love, God brought everything into being, the heavens, the earth, all living creatures including humanity, and “it was good.” At the very start of the Biblical story we learn that God is a God of the whole cosmos, a universal God, who watches over and cares for all of creation. The story continues, however. No sooner had this universal, loving God created humankind, then we turned our backs on God. In our sinfulness, we chose to live unto ourselves. We became alienated from the love and power of God and we became alienated from each other. Our “Outline of the Faith” also known as the Catechism found in the back of the *Book of Common Prayer* describes sin as “the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus

distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.”² Sin is less about actions and more about a state of separation, separation from God, separation from each other, separation from all creation. Sin is about isolation, division and broken relationship.

But God did not want humans to be alienated from God and from each other. The loving creator chose to rebuild the bonds of love that had been severed through human sin. God’s mission was to reconnect with humanity and heal the divisions that separate us. The central element of God’s mission, the *missio Dei*, is God’s desire to restore to unity that which had become broken; to reconcile a divided world.

To fulfill this mission God chose a particular people as an entry point into the world. Through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, God began a new relationship with humankind. God says to Abraham:

Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. . . . I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. (Genesis 17:5-8)

The whole of Hebrew Scripture is the telling and retelling of the quest for relationship between God and God’s chosen people.

To help define this relationship God gave the Law. The Law stood as God’s assurance of God’s love and faithfulness. In Exodus 19 God promises Moses and his people:

If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6)

²From “An Outline of the Faith,” *Book of Common Prayer*, 848.

The Law stood as God’s assurance of love and faithfulness. In the giving of the Law God sought to establish Israel as the leadership of a new world order. By following God’s commandments the chosen people would stand as a beacon of hope in a world separated from God..

God’s covenant with the Jews was not, however, an exclusive arrangement. The new relationship begun with Abraham, and clarified by the Law, was intended for all of humanity, a light to the nations. God’s covenant was to be the vehicle, the door, by which all the peoples of the world could be joined both to the almighty Creator and to each other. Israel’s role in God’s mission was to serve as a centripetal force pulling all of humanity back into relationship with God.³ Abraham and Sarah’s descendants thus were to be agents of reconciliation between God and an errant humanity. All the nations were to come to God through the Covenant. The prophets, especially the servant songs of Isaiah, testify to this calling. In Isaiah 42 God says to his chosen people:

I am the Lord I have called you in righteousness , I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6-7)

And again in Isaiah 49

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6)

The servant songs of Isaiah proclaim clearly that God’s mission in the world is to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, to set free those who are oppressed, to open the eyes of the blind (Isaiah 42:6-7); to heal the separation between God, humanity and all of creation; to restore to unity with God all the peoples of the world and all of creation. In Isaiah we find the affirmation of Israel’s commission, or co-mission, with God

³See: Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), and Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984).

The story of God’s mission, however, does not end with Abraham’s covenant. It goes on. As Christians we affirm that because of God’s love for the world and desire to be united with all of humanity, God took one final decisive step. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God enters the world anew and takes the responsibility for God’s mission directly upon himself.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17).

In Jesus, God creates a New Covenant, a new means by which all the world could be joined to the Creator. Jesus was sent into the world to be the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14:6) As the human form of the creator God, Jesus mission is coterminous, one and the same, with that of the Creator. His mission is God’s mission.

Jesus said to them: ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. . . For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of the Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day. (John 6: 35, 38-40)

The ultimate act of Jesus self-giving participation in God’s mission is his sacrifice upon the cross and victory over death. The joining of Jesus’ pain and suffering with our pain and suffering on the cross is where we are passionately connected with God, with one other and with all creation. On the cross is where this new relationship, this right relationship, with God and each other is effected. In Jesus’ resurrection three days after the agony of the cross, we are given the promise of restored life in him. This is what we mean by Jesus’ atonement. As Martin Smith has written, Jesus’ atonement is our at-one-ment: our at-one-ment with God, and our at-one-ment with each other.⁴ In Jesus’ death and resurrection we are given the means by which we become one with each other and with God. In the death and resurrection of Jesus the divisions between God and humanity are overcome, and the promise of reconciliation is made real.

