

## The *missio Dei* and the transformation of the church

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**O**ne result of the oft-cited fact that “of the making of books there is no end” is the retreading of titles with good mileage potential. One title with such appeal, apparently, is *What in the World Is God Doing?* How many times it has been revived I cannot say, but I know of four incarnations and own two. The other day a colleague spotted one on my bookshelf. Removing it, he examined the cover and remarked, “Wouldn’t we all like to know that!”

A slightly different question asks, “What is God doing in the world?” On that one, I think we have a better handle. No doubt, there are lots of ways to express it, but it boils down to something like this: God is on a mission.

In recent years, missiologists have been giving attention to the *missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world. It all began with a paper Karl Barth read at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932. Barth spoke not in the usual fashion about “the mission of the church” or about “our mission” but about mission as an activity of God. “Must not even the most faithful missionary, the most convinced friend of missions, have reason to reflect that the term *missio* was in the ancient Church an expression of the doctrine of the Trinity—namely the expression of the divine sending forth of self, the sending of the Son and Holy Spirit to the world? Can we indeed claim that we do it any other way?”<sup>1</sup>

In that address, Karl Barth became the initial exponent of a new theological paradigm.<sup>2</sup> Following Barth’s lead, missiologist Karl Hartenstein not only taught that mission is rightly grounded in the Trinity—that its locus is the redemptive and sending activity that took place within the Godhead—but as early as 1934 he began using the term *missio Dei* to describe mission as an attribute and activity of God.<sup>3</sup> It was, however, nearly two decades later, at the Willingen Conference of the International

Missionary Council, that the idea of mission as derived from the very nature of God began to gain wider attention. There, as David Bosch writes, mission was “put in the context of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and 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> The actual term *missio Dei* was not employed in the Willingen documents. However, even in the planning stages, preparatory reports affirmed, “God’s mission, not ours.” Thus, out of Willingen came the radical shift in perspective that *missio Dei* would represent, a shift that missiologist Johannes Verkuyl called “Copernican.”<sup>5</sup>

The next milestone in the development of the concept came in 1958 in the form of a book, *Missio Dei*, by Georg Vicedom,

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who used as his starting point the Willingen affirmation that “the missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself.”<sup>6</sup> Vicedom’s book was not meant for the scholarly world but as an introduction for sending societies and missionaries. He divided his discussion into five parts, beginning with the idea of *missio Dei*. Other sections considered God’s lordship and kingdom, God’s sending (the Father sends the Son, who is both sent and sender; the Father and the Son send the Spirit), the goal of God’s mission (the kingdom fulfilled in the conversion of the nations), and the

sending/inclusion of the church (congregations, apostles, and servants) in God’s mission.

Seven years later, Vicedom’s book appeared in English, in the thick of mounting cynicism in North America about the missionary enterprise and calls for a moratorium on missions. James A. Scherer’s *Missionary, Go Home!*, Ralph Dodge’s *The Unpopular Missionary*, and John Carden’s *The Ugly Missionary* were all published the year before, in 1964, and some people welcomed Vicedom’s elaboration of the mission of God as a more positive offering. However, Vicedom had been concerned not just with the

validity of missions but of the church itself, which was something new. As Vicedom put it, "Although this [legitimacy] question has always been addressed to the mission, what is remarkable in this age of ecclesiology is that this question should also be put to the church, the vehicle of the mission." Because mission was yoked to the church (mission being understood as the church's response to the gospel), the enlargement of the question was inevitable. However, by showing that the ultimate source of the church's missional activity is God's own mission, Vicedom destroyed the argument linking the legitimacy of mission to the legitimacy of the church.

Since the 1960s, the company of those endorsing the shift from a church-centered or salvation-centered missiology to a God-centered missiology has widened to include leaders from a wide range of Christian persuasions.<sup>7</sup> From the conciliar world, where the shift began, Jürgen Moltmann has asserted, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world, it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father which includes the church."<sup>8</sup> From the evangelical world, John Stott at Lausanne has affirmed that "Mission is an activity of God arising out of the very nature of God...so the mission of the church arises from the mission of God and is to be modeled on it."<sup>9</sup> From the Roman Catholic world, the Second Vatican Council has stated: "The church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Anabaptist missiologists have woven the first principle of *missio Dei* into their theologies of missions. Wilbert Shenk is a notable example:

*The mission of the Triune God is to establish basileia [kingdom] over the whole of creation. This is being realized through the missio Dei. The character of the missio Dei is defined by the ministry of God's Messiah, Jesus the ebed [servant], whose servanthood was empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is by the Spirit that the church is endowed with spiritual gifts and empowered for ministry as the messianic community. The missio Dei will be consummated in the eschaton; but in the interim the eschaton infuses the messianic community with hope and*

*power as it continues its witness amid opposition and suffering. The interaction of these elements represents the mission dynamic which, in turn, defines the vocation of the disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.<sup>11</sup>*

This shift has important implications for the church. To begin with, if from start to finish mission belongs to the triune God, then whatever missionary activities we engage in can only be deemed appropriate if they coincide with God's mission. As Stephen Neill, David Bosch, and others have pointed out, if the mission is God's, missions (plural) must derive from mission (singular).

Second, because it is God's, mission is not something the church can call a moratorium on, or evade. Because the church is the fruit of God's emerging kingdom, the church will be missional. Nothing it does will be self-serving. It will fully participate in God's mission in the world, not out of obligation but by nature. Because the Spirit of Christ indwells it, the church will spontaneously carry on with the errand on which Christ came. In loving acts and faithful witness it will boldly herald God's new reality. To those for whom the proclamation of the kingdom seems a presumptuous imposition on people who have their own legitimate faiths, the church will humbly maintain that mission is not its undertaking but God's, that God has decided to include the church, and that this is the purpose for which God made the church and indwells it!

