

Whose world? Whose mission?

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Introduction

The most fundamental biblical answer to both questions, of course, is 'God's!' It is God's world and it is God's ultimate mission to redeem it.

There could, of course, be other ways of answering these questions with different, and not necessarily unbiblical, emphases. We could say, for example, 'It is *our world*, but we have made such a mess of it that it is *God's mission* to save it and us from destruction.' Or we might say, 'It is *God's world*, which he loves in all its sin and lostness, and it is *our mission*, given to us by God, to proclaim the gospel of God's love to God's world.

However, it seems best to start with God in relation to both questions. For 'the earth is the LORD's', (Ps. 24:1), and so this is God's world before ever it is ours. And 'salvation belongs to our God' – and therefore so does the mission of bringing it about for the whole creation (Rev. 7:10). It is, then, God's world and God's mission.

Mission is the dynamic process by which God will transform the earth of God's own creation, now spoiled by human sin and the powers of evil, into the new heaven and new earth of God's redeemed creation. God's mission is what fills the gap between spoiled creation and new creation. And *the Cross* is at the centre of that whole historical and cosmic process. For salvation belongs not only to our God who sits on the throne, but also to the Lamb who was slain – that is, the crucified and risen Jesus.

But how do we know these things? From the Bible, of course. So even to answer two such basic questions as 'whose world is it?' and 'whose mission is it?' we are driven back to both God's revelation (the Bible), and God's redemption (the Cross). This is similar to the double emphasis of Moses' challenge to Israel in Deuteronomy 4:32-40. There he stresses Israel's experience of God's revelation (at Sinai), and God's redemption (the exodus), and then tells Israel that they have experienced these things so that they now know who God truly is, and what he expects of them. We must therefore likewise learn constantly to understand and evaluate all Christian mission in relation to both – what God has said and what God has done. It is appropriate therefore to link all three together, as we are doing at NEAC – Bible, Cross and Mission.

So, I want to speak about mission and the Bible, and about mission and the Cross; but I also want to see each of those two relationships 'from both ends' – that is in mutual interaction.

I Mission and the Bible

a) The biblical roots of mission

Traditionally, if we enquired about the biblical basis for Christian mission, we would be pointed to the familiar words of 'the Great Commission' (e.g. Matt. 28:16-20) and related New Testament texts.

But for **Paul**, the architect and engineer of the earliest Christian mission to the gentiles – the representatives of the non-Jewish nations – the scriptural basis for mission went much further back. And of course, in any case, 'the Great Commission' in its present scriptural form in the text of the canonical gospels did not yet exist in the early decades of Paul's mission. Paul had to justify, to critics who ranged from anxious to downright hostile, both his mission practice and his mission theology on the basis of the scriptures we now call the Old Testament. But that was no problem to him, for Paul found throughout those scriptures a rich and deep

theology of the mission of God – for the world and the nations, and Paul built his own mission theology on that foundation. Just a few examples:

- **Paul goes back to creation**, and he sees the mission of God as bringing the whole of the created order to liberation along with the sons of God (Rom. 8:18-27). Thus Paul proclaims the resurrection of the messiah as the firstfruits of that new creation, and can affirm that when any person is 'in Christ', new creation is already begun (2 Cor 5:17).
- **Paul goes back to Abraham** – and sees the mission of Israel as the people called into existence as the covenant people of God with the express purpose of being the agent of God blessing all nations (Gal. 3:6-8). So crucial is this foundation block of Paul's theology that he calls it 'the gospel in advance' – that is, the good news that God intends to bless the nations (and always had done, from the very call of Abraham).
- **Paul goes back to the prophets** – and sees God's purpose for the gathering in of the nations to become part of Israel, and of Israel itself coming to renewed faith and restoration, so that by this means all Israel will be saved (as Torah, prophets and Psalms had all declared) (Rom. 9-11).

So for Paul, then, the mission of God through Israel and Israel's Messiah, for the salvation of the nations and the renewal of creation, was the clear message of the whole of the scriptures. His own personal mission as 'apostle to the nations' was thus grounded in the Bible. For Paul, biblical theology was a theology of mission – the mission of God.

Jesus did the same thing. Not only did he understand his own personal mission in the light of the scriptures of the Old Testament, he also taught his disciples to see their mission in the same light and on the same foundation.

'This is what is written,' he taught them, in a lecture on Old Testament hermeneutics delivered on the very day of resurrection, 'The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things...' (Lk. 24:46-48).