⁴Martin L. Smith, SSJE, *Love Set Free: Meditations on the Passion According to St. John*, (Cambridge and Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998)

The reality that Jesus takes on God’s mission in his incarnation, death and resurrection is not, however, a departure from the mission that God entrusted to Israel. Jesus did not come to break down the Law but rather to fulfill it. Jesus testifies to his fulfillment of the Isaiah prophesy in the fourth chapter of Luke:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

Over and over again, Jesus demonstrates his solidarity with, and preferential option for, the poor, the sick, the outcasts and those at the periphery of society. The gospels are a living testimony to Jesus’ life and ministry as the source of God’s salvation for the world. In Jesus the Reign of God is made real and tangible in our broken world.

Although Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and prophets, there is however, a difference between God’s mission as it was entrusted to the Jews and how it was realized in Jesus the Christ. Whereas Israel represented a calling in of humanity to union with God, Jesus turned the direction of God’s mission around. Instead of a centripetal force, God’s mission, realized in Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, becomes a centrifugal force, a going out. Jesus demonstrates in word and deed that the Reign of God, made real in the sending of God’s son, must continue to expand, to move out to the ends of the earth. “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:18) Jesus thus sends out his disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be the bearers of His mission, God’s mission, in the world.

And Jesus called to him the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. . . So they went out and preached that people should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them. (Mark 6: 7, 12-13)

And to the seventy Jesus said:

Go your way; Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you; heal the sick in it and say to them, ‘The Kingdom of God has come near to you. (Luke 10: 3, 8-9)

Notice here that God’s mission, fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus and then furthered by the sending out of the disciples in the power of the Spirit, is multiform. There is loving service, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and setting free the oppressed. But these acts of love are always coupled with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, God’s mission to unite all of humanity to one another and to God is realized through acts of love and justice combined with the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of the world. The wholeness of God’s mission is discovered in the combination of the Great Commandment, to love one another as God has loved us (John 16:12-17) with the Great Commission, to make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19) Proclamation without loving service are empty words, and good works without naming Jesus as the Christ are simply honorable deeds.

The movement of God’s mission in heralding and making real the Reign of God to the ends of the earth is exemplified in the life and writings of Paul. I do not have time to develop here the complete mission theology of Paul but I do want to highlight two fundamental aspects of his role in God’s mission. The first is that Paul and his co-workers reached out to the Gentiles with the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is true that in the Gospels we are given evidence of Jesus mission to the Gentiles, see for example our Lord’s healing of the Centurion’s slave (Luke 7:1-10) and his curing of the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter (Matthew 15:21-28). But it is in the life and ministry of Paul that God’s mission expands beyond Jerusalem. The second thing I want to emphasize about Paul’s mission theology is the full development of the Church as the Body of Christ in the world today. In his letter to the Ephesians we find Paul’s testimony that all who follow Jesus Christ, Jew and Gentile alike, are united with God the Creator. Paul says:

And Jesus came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple of the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:17-22)

As followers of Jesus Christ today, as the Church, we too share in this household of God and thus are called to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near.

Participation in God’s mission, therefore is at the heart of the baptismal call. Baptism is our commission, co-mission, in God’s mission. Just as God sent Jesus into the world, and Jesus sent his disciples to the ends of the earth, we too are sent in mission.

And so the Catechism makes that profound missiological affirmation. It states that “the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”⁵ Or perhaps it would be more missiologically correct if it read: “The mission of God in which the Church is privileged to participate is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” The calling of the Church, the calling of every Christian, is to participate with God in the restoration of unity between ourselves and God and ourselves and each other; to participate in the *missio Dei*. It is the work of the Church to herald and effect the new order where alienation, division and separation give way to inclusion, reconciliation, and unity. As the Body of Christ in the world today, we are called to work for the restoration to unity of all people with God and each other in Christ. The eminent missiologist David Bosch has thus summarized,

Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. This is the deepest source of mission. . . there is mission because God loves people.⁶

Our identity as followers of Christ is dependent upon, and judged against, how faithful we are to the mission of God, to the making real of God’s reconciling love in the world. As Christians we are “called and sent” to live beyond ourselves trusting that God will use us to effect God’s restoration to unity; God’s redemption of creation to wholeness and oneness in Christ.

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 855.

⁶David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1991) 392.