

**Mission of God:
Intra-communal and Inter-communal Mission**

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Introduction

The person who administered my wedding comes from my same village in Northeast India. I will always remember him. But I must confess that when I think about him, the first thing that comes to my mind is not his wedding sermon. Maybe I was too pre-occupied focusing on my soon-to-be wife. The first thing that comes to my mind is his sermon in one of the conferences I attended way before our wedding. In it, he stated, “A church without a Mission is a dead Church.” I always remember that statement.

Back then, even when I was a young boy, I knew that statement was an important one. But now as I contemplate that profound assertion, I appreciate it more. I value it because that was what Jesus said it (well, not the exact words) and the churches throughout the history have lived it out. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations . . . (Matt 20: 19).” What exactly does mission mean? How are we supposed to carry out the mission? Let's contemplate on it briefly.

This article investigates the concept of mission by paying close attention to the gospel of John. While mission is a broad concept even within the Johannine theology, I limit my discussion on two particular aspects: mission as intra-communal and mission as inter-communal. The thesis of this article is that the concept of *missio Dei* (mission as the mission of God not the mission of Church) necessitates that both the ‘believing community’ and ‘unbelieving community’ be considered as mission field albeit with different emphasis and focus.

Mission as *Missio Dei*

Today, all Christian traditions—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant—have unanimously accepted the term *missio Dei* to talk about mission. Although the term was used earlier and the term title was not used in the gathering, the Willingen conference of International Missionary Council in 1952 became instrumental in popularizing the concept. Shortly after the meeting, the term *missio Dei* came to be associated explicitly with mission, as is popularly understood today.¹ Today, although there are nuances in understanding and explanation of *missio Dei*, we agree on the big picture, i.e., mission comes from God, is about God, and must lead back to God. The idea is that the church is not the founder of mission, God is. The church participates in the mission of God. God is the perfect missionary, and God's way of dealing with his creation and humanity is the perfect example of missionary work. Understanding mission as *missio Dei* also challenges the temptation to categorize life such as spiritual and physical because God does not. God cares about all aspects of life, so must we. Therefore, marriage is a mission field as much as the unevangelized people groups are. In fulfilling our marital duty, we are also

¹ Timo-Matti Haapiainen, “The Development and Outlines of *Missio Dei* in G.F. Vicedom's Theology,” *Svensk missionstidskrift* 100, no. 1 (2012): 45.

participating in God's mission. My experience tells me that taking care of our kids is as important and hard as writing a paper for Ph.D. class. In emphasizing all our duties as a mission, we are not relegating all priorities to sideline in our execution of mission. There are still priorities. However, it also means that all aspect of life must be part of mission. We must care for what God cares about, and God cares about all facets of life.

To understand *missio Dei* better, I would like to divide mission is two categories: Intra-communal and Extra-communal mission. Space constraints us, therefore, I will limit my discussion primarily to the gospel of John.

Intra-Communal Mission

In what is commonly known as 'the high priestly prayer of Jesus, he prayed for his disciples that they might be one just as he and his Father are one (John 17: 21). This verse is profound. We can approach this verse from different angles. Jesus wants his disciples to live in unity like the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit live in unity. The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit have different roles, yet they live in perfect harmony. Jesus wants us to look at the triune God as an example of living in love and unity. He also wants us to participate in this life of God (theotic life). This unity or life in God, however, is accessed through the Son (John 14:6).

Many of us know John 14:6 by memory and use it as an evangelistic tool. We also have to understand that this verse was written to Israelites who believed that they have a theotic life, a life with God. The Israelites had the temple (Church), Law (Bible), and religious fellowships. Jesus is telling them that their theotic life is incomplete without life in Jesus. In other words, the real blessings of theotic life are inaugurated in and through Jesus. It is only through the acceptance of Jesus by faith that life in God is materialized (John 20: 31). Only in and through Jesus one can gain the real heritage of God's promise because only in him one has the new temple (1), wine (2), life (3), worship (4), Sabbath (5), manna (6), festival (7), law (8) and healing (9). Jesus is the true shepherd (10) and the resurrection (11), in whom a new community is formed (12), bound by a new commandment (13) and empowered by the Spirit (14-16), to bring others to the fold (17), so that they all can witness this new life in him (18-21). A Christocentric faith life is thus the real theocentric life. In the light of the possible opposition and suffering—whether expulsion from synagogues or persecution from the Romans—Johannine Christians must continue to persevere in faith in Jesus to avail the full potential blessing of eternal life.²

To continue persevering in faith is an important key here. The word for faith in Greek, *pisteute* that John uses (faith has polyamorous meaning in the Bible) is neither a one-time historical event nor a mere cognitive conversion; saving faith is dynamic and ongoing. This is not to teach that salvation is achieved by works, but that actions are a necessary component of one's salvation. *Faith in* Jesus is also *faithfulness to* Jesus and to believe is also to obey.³ Thomas Schreiner, a New Testament scholar, argues that John uses a verb *metabaino* in 5:24 to signify the completion of the action in the past, meaning those who put their faith in Jesus has passed from death to life.⁴ At the same time, he also goes on to observe that several verbs describe

² I am indebted to Dr. Simon Samuel, the president of Luther W. Jr. Theological College, Dehradun, India, for the idea here.

³ Matthew W. Bates and Scot McKnight, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 96.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker

John's teaching on the active nature of faith: "Faith receives, obeys, drinks, hears, comes, beholds, eats, abides, goes, knows, sees, follows, enters, hates, loves, and more."⁵ He reinforces by arguing that John only uses the verb, never the noun form of faith.⁶ To believe in Jesus is to embrace his person and teaching actively. Practicing Christian doctrine is the norm. For John, a mere belief without the evidence of abiding work does yield eternal life (2:24-25; 12:52-43).