Jesus is not quoting any particular verse here (doubtless he did on the road to Emmaus; there are plenty to choose from). Rather he is saying that this is the whole point and thrust of the Old Testament scriptures as a whole. They lead purposefully to the *double* fulfilment of (a), the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and (b) the preaching of the gospel to all nations. The Old Testament, argues Jesus, leads both to the messiah and to mission – and that is how disciples of Jesus (whose minds have been opened by him to understand it) must read it.

For Jesus then, the Old Testament was as much about mission as it was about himself. Or rather, the two are inseparable parts of the same fundamental reality – the saving mission of God. If you know who Jesus is from the scriptures (that he is the Messiah of Israel who embodied their identity and their mission); and if you know what Israel is from the scriptures (that they were called into existence to be a 'light to the nations'); then, to confess Jesus as Messiah is to commit yourself to his mission to the nations. You can't have one without the other – not if you believe the scriptures and read them as Jesus taught his disciples to.

The necessity of mission is as rooted in the Bible as the identity of the Messiah.

Luke's account here focuses on Jesus as *Messiah*. Matthew's comparable account of the post-resurrection teaching of Jesus records Jesus putting it in terms of his identity and authority as *Lord* – unquestionably echoing the name of Israel's God, Yahweh, the LORD, in the scriptures. 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. So, as you go, disciple the nations...' (Matt. 28:18-19). The connection is again very clear – the logic of mission depends on the identity of Jesus. Or as John Stott has often expressed it, 'Mission is an inescapable deduction from the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ'.

For both Paul and Jesus, then, the roots of mission as they understood it were deeply biblical – that is, for them of course, deeply Old Testament. For it was in those Old Testament scriptures that they discerned the saving mission of God, which Jesus embodied and fulfilled, and which Paul devoted his life to proclaiming to the nations.

b) The missional roots of the Bible

It is not enough, however, just to say that mission has a solid biblical foundation, we also need to see that the Bible itself has its roots in mission. That is, the Bible is the product of God's engagement through God's people in God's world for God's ultimate purpose for the nations and the world. The documents which now collectively form our canon of Scripture emerged as God's people (in both testaments) wrestled with the issues thrown up by their identity, role and mission in the context of a fallen world of surrounding nations, cultures and religions. The human contexts within which the divine word was spoken were precisely the contexts of God's own revelatory and redemptive work.

In my chapter, 'Truth with a Mission' in the Congress book, *Fanning the Flame*, I have outlined this point further. There I survey how the Bible presents to us God with a mission (the biblical God is consistently presented as having a purpose, plan or goal towards which he works – both in the creation narrative and in the longer narrative of redemption in history). It also presents humanity with a mission – to rule over the rest of creation (Gen. 1), and to serve and watch (or keep) the earth (Gen. 2). Christians (who are also, one needs to recall, humans), are called to care for the earth because of the one to whom it belongs ('the earth is the LORD's), and the one for whom it is destined (Christ, the reconciler and heir of all things). Earthkeeping is part of our service of Christ. And of course the Bible presents Israel with a mission (not in the sense of being 'sent' anywhere, but of being the agent of God's blessing to the nations, a light to the nations). To Israel God gave his law, to share with them his own passion for justice, integrity and compassion, and special concern for the weak, poor and marginalized. So Israel became not merely the bearer of the truth about the living God, but also a paradigm of the way God wants human society to function. Centrally, the Bible presents Jesus with a mission. He certainly claims to have been 'sent', to fulfil God's purpose for Israel, and thereby to fulfil God's saving purpose for humanity and all creation. And finally the Bible portrays the church with a mission – sent by Christ to disciple the nations, to be and to do, to preach and to live, to share and to show, the Good News.

So from beginning to end, the Bible is 'missional', by its very existence and by its comprehensive message. Mission then has to be a prime hermeneutical key for our own Bible reading and teaching. Jesus 'opened the eyes of the disciples, *so that they could understand the scriptures*' – not 'so that they would *know* the scriptures' (they knew them better than most of us as well-taught Jews), but so that they would understand what they are all about – namely the mission of the Messiah and of the Messiah's people, old and new.

To conclude this first section, then, and put both our points together:

- ***Our theology and practice of mission must be biblical***

That is to say, our mission must be based on the whole message of the whole Bible – including the whole range of the Bible's concerns and teaching. The Bible renders to us the amazing breadth and depth of the creative and redemptive love of God, his total response to our total need. It shows us his loving care for creation, and for all human lostness, need, pain and peril. It shows us the depth of his anger at sin, his justice in history, his engagement in social, political and economic life, his standards for personal integrity and ethics. It shows us his faithfulness, mercy and compassion. It shows us his unwavering purpose ultimately to bless the nations and redeem creation. We need to ensure that our mission is as holistic as God's mission, that our concerns are as wide as God's concerns, that our Gospel is as Good News as God's is. All this was re-iterated in the Limuru Statement of the second International Conference of EFAC (the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion – of which CEEC is the English member): 'We re-affirm that biblical mission is intrinsically holistic'. So our mission must be biblical, but also:

- ***Our reading and teaching of the Bible must be missional***

Again, it was Jesus who points the way on this. 'This is how you must read your scriptures', he says to his disciples – not merely to prove who Jesus is, but also to understand the necessity of repentance and forgiveness being preached to the nations. Evangelicals have generally been good at reading the Bible in a Messiah-centred way, but not so good at reading it for mission, (and certainly not reading the Old Testament for mission, even though it was the Old Testament scriptures Jesus was referring to).

