

Missio Dei

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.

The Church'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 in a 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.

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 out his mission.

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 people to be alone. We see that God's handiwork is made to flourish in its divinely intended interdependence, which is a reflection of his own Trinitarian being.

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 humanity to change, and even enhance, the good creation God has given. Moreover, the narrative tells us that God gives humanity stewardship over the whole created order. 'For God so loved the world (*kosmos*)...'

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”¹

Everything God created was good. All of humanity’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 humanity 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 humanity 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 humanity 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.

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.

¹ Gregory K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, (Nottingham: IVP, 2004) p.82

As individuals 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.

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 rescues a people (1 Peter 2:9).

Through this redeemed community and its proclamation (Matt 28:18-20) and spiritual ministries (Acts 2:42-47), God unleashes his gospel upon the world. Jesus Christ is the rescuer, 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 cosmos in which a renewed heavens and renewed earth come into being.

Reversal of alienation

Unredeemed humanity 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). 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."²

² Christopher J.H Wright, *The Mission of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006) p.319

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.