

Missio Dei - Mission of God

Richard Bradbury

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Introduction to Missio Dei¹

Missio Dei is a Latin theological term that can be translated as "Mission of God". It refers to the work of the church as being part of God's work in the world. So, the church's mission is a subset of a larger whole mission, that is, it is both part of God's mission to the world and not the entirety of God's work in the world.

This definition provides a simple introduction to the concept of *missio Dei* which is essentially that the work or mission of the church is a subset of the work of God in the world, rather than something with an independent existence. The use of *Missio Dei* has evolved considerably over the last fifty years, therefore this consideration will start with a brief historical overview of the term before considering the implications and usefulness of contemporary usage, focusing (not exclusively) on the Evangelical wing of the church.

The term *Missio Dei* itself has a long history and can be traced at least as far back as St. Augustine. It was Thomas Aquinas who first used the term to describe the activity of the triune God; the father sending the Son and the Son sending the Spirit. Until 16th century *missio Dei* was used exclusively to refer to doctrine of the Trinity: the sending of the Son by the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.

In a modern setting, Karl Barth, in a 1932 paper, set out the idea that mission was God's work and that authentic church mission must be in response to God's *missio*. German missiologist Karl Hartenstein coined the phrase *missio Dei* for its contemporary usage in 1934 as he responded to the works of Karl Barth and his emphasis on the actions of God. He used this term to distinguish it from the *missio ecclesiae*; the mission of the church. However, it was at the 1952 Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Council that the concept of *missio Dei* was fleshed out in detail.

Seeing mission as belonging to God rather than the church came from two directions:

- The over optimism to change the world founded in the Enlightenment was flawed (two World Wars rendered the notion that the world is moving towards Utopia rendered this notion as no longer viable)
- The significant movements in Trinitarian studies linking missiology and ecclesiology

Missio Dei is a very useful term because a biblically constructed theology of mission must be based upon the nature and the life of the triune God. "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world' it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."²

When the church understands that its mission is rooted in God's mission and is captured by the incredible privilege of participating in God's work for his name's sake, the church will be energized and empowered to pursue its spiritual calling and purpose, namely, to make God's name known through making disciples to the ends of the earth, and to see His glory in all the earth.

¹ This section includes notes taken from the following article <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/may/metanarrative-of-gods-mission-closer-look-from-missio-n-of.html>

² Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 1975), p.64

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) argues that God's nature is the foundation for mission and that his triune life is the pattern of mission.

Some scholars use the term *missio Dei* as referring only to the sending action of God. The reason they do this is that the "root" of the Latin verb *mitto* means "to send." However, if we reduce our focus only to the sending acts of God, we may ignore a number of important missional themes and teachings in the Bible, which are crucial for our understanding of the fullness of God's mission and our own practice of missions.

Missio Dei can have a broader sense drawn from the way the Bible paints a picture of the purposefulness of God. The mission of God is the commitment of God to make Himself known to His creation ultimately for the purpose of redeeming and restoring all creation to its right relationship with God. The story of God making Himself known is the grand narrative of the Bible

There are four broad and descriptive categories that help define God's mission which are each emphasised by different commentators.

1. God who restores the world for the world's sake

This approach articulates that God's mission aims to affect the outcome of all of history. Redemption is defined by a return to shalom in the world. The work of mission therefore is the development of society. The mission is designed and initiated by God the Father

The Son offers the model of kingdom living. The Spirit aids the ongoing establishment of the kingdom.

This position follows the aspiration of the social gospel.

2. God who sends

Some people define *missio Dei* as redemptive acts of God, focusing on the Sending of God. They do not deny that God sends with a purpose, but they emphasise the sending aspect.

From a Trinitarian perspective:

- God the Father sends the Son into world
- The Father and Son send the Spirit into the world.
- The Father, Son and Spirit send the church into the world.

With this approach *missio Dei* is located after the fall of man.

Main adopters of this approach include Karl Barth, John Stott and Ed Stetzer.

3. God who saves from sin

Rather than mission encompassing the whole of history and the whole of creation, this views mission as the salvation of individuals. God the Father's plan was to send the son, and the Holy Spirit was sent to apply the salvation accomplished by the Son.

This is articulated by St Augustine et al.

4. God who redeems and restores for his sake

God's mission is conceived as encompassing all of history. Proponents of this view include Lesslie Newbigin.

Jesus Christ, in his coming, in his death, and in his resurrection changed something about the world. He defeated sin and death, both its power in the world and its effects upon people. This is moving the world towards the completion of God's mission.

“Meaningful action in history is possible only when there is some vision of the future goal”³

The mission of God is the commitment of God to make himself known to his creation. Therefore, mission shifts from activity to purpose and from primarily salvation of souls to the worship of God. This shouldn't be a distraction to evangelism but should remind us that in our evangelism we are seeking to see people reconciled to God that they may know him, worship him and enjoy him.

This viewpoint offers an approach that links the mission of God and the mission of the church. Mission includes our efforts to plan and go, but it does not primarily depend on our activity and initiation.

There is a danger in all of this to suggest God is missional by nature. It may lead to the conclusion that creation is necessary to God. What needs to be affirmed is that the only necessary thing about God is that God be God. He does not need to redeem his world but chooses to do so, and that is his mission.

The Church's Mission⁴

Using the meta-narrative already discussed we can consider the big picture of God's mission.

God's mission is to redeem for himself a people who will be a kingdom of priests to the praise of his glory, who will bear witness to his gospel and advance his church, and who will dwell with him forever on a new or restored heaven and earth.

The mission of God governs the story of the Bible from the brokenness of the nations in Genesis 11 to the healing of the nations in Revelation 21-22. If the grand story of the Bible and our world is God making Himself known, then this is the motivation and purpose of the church's mission. The church's missional activities, to which they are called and sent, flow directly from God's mission. The church's missional activities are acts of humble participation in God's great work for His grand purpose.

God is on mission, and we are "co-workers with God." The overarching narrative of the Bible helps communicate this in four movements.

