

## LESSON 1

# Rediscovering Mission: Three Movements

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## Overview

**Key Concept:** The Mission of God | **Bible Study:** John 20:1–28 | **Memory Verse:** John 20:21–22

### Objectives

- To understand mission as originating in the nature and purpose of the triune God
- To see the mission of God as the Bible's grand narrative

## Rediscovering Mission: Three Movements

On any journey, it is important to know where we're going and how we're going to get there, particularly when the journey is long or in our case deep. So we begin not just with a roadmap but with some reflection on how to approach and interpret that map. What is mission and how is it to be understood? From where and to where does Christian mission go? And perhaps more pointedly, what are we to do about it?

Over the course of this study, we will explore mission in the context of the Trinity and the sending action of God himself, which ultimately includes the sending of the church. We'll do so by looking at the mission of God as the Bible's grand narrative through the lens of one of its unifying themes, the kingdom of God. This will bear on the church's essential identity as a sent community that cannot but bear witness to this kingdom, which will in turn have practical implications for each local expression of God's church.

So if that's where we're going, then a few introductory and orienting remarks are in order, framed here by way of three movements. Here I am indebted to Christopher Wright's *The Mission of God*.<sup>1</sup>

### Movement One: From the Church's Mission to God's Mission

Christopher Wright offers a helpful definition of mission: "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>2</sup> It is God’s mission! It originates in God, flows from God, finds its impetus in God, concerns God’s creation, moves toward God’s destined end, all unto God’s glory.

Mission exists because God has freely determined to deal with humanity in a certain way, from creation to consummation. Deeper still, mission exists not just by God’s sovereign choice and unchangeable will, but by God’s very nature, his eternal attributes. Mission is at first about God, who he is and what he is like. It is about what he does in creation, what he does in response to ever-increasing rebellion and sin, and what he does to redeem the nations for himself. It is in every respect, *God’s* story, into which we have been lovingly written.

That story unfolds in precisely the way that it does because of who God is. And who then is he as he has revealed himself to us? God is the triune Creator King who reveals himself to humanity as King and determines to redeem for himself a kingdom-people “from every tribe and language and people and nation!” (Rev. 5:9). And how ultimately does God go about achieving this purpose? God sends *himself*. Specifically, God the Father sends the Son; then God the Father and the Son send the Spirit. The study of mission then begins as a study of the triune God himself. Only then can we begin to understand the mission of the church, who is then herself sent by the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The late mission theologian David Bosch observes that this is in fact how mission was understood throughout the great majority of the church’s history: “Until the sixteenth century the term [“mission”] was used exclusively with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, of the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.”<sup>3</sup> He continues, “Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology [the doctrine of the church] or soteriology [the doctrine of salvation]. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”<sup>4</sup>

This conception of the *missio Dei*, or mission of God, affirms the priority of God’s nature and purposes as the key to understanding the mission of the church. It can then be said, “It is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world.”<sup>5</sup> To rightly understand mission then, we must understand God’s nature and purposes as revealed to us in all of Scripture. So as one implication, mission begins then in Genesis 1, not Matthew 28. But more on this later.

Three quick caveats are in order. First, to maintain that God has been and continues to act in mission in no way absolves the church from committed action in her call to mission. If God is acting, must we? The answer of course is emphatically yes. We act precisely because God has acted

first! The sending movement of God toward his world necessarily involves and engages the church to action with the utmost sense of urgency and sacrifice.

Second, it would be mistaken to regard the church as solely an *instrument* at God's disposal to use unto his ultimate purpose in creation. It can be said with equal force and truth (and wonder!) that the church is itself an *expression* of that ultimate purpose. God did not enter into covenant relationship with the church just to accomplish his purposes in creation; he created to enter into covenant relationship with the church. And so it can be said, God "chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Thus, yes, the church is an instrument for God in his mission for his world. And, yes, the very existence, redemption, and glorification of the church are themselves central to that ultimate end. The church is both instrument and end.

Finally, to maintain the basic continuity of the mission of God and the mission of the church does not mean the *role* the church has to play in that mission is one and the same as the *role* of the Godhead. There are of course certain salvation-historical actions unique to the persons of the Trinity! Some in critique remind us that "we have no part, for example, in dying for the sins of the world."<sup>6</sup> That we are to participate in the mission of God for his world is not to conflate our call with the work of the triune God. It is to conceive of our identity and mission in light of his; it is to see what he has called us to be, what he has commissioned us to do, and what he has empowered us to undertake, all under the great banner of God's great mission for his world: the revelation of God to humanity as King and the redemption of humanity as his kingdom people.

Mission is a movement from God to his creation. It is fundamentally a sending movement that culminated in the sending of himself, and it is a movement of mercy, kindness, and grace; pardon, promise, and deliverance; all where there ought only to have been judgment, curse, and death. And why? Because that is who God is! Mission is finally to be located in the character and trinity of God. It exists because God is a certain way. Or put another way, something about God renders mission inevitable. That's where we start. "To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward peoples . . . mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people."<sup>7</sup>

## **Movement Two: From Mission Imperatives to Missional Indicatives**

Just as mission is to be located in the very nature and character of God, so is it also to be found in the essential identity of the church. It is not so much a thing for us to do but an expression of who we are. It is identity, not simply activity.

Imperatives are commands. As such, they represent what we are to do in obedience. Indicatives are affirmations or declarations. As such, they are engraved-in-stone truths that inform first who we are, and then secondarily what we are to do as necessary and inescapable consequence. And the order is important. In the Bible, it is, invariably, know who you are, then live that out. The imperative flows from the indicative. It's not simply, "Fly!" It's, "You are a bird set free, so then, fly!"