Active faith in Jesus must lead to the fellowship of our triune God and the unity of the ecclesial body. However, they are not the end goal; they are the foundations of the mission. The centripetal nature of the mission is not passé for John. Yielding fruit and loving one another is not the final goal; they are the foundations of the mission.⁷ They must point others to Christ (13:35; 17:21-23).

Inter-communal Mission

The Bible envisions the faith community (church) to draw outside people to Christ by inviting and going, by living transformed lives and proclaiming the message of transformation. The disciples must proclaim the message of salvation with their words and deeds just as Jesus proclaims God's testimonies (John 3:34; 12:49; 20: 21–22). More than often Christian actions become the stumbling block, not the attracting force for others to come to Christ. It should not be so. John says we can adequately witness about Jesus only if we yield fruits by abiding in him (15:4) and loving one another (13:34).

One of the ways the church can proclaim the good news is by crossing frontiers. The crossing of the vertical boundary (divine-human) by the triune God in the person of Jesus provides the example and impetus for the church to cross the horizontal frontier—social, ethnic, cultural, and geographical—to participate in and witness the saving work of God.⁸

The faith community crosses boundaries by being incarnational. Even though Kostenberger's objection to the use of the idea of incarnation as missional model in an archetypal level—a sentiment which Hasselgrave also shares⁹—has some validity,¹⁰ I believe that the term is still helpful in understanding the way our mission should be modeled in an example level. He is correct in arguing that our missional model is not incarnational in the sense of emulating everything Jesus did. Our mission is to represent Jesus. John aimed to highlight the ontological uniqueness of Jesus's person and mission and his relationship to the Father. We cannot emulate Jesus in such areas but only represent him. In this narrow sense of Jesus' mission, we cannot be incarnational like Jesus but must rather be representational like Paul. But Kostenberger also agrees that Jesus' life of dependence, obedience, and faithfulness to the Father

Academic, 2008), Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 87. N 26.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*, 560–562.

⁶ Ibid., 558.

⁷ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *The Missions of Jesus & the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 189.

⁸ Lalsangkima Pachuau, "Vulnerability and Empowerment in Crossing Frontiers: A Christian Theology of Mission," *Asbury Journal Fall 2013* (October 1, 2013): 80–85.

⁹ David J. Hasselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 158–163.

¹⁰ Kostenberger, "The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission," 454.

is a model for the church to emulate.¹¹ In this broader sense of the term, our mission can be genuinely incarnational.

To be incarnational is to be practical and tangible in expressing one's faith. John uses the Greek word *zoe* to refer to life (John 10:10). It encompasses temporal and eternal, physical and material realities. Jesus has inaugurated the eternal life in space-time sphere by his bodily resurrection from the dead.¹² Therefore, the gospel must impact not only our eternal destiny but also our existential life. Christian mission happens not in an esoteric, spiritual realm, but in particular, historical, and cultural settings.¹³ The church must strive for the realization of the abundant life Jesus promised here and now among the community of saints in particular and the world in general (10:10; Gal 6:10). So all activities that affirm life is part of God's mission.

Incarnational faith is the kind of faith that combines struggle for justice on behalf of the marginalized and proclaims the message of redemption to the rich. It is a faith that cares for the poor, protects the widow, and is not afraid to lay down one's life for others. For John, even though the full reality of the kingdom awaits the future return of Christ, eternal life begins here and now. Therefore, the faith community is to live in the assurance of the final promise reward while at the same time proclaim the good news of Christ Jesus through tangible and concrete actions. The Church must uphold the vertical and horizontal aspect of faith in creative tension. The church by her existence, example, and proclamation points to the dual, yet complementary, aspect of life.

Lastly, the faith community relies on the triune God to accomplish God's mission because, without the help of the triune God, the church is helpless. The Church has no power to save others. The cognitive agent for fallen humanity is the whole Trinity. Only those whom the Father draws to Jesus (John 6:44) and those who are enlightened by the Spirit (John 1:33-34; 3:3-6) can recognize Jesus as the Son of God. The triune God is both the foundation and object of our mission.

Conclusion

According to John, life comes from faith in the name of Jesus. It is by recognizing and embracing that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God that we enter into the fellowship of the triune God. This has implications both for the community of faith and the community outside of faith. Both communities must exercise their faith in the Son to enter and remain in the fellowship of the triune God. John wants his readers to be transformed through the knowledge that they have about Jesus. He wants them to yield their lives and to give complete allegiance to Jesus as Savior and King. This life in and through Christ is the actual theotic life. A Christocentric faith, in essence, is, therefore, ongoing and lively, eternal and existential, immanent and transcendent. This transformed life comes about as people respond to the initiation of the triune God by recognizing Jesus as the Son of God and embracing him as their Lord and Savior. The gospel clarity, therefore, depends to a large extent on how the transformed community lives and witness to the world.

When the church stops witnessing through her words and deeds, she becomes a dead church. To be a vibrant church, believers have to maintain the vitality of being intra-communal

¹¹ Ibid., 454.

¹² Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 85.

¹³ Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*, Invitation to theological studies series: 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 83.

and inter-communal. It might be appropriate to contemplate if we are a church that is vibrant and alive as we once were. It will also be worthwhile to recall those servants of God because of whose participation in God's mission we were given change to know the living God through Jesus Christ. Are we willing to participate in God's mission today? What will our response be?