Creation

God is distinct from the world yet intimately involved in it and sustains it through his providential care. Human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, and salvation includes being remade into the image of our creator. The first 2 chapters of Genesis reveal the significance that God gives to humanity – to export his image and glory into all the earth.

Man's role in the *missio Dei* doesn't begin with the great commission, but in the Garden of Eden. On the seventh day God rested but was not finished. He instructed humanity to be fruitful and multiply and to also fill the earth and thus carry his mission out.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989) p.114

⁴ Main notes taken from Bruce Ashford, *Theology and practice of Mission* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011)

Creation is God's handiwork. However, in his sovereignty he has chosen to use human agents to actualize creation's inherent potential. Mission is therefore God's and only he can bring it to completion.

On the other hand, he has created us as responsible human beings – not only in our individual relationship to him, but also to fulfil our God-given role in relation to the world around us. At the heart of this mission, therefore, is love.

A love for God - If God created us, it makes sense that our purpose in life stands in direct relation to him. Our highest call is to love the Lord our God (Deut. 6:5, Matt .22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27)

A love for each other – It is not good for man to be alone. We see God's handiwork is made to flourish in its divinely intended interdependence, which is a reflection of his own Trinitarian being. The movement from loving God to loving others is a common theme. In Romans 12 Paul follows his instruction to offer living sacrifices with encouragements to love others by using gifts to build the church, love enemies, submit to authorities, avoid judgmentalism, avoid causing a brother to stumble, all of which is an expression of love owed to every man.

A love for oneself - We are to love ourselves by seeing ourselves the way God sees us and by becoming the person God wants us to become.

A love for God's creation – in the creation narrative God is asking man to change, and even enhance, the good creation God has given. Moreover, the narrative tells us that God gives man stewardship over the whole created order. 'For God so loved the world...'

Fall

"God's ultimate goal in creation was to magnify his glory throughout the earth by means of his faithful image-bearers inhabiting the world in obedience to the divine mandate"⁵

Everything God created was good. All of man's relationships at this time were rightly ordered. Man was in right relationship with God, with the others, with himself and with the world. With the fall, almost everything changed, and the results are evident. Guilt, shame and fear entered the world and man is now faced with sin and death. Although the image of God in man was not completely eradicated, his basic orientation toward God, others, himself and the world has altered. However, grace is shown and humanity becomes both object and agent of mission.

When Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God they rejected their dependence upon God and sought to make themselves autonomous and to seize power for themselves. This resulted not only in the fall of mankind but also of the created order. Humanity would suffer in relationship to God, to others, to themselves and to the world.

A broken relationship with God

Humanity's sin resulted in a broken relationship with God. They sought goodness and happiness on their own, apart from God, and became naked. They couldn't clothe themselves physically, spiritually, morally, intellectually and emotionally.

⁵ Gregory K. Beale, *The temple and the Church's Mission*, (Nottingham: IVP, 2004) p.82

A broken relationship with others

Man's relationship with others would be marked by strife. The consequences of this are not just limited to themselves alone. Humanity must now deal with interpersonal and societal evil as a result.

A broken relationship with themselves

Humanity's love for themselves rather than for God, resulted in worshiping the creature not the creator. Because of sin, man is less than fully human. The image of God is marred. This brokenness is seen in every dimension as humanity becomes a slave to its own Sin:

- Rationally – difficulty knowing the truth, goodness and beauty
- Morally – difficulty discerning good and evil
- Socially – exploits others and loves self inordinately
- Creatively – leads to idolatry rather than worship of God

A broken relationship with the created order

Humanity's work would now be marred by strife rather than by delight. The result was a broken relationship with the rest of the created order. Rather than unbroken harmony and delight, there would be fragmentation and pain. There would also be exploitation rather than nurture of the world that God had given to humanity to provide for their needs.

Redemption

From Genesis to revelation scripture narrates the story of God's plan for redemption and contains both implicit and explicit testimony of humanity's role in the process. At every major turning point God uses humanity in his mission to glorify himself through redemption. Examples of this include: Noah, Abram, Moses, Jesus and then his disciples.

Through them, as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit, the inaugurated kingdom extends its territory, primarily through God's new covenant people, the church. Whilst God occasionally operates immediately or directly, he most frequently employs human agents to accomplish his purposes.

Within the story of the fall is also a promise of redemption. Adam not only heard a promise of death but also of life. The woman would bear children (although painful) from whom the redeemer would come, and though the serpent would bruise the heel, the offspring would crush the serpent's head. Life would be sustained by God's gracious provision - life here is associated with offspring.

Paul recognized that these ultimately point to Christ (Romans 5:16). John's account also recognises the association of family and salvation. The biblical narrative thus is a redemptive story, the story of God redeeming his image-bearers.

Redemption of anthropos and cosmos

At the centre of God's redemptive purpose is the salvation of humanity, the creature made in the image and likeness of God.

However, God does not simply save an individual he:

- Redeems a people (1 Peter 2:9)

- The people of God is the body of Christ (Eph. 4:16)
- And the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19)
- Whom God will make into a Kingdom of priests (Exodus 19)
- To serve him and glorify him forever.

Through this redeemed community and its proclamation (Matt 28:18-20) and spiritual ministries (Acts 2:42-47), God unleashes his gospel on the world. Jesus Christ is the Redeemer, and the gospel is the good news that Jesus is the saviour of the world.

Redemption isn't only for humans; in the end God will redeem the world (created order) he has made. The good end of God's redemptive purpose is a world in which the new heavens and new earth are formed, a world in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13), thus restoring God's good order for his world.

Reversal of alienation

Unredeemed man is under condemnation, separated from Christ, alienated and without hope (Eph. 2:12). To be saved is to have hope, to be restored to relationship with God.

Humanity, by their sin and rebellion, became the enemy of God; Christ, by his death and resurrection, has brought us peace between humanity and God. Thus, reconciled to God in Christ we are now ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

Redemption in humanity's relationship with God and with others

The effects of the cross go beyond the divine-human relationship. From 2 Corinthians 5:16 we learn that God's reconciling work in Christ redefines our relationships with others.