Yet the whole Bible renders to us those great realities and truths which impel us into mission. This is the God we worship. This is the story we are part of. This is the people of God to whom we belong. This is the goal to which all of history and the whole universe are heading. What then must be the mission of God's people in the light of these massive biblical truths?

I am sometimes amazed and saddened, when preaching at 'Missionary Weekends' or similar events, that members of the congregation even in large evangelical churches noted for their 'Bible ministry', can come up to me afterwards and say they've never heard mission preached in that way from the Bible before (particularly if I've used an Old Testament text). What Bible is it that is being preached then? Surely, to claim to be 'biblical', and yet to fail to teach and be committed to mission, is seriously to miss the plot – both in the metaphorical sense of having missed the whole point of being a Bible-centred community at all, and in the literal sense of missing the plot of the whole biblical grand narrative.

II Mission and the Cross

a) A mission-centred theology of the Cross

We have seen that the Bible presents to us God's own mission to redeem and renew his whole creation. Every dimension of that mission led inexorably to the Cross of Christ. ***The Cross was the unavoidable cost of God's Mission***

It was the purpose, goal or mission of God:

- i) *to deal with the guilt of human sin*, which had to be punished for God's own justice to be vindicated. – And at the Cross God did so, by taking that guilt and punishment upon himself in the person of his own Son. For 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa. 53:6), and 'Christ himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2:24).
- ii) *to defeat the powers of evil*, and all the forces (angelic, spiritual, directly or by human agency, – 'seen or unseen'), that oppress, crush, invade, and spoil human life. – And at the Cross God did so, 'having disarmed the powers and authorities, ...triumphing over them by the Cross' (Col. 2:15).
- iii) *to destroy death*, the great invader and enemy of human life in God's world. – And at the Cross God did so, when 'by Christ's death he destroyed the one who holds the power of death – the devil' (Heb. 2:14).
- iv) *to remove the barrier of enmity and alienation between Jew and Gentile*, and by implication ultimately all forms of enmity and alienation. – And at the Cross God did so, 'for he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier...to create one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the Cross, by which he put to death their hostility' (Eph. 2:14-16).

- v) *to heal and reconcile his whole creation*, the cosmic mission of God. – And at the Cross God did so, in anticipation, for it is his ultimate will ‘through Christ to reconcile all things, whether things in heaven or things on earth, by making peace through his blood shed on the Cross’ (Col. 1:20 – the ‘all things’ here must clearly mean the whole created cosmos, since that is what has explicitly been created by Christ and for Christ (vs. 15-16), and has now been reconciled by Christ (v. 20).

So then, all these huge dimensions of God’s redemptive mission are set before us in the Bible. God’s mission was that:

- sin should be punished and sinners forgiven
- evil should be defeated and humanity liberated
- death should be destroyed and life and immortality brought to light
- enemies should be reconciled, to one another and to God
- creation itself should be restored and reconciled to its creator

And all of these led to the Cross of Christ. The Cross was the unavoidable cost of God’s mission – as Jesus himself accepted, in his agony in Gethsemane: ‘not my will, but yours, be done’.

Yes, it is so important that we have a sound and biblical doctrine of the atonement. But let us remember, first, that we are not saved by a theory, but by the historic reality that God sent his Son into the world and his Son willingly gave up his life on the Cross in fulfilment of that mission. It was the unfathomable determination of the saving mission of God that led to those six hours on a Friday outside Jerusalem, to that bleeding body stretched on two pieces of wood, to a torn curtain and a quaking earth, to that awful cry of dereliction, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’, and to that triumphant shout of achievement ‘It is finished!’ For it was indeed on the Cross that Jesus accomplished the mission of God, for ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.’