Mission can be conceived in purely imperative terms. "Go therefore and make disciples . . ." In such terms, mission is simply a command to be obeyed and incidentally one of perhaps many. Mission, however, is to be located not in the imperative, but in the indicative. Who we are defines our mission apart from explicit command. As God's people, united to Christ, and indwelt by the Spirit, we are a missionary community just as our Triune God is a missionary God. We are a sent people just as God is a sending God. And it is from this basis of our essential missionary identity that the imperatives are given. It is not just that we are to witness (and we are!), it's that we are witnesses.

### **Movement Three: From a Biblical Basis for Mission to a Missional Basis for the Bible**

Finally, our third movement is to reorient ourselves to God's own self-revelation in Scripture as it pertains to mission. Christopher Wright summarizes one approach to Scripture and mission that surveys those passages that provide both rationale and inducement for Christian mission to establish a case for the so-called biblical basis for mission. It is often a *tour de force* through all of the classic mission texts in Scripture: Genesis 12 and the promise to Abram; the book of Jonah in its entirety and his call to Nineveh; Matthew 28 and the Great Commission; Acts 1 and the promise to the disciples, and so forth.

The primary drawback to such an approach is that it can leave the impression that mission is just one thing that the Bible happens to talk about. See, it comes up here in this passage, and—*oh!*—here it is again over there! Wright concludes, "The Bible is turned into a mine from which we extract our gems—"missionary texts."<sup>8</sup>

The Bible of course, for all of its stunning diversity with respect to human authorship, genre, socio-cultural and historical context, and even language, tells a single story—a story that encompasses and elucidates the meaning of every constituent narrative and letter; every prayer and prophecy; every poem and proverb. And the story goes like this: "It begins with the God of purpose in creation, moves on to the conflict and problem generated by human rebellion against that purpose, spends most of its narrative journey in the story of God's redemptive purposes being worked out on the stage of human history, [and] finishes beyond the horizon of its own history with the eschatological hope of a new creation."<sup>9</sup>

Could it be that mission is not just an occasional theme to be discovered here or there as the story unfolds, but that the story *itself* is the mission of God for his creation? Could it be that the Bible is God's own self-revelation to us about who he is, about what he has done and what he is going to do? And, if so, isn't the entire story of Scripture a witness to the ultimate mission of God? Then because this great story goes beyond our own horizons, because it is revealed to us as both past and future, is not the present-day church forever caught up in this story and in this mission?

So it is not that we need to find the “missiological” meaning in our favorite texts. We discover who God is and what God's purposes for humanity are in the text—in every text! So, you want a missions text? You don't need to turn to Matthew 28. You can start in Genesis 1 and keep reading until you hit Revelation 22. The Bible is not just a book that happens to talk about mission; it *is* the story of God's mission for the world.

Furthermore, the very existence of Scripture is itself a missional phenomenon, a symbol of God's sending movement toward us and his creation. God reveals himself to us! God makes himself known to sinful humanity as Creator and Redeemer, as King and Father, as Savior and Friend. It is not so much about a biblical basis for mission in the traditional sense. Rather, “We could as meaningfully talk about the missional basis of the Bible as of the biblical basis of mission.”<sup>10</sup>

Over the next several weeks, we will ground our study of mission in *that* story. Specifically, we will read this story through the lens of one of its dominant and unifying themes, the kingdom of God. It is a story of a Creator King of unspeakable glory who spoke his “very good” kingdom into existence. It is a story of rebellion and ruin, of blessing turned curse, of life become death. It is a story of grace and hope and of a promise that the kingdom will one day be known. It is a story of wonder that a child King is sent by his Father to redeem for himself a kingdom people and whose very presence signified the coming of the kingdom. It is a story of both paradox and possibility for the kingdom would require the death of its King and prevail because of his resurrection. It is a story of a people made new by the indwelling presence of that future kingdom here and now. And it is a story of what those kingdom people are called to do, here and now, even as the glory of the final kingdom still awaits. It is a story of who God is and who we are. And it is a story of God's mission and ours.

## *Group Discussion*

### **Bible Study**

Read John 20:1–28.

- 1. The context of our passage is the resurrection of Jesus and three post-resurrection appearances: to Mary, to the disciples, then to Thomas. Describe the state of Mary, the disciples, and Thomas prior to the appearance of the resurrected Jesus. How do their encounters with the resurrected Jesus change everything?**
- 2. In each of the three encounters, how does the appearance of the resurrected Jesus call for action? What must happen now that Jesus is risen (17–18; 21; 28–29)?**

**3. Read verses 19–23. What is precious to you about Jesus’ response to his disciples? What changes as a result of the Jesus’ resurrected presence?**

**4. Read verses 21 and 22. What is the role of the three persons of the Trinity in the sending of the disciples?**

## *Discussion Questions*

Refer to this week's reading, "Rediscovering Mission: Three Movements."

- 1. Share with your group your experiences with mission. In what ways have you engaged mission? In what ways can it be said you are living a life of mission?**
  
- 2. What is the role of mission in the life of the church? In what ways can it be said that your church engages mission?**
  
- 3. How might mission be understood as flowing from the very nature of God himself and not simply as an activity of the church? Is this a helpful distinction? Why or why not?**
  
- 4. How have you understood the relationship between the Bible and mission? Have you tended to view mission as one of many important themes in Scripture? How does the prospect that the mission of God represents the grand narrative of Scripture affect your understanding of mission?**



## *At Home After the Lesson*

### **Prayer Requests**

### **Assignments**

- **Memorize** John 20:21–22.
- **Read** “The Creator King and His Creation-Kingdom, Part 1,” in preparation for your next meeting.
- **Pray** for your group members.

### **Memory Verse**

#### **John 20:21–22**

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”