In the natural course of things, we see others in terms of our fallen nature - as competitors, beneath us, or as enemies. The cross dispels such animus redefining the way I must look at others and to whom I now owe Christian love (Romans 13:8).

Redemption in humanity's relationship with themselves

As the work of Christ reconciles me to God, it brings healing effects in the soul, making the corrupt sinner a 'new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). Just as I must look at others differently so I must also look at myself differently. The image of God in me is being restored to the original intention until I become like Christ – the perfect God-man who reflects the goodness and glory of God

Redemption in humanity's relationship to the created order

To share his reconciling ministry is first the gospel ministry of reconciling others to Christ, but also it includes the good work of performing our God-given ministry within whatever cultural context God places us as his image-bearers. It also means fulfilling the role of stewarding the earth's precious resources, as mandated to us in the beginning. Thirdly, it means redeeming society from the structural sin which allows for exploitation of people and resources throughout creation. This is where social action and social justice become part of the church's fulfilment of the *mission Dei*.

Restoration

As in the original creation, the ultimate purpose of restoration is God's glory being displayed through the reconciliation and restoration of all things. God alone can fully accomplish this final restoration, however, the Kingdom has broken into the present and the process has begun.

Our participation in the restoration of all things extends beyond personal salvation. A comprehensive view of redemption encompasses all of life, including all the various elements of human culture – personal relationship, family life, education, arts, sciences, entertainment etc.

If the church is intended to be a concrete display of the kingdom in the present age, that display should manifest itself both in the church and in the world, in our relationship with the body of Christ and with the broader culture in which we live.

Regardless of calling, God assigns us a responsibility in the *missio Dei*. Whether in our vocation, family, or other spheres of influence, God calls us to honour him by reclaiming everything for his glory.

The question is not whether God will accomplish his mission – that will happen. The question is whether we will know the joy of obedience and participation. Not everyone is called to move overseas, learn another language, plant a church but all redeemed humanity have a part to play.

Although God's mission and the church's mission are not synonymous the church's mission is framed by God's mission, seen upon the backdrop of God's mission, and understood in the light of God's mission. The church takes its cues from God himself and therefore is committed to his mission, seeking to increase his renown, proclaim his good news, advance his kingdom, and bear witness to the truth of his word.

God's work of redemption will reach its goal in the end, as God saves for himself a people and restores his good creation.

In scripture the eschaton is not simply tacked onto the end. It is instead the vision toward which all of scripture is pointing – and the vision that grounds the hope of the gathered church and the individual believer.

Summary

The church does not constitute the kingdom, but it is the concrete display of the already/not yet of the kingdom. Therefore, the church is the primary means through which God is accomplishing his mission.

So, what constitutes humanity's role? If sin is the root cause, the gospel (in its narrow sense) is the cure. The salvation of man is central to the mission of God.

“Mission may not always begin with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately include the declaring of the Word and the name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience has not completed its task.”⁶

Ultimately our responsibility extends beyond evangelism as the task given by Jesus is to make disciples. This is a more comprehensive assignment that includes teaching believers to obey all that Christ commanded. This is the process of seeing the image of God restored in the individual.

⁶ Christopher J.H Wright, *The Mission of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006) p.319

The practice and precept of the New Testament affirms the importance of church planting as a central element of man's role in *missio Dei*, particularly in pioneer areas. The covenant relationship of church life is the God-appointed context for disciple-making.

The 'one another' commands of the New Testament are best fulfilled through the regular interaction and accountability of committed believers assembling together in mutual submission to each other and to Christ. This is the essence of the church.

Just as the whole creation was affected by the fall, redemption involves the reclamation of all creation in Christ. The wisest and most effective application of this will most often come from indigenous believers and churches (as opposed to aliens in a foreign culture seeking to 'evangelise' the heathen).

The Great Divide

Scripture teaches man's relationship with God will be finalised. Those who die apart from Christ will receive eternal torment (Matt 5:22; 8:12). Those who die in Christ will proceed into eternal life (Rev 21:2-4).

We hold three truths in tension:

- There is no other name by which we are saved,
- All men who die apart from Christ abide in eternal torment.
- We, as believers, have a calling and responsibility to proclaim to them the good news.

The redemption of the nations

God will win worshippers unto himself from all tribes, tongues, peoples and nations (Matt 24:14 & Revelation 5). The ingathering of nations is a deeply pervasive theme throughout scripture. Our God is not a tribal deity but the Creator king of the nations.

The new heavens and the new earth

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament contain promises of the renewed heaven and earth. This is the full circle of the doctrine of creation.

The God who gave us the good creation recorded in Genesis will be the God who will give us a renewed heaven and earth. We will live in unbroken relationship with God, with others, with ourselves, and with the new creation.

Presently we live between the times of the first and second comings of the King and find ourselves called to be ambassadors for God who created us and purchased us and with the blood of his Son.

Our role now is to find out where God is at work in His world to redeem and restore all things and to work with him towards the completion of that task when he returns.

Application

So how does all this work out in terms of the mission of the church to the world? There are many areas we could identify here: politics, economics, ecology, justice, evangelism, influence. In this section we will give brief consideration to each of these areas.

Politics

Introduction

Whilst ultimately all authority is established by God (Romans 13:1), the state is the self-appointed kingdom of man. Inevitably, where two kingdoms are attempting to exercise dominion over the same area, there is contention. We see this demonstrated in John 18 and 19 as Jesus stands before Pilate who believes he is the one in authority in the situation since he is the judicial representative of the mighty state of Rome. Jesus states categorically, 'You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above' (John 19:11). Thus, Jesus asserts that He represents a higher authority than that of Pilate. Ultimately, all of creation will come back under the authority of God. That is part of the *mission Dei*.