And let us remember, second, that a full biblical understanding of the atonement (of which the above points are the merest sketch), goes far beyond the matter of personal guilt and individual forgiveness. That Jesus died in my place, bearing the guilt of my sin, as my voluntary substitute, is the most gloriously liberating truth, to which we cling in glad and grateful worship with tears of wonder. That I should long for others to know this truth and be saved and forgiven by casting their sins on him in repentance and faith, is the most energising motive for evangelism. But there is more in the biblical theology of the cross than individual salvation, and there is more to mission than evangelism. The Gospel is good news for the whole creation (to whom, according to the longer ending of Mark, it is to be preached, Mk. 16:15, cf. Eph. 3:10). To point out these other dimensions of God’s redemptive mission (and therefore of our committed participation in God’s mission), is not (as sometimes alleged) ‘watering down’ the gospel of personal salvation, but rather setting it firmly and affirmatively within its full biblical context of all that God has achieved and will finally complete, through the Cross of Christ.

b) A Cross-centred theology and practice of mission

So, we have seen that the Cross was the unavoidable cost of God’s mission. But it is equally true, and biblical, to say that ***the Cross is the unavoidable centre of our mission***. This is so in two ways.

- i) *All Christian mission flows from the Cross* – as its source, its power, and as that which defines its scope. It is vital that we see the Cross as central to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission – that is, of all we do in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is a mistake, in my view, to think that our evangelism must be centred on the Cross (as of course it has to be), but that our social engagement and other forms of practical mission work, have some other theological foundation or justification. Why is this? Because in all forms of Christian mission in the name of Christ we are confronting the powers of evil and the kingdom of

Satan – with all their dismal effects on human life and the wider creation. If we are to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of the reign of God in Christ – that God is king, in a world which likes still to chant ‘we have no king but Caesar’ and his many successors, including mammon – then we will be in direct conflict with the usurped reign of the evil one, in all its legion manifestations. We will find ourselves engaged, as Sue Hope put it, in ‘hand to hand conflict with darkness’. This is the unanimous testimony of those who struggle for justice, for the needs of the poor and oppressed, the sick and the ignorant, as much as those (frequently the same people) who struggle evangelistically to bring people to faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord. In all such work we confront the reality of sin and evil, challenging the darkness of the world with the light and good news of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through him.

By what authority can we do so? With what power are we competent to engage the powers of evil? On what basis can we challenge the chains of Satan, in word and deed? Only the Cross. Only in the Cross is there forgiveness of sin, the defeat of evil powers, release from the fear of death, the reconciling of enemies, the healing of creation.

The fact is that sin and evil constitute bad news in every area of life on this planet. The redemptive work of God through the Cross of Christ is good news for every area of life touched by sin – which means every area of life. Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess. And by God’s incredible grace we have a gospel big enough for all that sin and evil has touched. And every dimension of that good news is good news utterly and only because of the blood of Christ on the Cross. Ultimately all that will be there in the new and redeemed creation will be there because of the Cross. And conversely, all that will **not** be there (suffering, tears, sin, corruption, decay and death), will have been destroyed by the Cross.

So it is my passionate conviction that holistic mission must have a holistic theology of the Cross. That includes the conviction that the Cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism. There is no other power, no other resource, no other name, through which we can offer the whole Gospel to the whole person in the whole world, than Christ crucified and risen.

- ii) *All Christian mission must be shaped by the Cross.* If the Cross was the only way for the mission of God, if it was the only way for Jesus Christ himself, then it is likewise the only way for us – us who follow him and share his mission. Discipleship unavoidably commits us to mission. The Cross is an unavoidable dimension of discipleship.

We cannot, of course, ‘replicate’ the Cross of Christ himself. We do not suffer redemptively or vicariously as Christ did. His Cross was, as we are so beautifully reminded, ‘the full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world’ (Book of Common Prayer). Yet, as Paul affirms, there is that about Christian mission and the suffering it necessarily entails that means entering into the fellowship of Christ’s suffering. David Zac’s chapter in *Fanning the Flame* illustrates this from the Cross-focused suffering of significant (and often unsung) African missionaries.

The way of authentic Christian mission, then, is the way of the Cross, the way of suffering and sacrifice – just as Paul claimed that weakness, suffering, persecution and contempt, far from being the *disqualifications* that the Corinthians thought in their embarrassment at what was happening to their so-called apostle, were paradoxically the authentic marks of a genuine apostle of the crucified Christ.

Mission is cross-shaped or it is a betrayal of the Crucified. God’s mission required

Jesus to take up his Cross and obey his Father. Our mission requires us to take up our Cross and follow the Son.

Conclusion.

We have seen, then, that our understanding of the Bible and the Cross must be shaped by mission – the mission of God.

And we have seen that our theology and practice of mission must be shaped by the Bible and the Cross.

Let our mission, then, be as broad as the Bible and as deep as the Cross, for the glory of the One who gave us both.