Third, the mission of the church cannot be limited to planting churches and saving souls, for with God's kingdom comes *shalom*, of which the church is a sign. The missional church proclaims the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended Christ who, present in the Spirit, is continuing God's mission of establishing the kingdom. And what it preaches it also confirms in ministries of love to its own members and everyone else—even enemies. In priestly service, prophetic speaking and actions, and advocacy for peace and justice, the church models the meaning of kingdom citizenship.

Fourth, God's people do these things not out of obligation but out of a new identity. When Jesus said, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8), he was not issuing a command but making a statement about the nature of his followers. Likewise, the New Testament's

metaphors for believers—salt, light, fishers, stars, letters, ambassadors, good seed—are never made into imperatives. They are always indicative, attesting that mission is the natural activity of the church. In Emil Brunner’s words, “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.”

Fifth, for some in the church, being in mission will involve a call to a specific place or people. But no longer will mission be

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seen as something westerners carry to the non-western world. God’s mission is to the whole world, so every place of human habitation is a mission setting.

Although this new understanding of the mission as God’s mission clarifies much about the church’s role in the world, it also raises perplexing questions about the church and its institutions. For example, the present North American scene is increasingly post-

Christendom, post-denominational, and postmodern. What kind of participation in God’s mission do these emerging realities demand?

Other questions arise from the new *missio Dei* paradigm itself: (1) What are the implications of this shift in understanding for churches that have traditionally affirmed the role of denominations? (2) What about our enthrallment with church buildings, which tend to draw our focus inward? (3) If the church participates in the *missio Dei* and is not owner of its own mission, what is to be our theology of congregational life? Is it not plain that ingrown churches function less as churches than as fellowship groups (or as hospices, in view of drastic declines in western church membership)? (4) What are the implications for how we do Sunday school, small groups, and other ministries? (5) Does this new paradigm challenge the validity of certain ministries? (6) Can our cherished distinction between clergy and laity hold up in the light of this new way of thinking? (7) What changes are implied for seminaries and their curricula? Do we continue to stress training leaders for pastoral ministry, which we have mainly understood as something done in and for existing congregations?

When we make the *missio Dei* our priority and “seek first the kingdom,” we must deal with a host of such issues. Collaterally, in

the light of the Scriptures, we are obliged to appraise the reasons for many of our practices. As we do, we are confronted with the inevitability of transformation in ourselves, our churches, and our

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church institutions. To put it another way, when our ethos changes and our prayer begins with “thy kingdom come,” our priorities, our programs, our preaching, our practices will all change. No longer will we be able to abide an ecclesiology that is not missiological. No longer will we be able to divide church and mission. Isolation (personal or corporate) and respectability will be mutually exclusive. Therefore, we will seek unceasingly to learn what God is doing in our little part of the world and get on board. We will rediscover the meaning of gathering in order to be sent. Our Sunday

schools and small groups will recover their missional intent. Our failure of nerve will dissipate. Having been called from our darkness to be God’s own people, we will give testimony to God’s mighty acts and become lenses for God’s marvelous light (1 Pet. 1:9). Our kindness, passion for justice, and engagement in peacemaking will be clearly seen by all to be derivatives of God’s mission—we will make sure of it. To paraphrase Mennonite missiologist James Krabill, our mission will smell like God’s mission.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we will reclaim our faith and approach each day with anticipation, expecting to encounter in ourselves and others the transforming work of Christ through the Spirit.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Norman E. Thomas, ed., *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1995), 105–6.

<sup>2</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1991), 390.

<sup>3</sup> Gerold Schwarz, *Mission, Gemeinde und Ökumene in der Theologie Karl Hartensteins* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1980), 130, is a record of Hartenstein’s early employment of the term. After the 1952 International Missionary Council in Willingen, Hartenstein’s report stated: “The mission is not only obedience to a word of the Lord, it is not only the commitment to the gathering of the congregation; it is participation in the sending of the Son, in the *missio Dei*, with the inclusive aim of establishing the lordship of Christ over the whole redeemed creation” (Karl Hartenstein, “Theologische

Besinnung,” in *Mission zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Vom Festaltwandel der Weltmission der Christenheit im Licht der Konferenz des Internationalen Missionsrats in Willingen*, ed. Walter Freytag [Stuttgart: Evang. Missionsverlag, 1952], 51–68).

Another early Hartenstein work in which the concept shows up is his dissertation, *Die Mission als theologisches Problem: Beiträge zum grundsätzlichen Verständnis der Mission* (Berlin: Furche-verlag, 1933), cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

<sup>4</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Hse., 1965), 5; originally published as *Missio Dei: Einführung in eine Theologie der Mission* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390–1; Charles van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson, eds., *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1993), 262.

<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution of Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Pr., 1977), 64.

<sup>9</sup> J. D. Douglas, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: Official Reference Volume, Papers and Responses, International Congress on World Evangelism, Lausanne, Switzerland* (Minneapolis: World Wide Pubns., 1975), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1975), 814.

<sup>11</sup> Wilbert Shenk, “The Mission Dynamic,” in *Mission in Bold Humility: David Bosch’s Work Considered*, ed. Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritzing (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1996), 93.

<sup>12</sup> James R. Krabill, *Does Your Church Smell Like Mission? Reflections on Becoming a Missional Church*, *Mission Insight*, no. 17, (Elkhart: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2001).