The Basis of the State

The notion of the state was originally a Greek idea in which citizens of standing governed the masses for their good (we could trace the existence of the city state all the way back to Ur of the Chaldees, however, it is the Greeks who theorised concerning it and it is on Greek thought that Western civilization is based). The Greeks experimented with many variations of state control from the establishment of democracy in Athens, which began in 510BC, to the extreme oligarchy of the Spartans, where all men were equal, unless you were a Helot, and where everyone lived to serve the state.

The Greek philosopher, Plato, encapsulated the idea of the state in his Republic. The Roman's drew heavily upon the same Greek ideas and expanded the mechanics of the state, introducing a system of governors, procurators, and civil servants, backed by the army, to administer their rule throughout the empire, at the behest of the emperor.

From the Edict of Milan in 313AD, Christianity entered into a relationship with the state which has had consequences for both in European history, even though it was not until Theodosius I in the latter fourth century that Christianity would become the official religion of the Empire. This relationship largely brought persecution to an end but opened up the way for state interference in the Church (not always negative e.g. Council of Nicaea in 325AD), and Church interference in the state such as when in the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII excommunicated the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, and made him wait for three days in the snow before he would rescind the excommunication – the Emperor needed this validation from the Pope in order to continue ruling over his empire.

Following the decline of the Roman Empire, most states previously ruled over by the Romans reverted to a feudal system, with the Church sharing some of the power on the basis of being the agent of God's Kingdom on earth (although this rule was often administered in a corrupt manner).

During the Renaissance, there was a re-discovery of the Greek and Roman forms of state rule and the notions of a state outside of the rule of God began to grow.

Following the Commonwealth rule of Britain under Cromwell, Charles II was put on the throne of England. With his accession, one of the first laws passed declared that the rule of the Crown was higher than the Law of God. From that basis, and with the gradual secularisation of the state from the Enlightenment onwards, we have arrived at a situation in which anybody who holds that the state does not have a right to run the affairs of the citizens of a country is considered either mad, subversive, New Age or else naive (or perhaps a combination of all of these).

Rousseau summed up this position by suggesting that the state is seen to represent the common good or the general will. The general will is not to be confused with the 'will of all'.⁷

The Problem with the State

The fundamental problem with the state is that it is unregenerate man attempting to rule over God's world, but without the mandate to do so. Because of the development of the state in the last four hundred years, essentially the state rules by the right of Man. The fact that the world belongs to God is completely immaterial. Thus, as Christians, we find ourselves subject to a higher Kingdom but having to live as citizens of an unregenerate, Godless or even pagan state. Of course, the concomitant to this is that 'there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God' and that the state is 'a minister of God' (Romans 13:1-4) whether it acknowledges God or not. However, the problem comes about when the ideology and values of the state come into conflict with those of Christianity. Then we find ourselves in the position where 'we must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29).

In John 18:36, Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God is not of this world. It is not motivated by Money, Sex and Power, but by the will of the Father. The basis of the Kingdom of God is not that which is for the common good, but that which is the will of God.

This does not mean we do not have a responsibility to the poor and the needy. The essence of the Kingdom is servant-hood; however, this should flow out of our love for God and our desire to please Him and see his mission fulfilled on earth, not purely out of a 'moral conscience'.

Our Response

The truth is that God is not on the side of any political party, whether their colour is red, blue, orange or some other hue. He is on the side of righteousness and justice. We have a responsibility to submit to the authority of the state, as Paul declares in Romans 13:1; however, we also have a higher loyalty to the Kingdom of God and when the values and judgements of the two come into conflict, our loyalty should always be to the King of Kings.

Ultimately, the state will be answerable to God when He judges the nations (see Matthew 25:32). At that time the values and judgements of the state will be held up for scrutiny and will be found wanting. The judgement of the higher Kingdom will cause much to be set aside as the King of Kings establishes His just rule upon the earth.

So, in the meantime, what should we as the Church or as individual Christians do? Do we have political responsibility or should we shun politics and only involve ourselves in preaching the gospel?

I believe the truth is that we have social responsibility and we have the calling to be salt and light – to cleanse and apply the illumination which God's truth brings. If we are inclined to involve ourselves directly in politics, whether national or local, I believe it has to be the calling of God upon our lives, in the same way as we can be called to be an engineer, and accountant, a teacher, a shop assistant or a cleaner. Wherever God places us or whichever role God opens up for us in the world we must embrace it as His choosing. In this sense we are all 'full time' for God. The only difference is who pays our wages.

⁷ *Social Contract* (1762) Chapter 2

In terms of social responsibility, throughout the ages God has raised up people within the Church to care for the needy and the sick. But how far should my responsibility extend? Is it my town? Is it my county? Is it England? Europe? Or is it the whole world? I certainly think it is the local town. If we do not care for those around us how can we pretend to be salt?

However, I also believe God has called us to, and given us a share in, the global responsibility of caring for this world. This is the part of the *missio Dei* concerned with the restoration of God's creation. How we, as individuals and collectively as a local church, do that we must determine for ourselves and keep under review. Clearly, we cannot do the whole thing on our own but we can find the piece of the whole that God has called us to help with. We need to be alert, diligent, and committed to finding that niche and to serve faithfully in it. This will give us influence and we will see the kingdom come to our little patch of the world.

For those called to go into politics, integrity must be the dominant characteristic. The political arena gives an opportunity for influence that can affect the lives of many, whether that be at a local level or at a national level. This can both positively, in championing legislation that will cause the many to flourish, or it can be negative in preventing legislation that will be a hindrance to the *mission Dei* being accomplished. Whilst some would see political involvement as a contract with the devil, we can cite many great Christian champions of the past, such as Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury, and more recently, Philippa Stroud, who have taken a stand on Christian principles while not seeking to exert Christian hegemony over the state. We can be proud of such people. May God raise up others like them in our generation!

Economics & Ecology

Introduction

In this section, we will consider the world once again, however, this time from the point of view of values and the stewardship of the resources that God has given us. The care of this material world and the issues of inequality and poverty are very much on the political and social agenda in these days but what is a Kingdom response to these things? As part of the *missio Dei*, God is restoring his creation to the original intention. As Christians, we are called alongside God to do the same.

Defining the Issues

*Our liberal disposition is ingrained in the concept of unlimited material advance. Now we are confronted with the economic reality of a finite planet which simply cannot sustain our expansionary value system...Ultimately the end of the expansionary economic period will usher in an entirely new philosophical ethos that will be as radically different from liberalism as the Reformation and Enlightenment were from the Middle Ages.*⁸

In other words, our mindset is that our economies and our personal wealth should expand without limitation, whilst the world in which we live is limited in its material resources. These two notions are obviously on a collision course. We cannot continue to use up the world's scarce resources in an infinite manner. We cannot continue to pollute our atmosphere, our rivers and our seas and think there will be no consequence to our actions. There are consequences; however, we may not live to see them.

We inhabit an intricate biosphere consisting of a few inches of topsoil and a few hundred feet of oxygen. Although our ecological awareness is growing, we may be too late. We may not have enough time for making the

⁸ Rifkin, Jeremy *The Emerging Order: God in the Age of Scarcity* (1979 Putnam ISBN B0006DCHX4), p.9

*required economic and lifestyle shifts to permit human life to continue past the middle of this century. Our present economic system is buying disaster for our children and grandchildren.*⁹

Chernobyl did not end when the fires stopped burning but will remain an ecological disaster for centuries to come. In recent years, there has been publicity concerning the twentieth anniversary of Chernobyl. Whilst the number of those who died directly from the effects of the meltdown of reactor number 4 was only 56, Chernobyl's name remains a by-word for man-made horror. The genetic damage done as a result both to humans and to wildlife is yet to be fully realised and will take generations to be fully revealed, however, already marked differences are being seen in, for example, the rats and mice in the forests around Chernobyl who have a very high ratio of anaemia, immune system problems, limited reproduction and other aberrations. It is most likely that similar effects will be seen in future generations of humans. This is just one example of man's incompetence creating irreversible effects on the planet we inhabit.

The earth's resources are indeed scarce as they are not limitless. Today, we observe the rapid depletion of the earth's resources by the industrialised nations; we participate in the growing gap between rich and poor; on our TV sets we see news filled with malnutrition and starvation on unprecedented scales. Farmers tell us of the gradual decline of productive arable land because of chemical pollution of fertilizers and herbicides. The earth is under threat from growing deserts, urban sprawl and global warming which it is now accepted is reducing the ice caps. Rich nations gobble up the resources of poorer countries and apply restrictive and protective trade tariffs in order to fuel an ecologically irresponsible technological materialism and safeguard extravagant lifestyles, raising the spectre of war over oil wells and mineral rights. This is what the Gulf wars were really all about not WMDs!

Is the practice of pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere an amoral activity? And yet all of us are involved in it every day as we drive in our cars, switch on our lights at home, buy consumer goods which have been mass-produced in factories which use up more and more of the world's precious resources and exploit workers by underpaying them in order for wealthy indigenous entrepreneurs and large corporations to become wealthier still.

The fact is that all behaviour has consequences. This stands ecologically as well as morally.

Ecology is a Kingdom Word

The word 'ecology' is based on 'oikos', the Greek word for 'house' or household. The Universe is God's household, but it also tells us that the world is a household and that everything within it is tied to everything else. Mankind and the world we live in constitute one ecological system.

'Ecology' describes the essential interdependence of all aspects of life on this planet; 'economy' (from Greek 'oikonomia') describes the ordering or managing of these interrelationships. The more closely we look at economic and ecological concerns, the more we see that the concerns of the two related areas of knowledge merge.

The gloomy future we potentially face, with respect to the ecology of the world leads us back to the Fall and the power of sin. Sin has always had disastrous effects in the natural world. Romans 8:20 tells us that 'the

⁹ Snyder, Howard *Liberating the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), p.39

creation was subjected to futility...’ But now the effects of living with disregard for others and for the environment are catching up with us.

Facing the threat of ecological ruin, society tends to look for a technical solution which will solve the problems both for now and for the future. Historically, mankind has always been very inventive. It is this (as well as having a spirit) that raises us above the level of animals. We use tools and find technical solutions to the problems we encounter in our environment. The hope is that such a breakthrough will save us from the effects of our own environmental wastefulness and poor stewardship.

Howard A. Snyder presents a number of counter-arguments to the idea of a technical solution to the world’s ecological problems as follows:

First, technology does not operate in a magic vacuum; it operates within a finite ecosystem and therefore is limited in what it can do. Technology is simply a way of using sophisticated tools for shaping and ordering the matter and energy of our planet, but these resources are limited. Technology is not a power in itself; it is merely a way of using energy resources in a more concentrated way. Technology has given us the illusion of limitless progress, because it has released enormous amounts of energy for human use, but in using up more and more energy, we are borrowing from future generations. Thus, dependence on technology is a kind of ecological deficit spending ensuring an eventual and unpleasant day of reckoning.¹⁰

In other words, we are spending tomorrow’s resources today without a thought for what we are going to spend tomorrow. He goes on to define a second problem with a technical solution as follows:

...[it is] fundamentally anti-ecological. We are faced with a choice: will we view the world essentially as a machine or as a garden? Will we see the earth as a factory or as a home? Will we opt for technology or ecology? This is not an either / or choice but a question of dominant models. If ecosystem is kept as the controlling reality, technology can have a human face; but if the controlling reality is technosystem, mechanistic technology takes over and life suffers from being squeezed into the ‘clockwork orange’ habitat for which it was never meant. Then the world becomes essentially mankind’s substitute Eden – its symbol of the rebellion and sign of autonomy. But this is suicidal, for we are not autonomous, not from each other, not from God and certainly not from our earthly habitat.¹¹

This is not saying that all technology is bad. We are not a Luddites attempting to smash up the machinery of the modern world. But we must recognise that technology is not amoral, that it tends to create its own morality of means, and it has an inherent tendency towards totalitarianism and depersonalisation (e.g. embryo research).

As we confront the environmental crisis we are left with the choice of trying to solve the problems ourselves or of applying Kingdom principles written into scripture itself which include justice, mercy and freedom from oppression.

Justice to the Poor

Let us consider just one aspect of our current crisis for a moment: world poverty. It is argued by capitalists that the markets are amoral. This is not true. Any system acquires the morality and values of those who take part in it (see Plato). Thus, we must first consider the motive and morality of Western businesses; in the west,

¹⁰ Snyder *Liberating the Church* p.42

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.42

with the shareholder domination, the motivation for business is the bottom line – ever increasing profit, regardless of social consequences.

All companies, from trans-national corporations to small businesses (unless they deliberately adopt an alternative stance) are motivated by the need to make enough profit to satisfy their shareholders and incentivise their directors. I am not, at present, arguing against these things; merely stating them as fact.

Those arguing for Free Trade insist that these activities should go on unchecked and unregulated. The problem is that the power rests with the trans-national corporations who are free, unchallenged by national governments and international law, to pursue policies of supplier price reduction and control in order to maximise their profits, without consideration of the concept of the ‘reasonableness’ of the prices they pay developing country suppliers.

The reality is that, in their rhetoric, governments of rich countries constantly stress their commitment to poverty reduction, yet the same governments use their trade policy to conduct what amounts to robbery against the world’s poor. When developing countries export to rich country markets, they face tariff barriers that are four times higher than those encountered by rich countries. Those barriers cost them \$100 billion a year — twice as much as they receive in aid. Trade is reinforcing global poverty and inequality because the international trading system is managed in such a way as to produce these outcomes. The rules of the game reflect the power of the vested interest of the developed nations. Trade barriers in rich countries are especially damaging to the poor because they are specifically targeted at the goods that the poor produce, such as labour-intensive agricultural and manufactured goods.

Even if all trade barriers that currently exclude developing nations from having access to western markets were to be lifted, many of the poorest countries lack the infrastructure to take advantage of market openings. Within developing countries, poor people similarly lack access to productive assets such as land and capital, and to healthcare, education and infrastructure provision. Thus, lacking access to land, marketing infrastructure and financial resources, the poor are often least equipped to take advantage of market opportunities and most vulnerable to competition from imports.

John Maynard Keynes stated in 1944 that ‘proper economic prices should be fixed not at the lowest possible level (as is the current practice of trans-national corporations and the free market) but at a level sufficient to provide producers with proper nutritional and other standards’. Meanwhile, powerful multi-nationals have been left free to engage in investment and employment practices which contribute to poverty and insecurity, unencumbered by anything other than weak, voluntary guidelines. Any move to open up the global market to the poorer nations must introduce a level of morality beyond the pursuit of profit, i.e. it must include a requirement to pay a fair and consistent price for goods produced which will keep producers ‘in proper nutritional and other standards’.

No civilised community should be willing to tolerate the extremes of prosperity and poverty that are generated by current trade practices, and none of us should be willing to accept the abuse of power, injustice and indifference that sustains those practices. Simply saying that if we open up those markets all poverty will be solved is irresponsible and immoral.

In my experience, most evangelicals simply ignore this issue, preferring instead to focus on spiritual things. In 2004 my wife and I established a Fair-Trade shop. Our aim was to support certain Christian projects with

which we were in touch, and to use any profits for overseas mission. Since the start we have had far more support from Anglicans, Methodists and Catholics than from evangelicals.

This whole issue has been exacerbated by some proponents of prosperity teaching who proclaim that, under the blessing of God, we can pursue an ever more materialistic lifestyle. Fundamental to this is the belief that God has blessed the West and not the East when the reality is our prosperity is far more a product of economic exploitation of developing nations than of any righteousness on our part. I do believe that God does call us to prosper and to be blessed to be a blessing. He may indeed give us abundant resources, but as John says in 1 John 3:17, 'whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?'

I am not saying that God does not bless us materially, but He may also call us to live in poverty in order to reach the poor. As David Smith puts it, 'has the acculturation of the churches to a culture shaped by fundamentally materialistic values resulted in the eclipsing of the authentic message of Christ?'¹² To have material goods may not be wrong in itself but our model in terms of lifestyle is the Lord Jesus Himself.

David Smith goes on to say that, 'Western Christianity runs a serious risk of becoming an ideology justifying a global system that stands under the judgement of God'.¹³

It is time for evangelicals to realise the demands upon us to bring justice to the poor, not because it is a nice thing to do but because it is a Kingdom ethic which Jesus came to establish.

The House of God

Hebrews 3:1-6 tells us that Jesus was 'faithful as a son over His (God's) house'. We too are called to be faithful over God's house, whether that be our local church or the world we inhabit.

Man and woman were created in God's image with the mandate to rule over His household and a charge to take care of it. God initially left nothing in the created order which was not subject to humankind. But, the writer to Hebrews (2:9) says, when we look around us today, we do not see a fully ordered, balanced, peaceful world. In many ways we see just the opposite. But what else do we see? We see 'Jesus...crowned with glory and honour'.

God fashioned and shaped humanity in His very image to have fellowship with Him to care for His beautiful, balanced, dynamic world. They failed. But Jesus has come, truly God and truly human, to restore the ecological balance of God's order; to take back the reins of the rulership of the world and bring all things under His control. Through His once-for-all death and resurrection a new, restored order is now at work within this fallen world. And we, the Church, are a part of God's restoring work. Thus, we too are called to be faithful over God's household just as Jesus was, until 'creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21).

Ultimately, this restoration will be complete after His return, and the 'lion will lie down with the lamb'. In the meantime, we should be an example to the world and wherever possible seek to exhibit Kingdom principles in the management of our own resources. We should also be those who speak out against injustice and corruption in the world's systems. Is this not what we are encouraged to do in Isaiah 58? In this passage it makes it very clear that God is not interested in religion that takes no account of bringing justice to the

¹² Smith, David, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2003), p.90

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.122

poor and oppressed. God has not changed in this respect, and if our spirituality or faith takes us into the presence of God but does not lead us from there to reach out to the world with His love, such spirituality is worthless.

Conclusions

Where is all this leading? We cannot live as if our economic and ecological choices have no moral implications. We cannot pretend that we in the West are blessed and that those in the developing world are not blessed. We are in a privileged position but we will also be held accountable before God for the way we have used our abundant resources and for the approach we have taken to those less privileged than ourselves.

The accumulation of consumer goods and the pursuit of our own self-interest may bring short-term satisfaction. In these things we may be no better or worse than our neighbour, but that is not the point. Retail therapy is a western phenomenon more to do with the poverty of spiritual life than a means of real self-help.

I am not suggesting that our focus should be to live in environmentally friendly housing, cycle to work every day, and buy organic or fairly-traded food. These things may go some way towards helping to a small extent. I do think we can be an influence for good and against injustice and we can be the conscience of society in these issues so that society changes. At the moment we have allowed Greenpeace to do this function whilst we have concentrated on higher, more spiritual matters.

I also believe as individuals we should think about the consequences of our consumer choices. We can choose not to go to stores such as Gap, which have been publicised as exploiting workers in the Far East, or we can choose to use Fair Trade produce, etc. But most of all, we need to change our fundamental Western values so that our lives are not one long pursuit of accumulating consumer goods, but rather we should take on Kingdom values so that we live our lives in an environmentally responsible way for the good of others and for the glory of God.

When God asked Cain, 'where is your brother?' and he replied, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Genesis 4:9). The answer was of course 'Yes'. The same answer is true of us in God's 'oikos'. As members of God's household in its wider sense, we do have responsibility for our neighbour.

Our Response

There are two major influences that we can bring to bear on the world of economics / ecology: the first is our lifestyles, and the second is through our campaigning. We will consider both of these areas.

Our first calling as humanity was to steward the earth so that the glory of God could be seen in every part of the world. This was an active and not a passive calling. The *missio Dei* makes clear that this remains on the agenda for humanity. 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein' (Psalm 24. KJV). We have been given responsibility for looking after God's world, and yet we have concerned ourselves exclusively with heaven and the world to come. We have left the ecological agenda to Greenpeace and such like and we have ignored the economic effects of unrestrained free trade on the poorest of society.

We may not be able to change the world on our own, but we can change the world for an individual or a community just by the lifestyle choices we make. These may include ethical purchases, choosing not to use plastic where it can be avoided, or selecting bio-degradable products. It may also include choosing in which

companies our pension funds are invested or whether our clothes are ethically produced or even how many air miles there are on our food. We don't have to be hippies to make these choices! The church should be leading the way in these things not supporting a prosperity gospel that sees an increasingly abundant lifestyle as the blessing of God rather than just the blessing of living in the western world.

Secondly, we need to open our mouths and give support to the champions of these issues. We may not agree with their politics, but if they are making a stand that supports the stewardship of the earth, we should stand with them. This is called 'co-belligerence'. If we stay silent, we remain part of the problem.

As charismatic Christians, we need to be at the forefront of these issues. Thus far, we have left such campaigning to the Quakers and the Methodists. It is time to hear the voice of the new churches raised on these issues. It is time for a voice that calls out prophetically to our generation before we use up the finite resources of our children. It is not too late for us to make a difference and to present a world that is well-stewarded to our Lord Jesus when he returns.

Justice

"You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 2:8. Our God is a God of justice. He wants us, not just to be the recipients of his justice but also to be the agents of his justice.

There are so many issues of justice that we could consider here. Ultimately, God will bring everyone to account for the way they live and the choice they make when he brings all things back under his authority. In the meantime, we are to be agents of his justice on this earth, challenging all injustice and seeking to bring freedom to those who are captured and constrained in an unjust world.

This may mean fighting to stop Modern slavery. Recently, I was in the House of Lords to receive a report that is being championed by some of the members there outlining the issues and roots of modern slavery and seeking to address them. But we could always do more.

The travesty of the fact that there are thirty million people in slavery in the modern world is something that should have us shouting from the rooftops to undo this injustice. Yet, most of us go about our daily lives ignoring this issue because it is not close to home.

Every slave is a child of God. Every person trafficked is a person deserving of human dignity. Every child could be one of our own. As Christians we should be involved in the fight to stop slavery.

The problem with this, however, is that many of the economic reasons that are responsible for such things as slavery are driven by the greed to the West. They are a product of structural sin on a global scale. Jesus came to deal with sin on this earth and to restore the world, but if we continue to participate in this world without challenging such structural sin, we are complicit with it.

The church needs to make its voice heard much louder on such issues. We also need to adopt lifestyles that do not continue to fuel the greed that gave birth to the structural sin. We are called to be different; to be 'in the world but not of the world'

Our Response

If justice is an issue that is on God's heart, it should also be on ours. As we see people being trafficked in boats from North Africa, what is our response? It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the images we see and

therefore to put them out of our minds. I believe the heart of God is that we should respond with his tears and with his righteous anger. This may include writing to our MP. It may mean starting a campaign ourselves to raise this issue. It may mean speaking out in public, in the media, in the public square. We do not need to be extremists to raise issues of justice. We just need to be Christians with a conscience that can respond to the promptings of the Spirit of God. It may mean something as simple as giving to Hope for Justice. As we said before, we may not be able to change the world, but we can change the world for one or two people.

Evangelism / mission

In this section we are going to consider the latest thinking around mission and the church. This will draw on various writers who have influenced this thinking over the last 40 years or so.

Timothy Keller offers an in depth exploration of the missional church and the beginnings of the missional conversation.¹⁴ He cites Guder's book 'Missional Church' as being the first main publication to become popular and since then the term missional has exploded and spread like a virus throughout modern Christian literature.¹⁵ The term missional, and specifically *missio Dei*, is widely traced back, through all key missional writers, to 1952 and the world mission conference in Willingen Germany. They used it as a way of stating the fact that God is active in the world, working to redeem it and the task of the church is to participate in this mission as noted by Lesslie Newbigin.¹⁶

Newbigin is an important figure when it comes to missional thinking in the UK, and also overseas. Many of the current writings are founded upon his work and experience. Having been a British missionary overseas in India, he returned to the UK after several decades. When he left the UK, the culture was institutionalised by Christianity and it was the social norm for people to attend Church. Whilst out in India, Newbigin found that they couldn't replicate the western church but that everything they did was in itself a form of mission. This included worship, preaching, community life and discipleship.

When Newbigin returned to England, he noticed a drastic shift had occurred in society which included a newly formed hostility to Christianity, and the number of people who attended church had plummeted. He noted that churches had continued mission using the old methods as if the Christian west (Christendom) still existed when it had actually vanished. To address this Newbigin felt strongly that the western church needed to approach church in the same way he had experienced out in India and this is what he spent the last 24 years of his life pursuing.

Another key figure in this discussion is Bosch who argues that the concept of *missio Dei* shouldn't be seen as just a way to save souls or a way to expand the church but that the heart of it flows out of the very nature of God and Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁷ Keller summarises this by saying,

"In short, God does not merely send the church in mission. God already is in mission, and the church must join him. This also means, then, that the church does not simply have a missions department; it should wholly exist to be a mission".¹⁸

¹⁴ Keller, Timothy, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)

¹⁵ Guder, Darrell, *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998)

¹⁶ Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Open Secret* (London: SPCK, 1995)

¹⁷ Bosch, David, J, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991)

¹⁸ Keller, *Center Church* p.251

After Willingen it didn't take long for the concept of *missio Dei* to take an unbalanced form that saw churches trying to take the ground of social services or politics. Not that the church shouldn't be involved in these things in balance but it was unable to carry the same weight as organisations already operating in these spheres. Although the thrust of the concept is to take mission beyond the walls of the church buildings and into society and impact culture, it started to reject the concept that at the heart of the mission is the Church. Thus, activities in the community became increasingly parachurch.

Newbigin clearly became frustrated with this shift and argued that at the centrality of mission should be two factors: conversions leading to the growth of the church, and the quality of Christian community. In his eyes, these are two critical factors and so Newbigin attempted to pull the church back to the centre ground without losing the initial essence of *missio Dei*. He insisted that the church needed to grow through evangelism yet be involved in service and in the struggle for justice in the world as well.

In helping to address this imbalance and mismatch Newbigin laid out 8 ingredients for what he believed a missional church should look like.

1. A new apologetic (argument for presenting the good news).
2. The teaching of the Kingdom of God, that God wants not only to save souls but to redeem creation.
3. Earning the right to be heard by serving others sacrificially.
4. Equipping the laity to bear witness to God in their public calling.
5. A countercultural church community.
6. A unified church.
7. A global church.
8. A courageous church.

Our Response

As churches we need to be engaging with our culture so that the gospel is accessible. This means a level of enculturation without watering down the essence of the good news. It means presenting salvation in terms that a post-modern world can understand.

There is lots of room for creativity here. It may mean experimenting with new models of church. It may mean changing the emphasis of our churches. It certainly means finding new ways of building bridges with the community in which we find ourselves. It undoubtedly means building relationships with the other churches so that we can, together, reach out into God's world. It means mobilising the members of our churches to see mission as their responsibility and not just that of the specialist few. Finally, it means radical prayer that brings the presence of God down to earth.

Influence

We are called to be salt and light to this world. That means to restore and preserve that which is good and to bring a kingdom influence into the places where we connect with the world such that we can bring change that will redeem and restore creation and humanity to God's intention so that humanity in this world will flourish.

This involves bringing the light of God into dark places, but also includes bringing hope to a world that is almost bereft of hope right now. We are a people of hope and the destiny of the world rests on our shoulders until Jesus returns.

Every Christian has the capacity to be salt and light in their own situation. The purpose of salt is to give flavour and to preserve. The purpose of light is to give definition to everything and to expose that which is hidden. We can do this wherever God places us.

In the workplace, we can be an influence for good, simply by acting with integrity and upholding righteousness. However, I believe that is where our influence begins, not where it ends. Where we have an opportunity to influence policy or procedure in our workplace, we can do so in a manner that ensures that all workers can flourish. If we are responsible for others in the workplace, we can 'disciple' them so that they can maximise their potential – this will both increase their personal wellbeing and benefit the company.

All of this flows from building relationships with people that are real. Our authenticity will communicate much and will build a platform of trust that will enable us to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Often people will trust us before they will trust God, and so our integrity builds a platform for our testimony.

Colossians 3:17 says, 'And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' Everything we do can give glory to God. If we are in the creative or arts arena, our creativity can glorify God since all creativity comes from him. If we are in the world of science, we may be called to research something that will benefit humanity as a whole. If we are in the caring professions, our care is an extension of the love of God poured out into our hearts. If we are in education, our goal is the flourishing of all those under our care. All of this comes from God and can be an influence that improves and enriches society.

However, our ultimate aim in all of these things must also be to make Jesus famous. He is the reason and motivation for this influence. If that ceases to be the case, we slip back into the Utopian dream of the Enlightenment that sees society on a pathway of improvement that will bring in the kingdom. It is the power of the gospel that brings in the kingdom and our aim to bring Godly influence into the world needs to flow out of that.

Our Response

For leaders reading this, we need to encourage our people both to be people of integrity, but also to be people of confidence – confident in the gospel and confident in the gifting and calling of God upon them. We also need to encourage them to be intentional in these things, that is, to have a mindset that seeks to influence, not just for the sake of personal gain, but on behalf of the King of Kings.

The essence of the Household codes in Paul's writings (Ephesians 5:21-6:4; Colossians 3:18-4:1) was to encourage the church to live with integrity in the world such that they did not bring the gospel into disrepute. It was also to demonstrate an alternative lifestyle from the society around them so that their Christian commitment was demonstrated by their service in the world. We live in a day where the world is living without hope but we are bearers of hope. It is time for the world to see the church as Christ intended it to be – as the alternative society that can bring hope to the fallen world so that the glory of God can be seen in the world until Jesus comes again.