



A theology of *missio Dei*

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We accept human witness, but God's witness is greater because it is the witness of God, which he has given about his Son.

1 John 5:9

My intention in the following is to affirm the importance of *missio Dei* for the church today. To do this, however, it is necessary to address the evident weaknesses in its popular usage. *Missio Dei* language, with its various linguistic equivalents (the mission of God, God is a missionary God), is ubiquitous. One finds it in ecumenical documentation as much as in popular literature, in Catholic as much as Pentecostal circles. Yet, despite this range, *missio Dei* follows a rather narrow formulation, one that can be simply stated: mission is not first something the church does, but describes the being of God. The triune God is in and for Godself missionary. Two further affirmations follow this primary one. First, a correspondence forms between who God is and the calling of the church in and for the world. As God is missionary, so the community which worships him is missionary. Second, mission is set within an eschatological framework and becomes, either as God's acting in history, or in terms of the church's essential function, the determining factor 'between the times'.

Alongside this definition, two observations need be made. First, *missio Dei* has a peculiar force. The assertion that God is missionary has often permitted an unqualified drawing of missionary ideals into ecclesiology. The logic is simple. Because mission includes the freedom to speak the gospel in a way that it can be heard in different contexts, and insofar as the church itself speaks the gospel, missionary freedom is basic to the structuring of the church. This positive statement is set against a critical account of received church structures. In the most extreme case, such structures stand guilty, not only of submerging the gospel message under unnecessary cultural layers, but, to cite the 1967 study, *The Church for Others, and the*

Church for the World, of being “heretical structures” i.e. structures that impede the *missio Dei*.¹ In that they prohibit the spread of the gospel, they need to undergo critical reformulation.

Second, belying both its wide usage and peculiar force, *missio Dei* lacks theological development. The above definition is, in terms of the received history, close to exhaustive. *Missio Dei* serves an apologetic function, creating critical space for mission. But without sufficient theological development, reference to *missio Dei* disrupts a necessary doctrinal order. Ecclesiology is properly derived from the doctrine of God, from christology and pneumatology. And because *missio Dei* is, above all, a statement of Trinitarian ontology, it seems to support this ordering. The problem with *missio Dei*, however, lies precisely in its Trinitarianism. *Missio Dei* equates ‘sending’ with the being of God. To say that God is missionary is to say that he sends, first, his Son and Spirit, and then his church, but then also creation itself. Detaching the ‘sending’ definitive of God’s being from the particular missions of the Son and Spirit permits a whole range of sendings to be projected into God. In effect, *missio Dei* has proven easily susceptible to the political or social *zeitgeist*. Any resolution of the problems within *missio Dei* must begin with a more robust grounding in the doctrine of the Trinity. To this we now turn.

Acknowledging the weaknesses in the popular usage of *missio Dei* is not to deny the significance of the concept. It developed for a particular reason. During the twentieth century, the first attempts at giving mission a theological basis sought to frame mission in terms of the church – for good reason. Around the time of the expulsion of Western missionaries from China during the early 1950s (the so-called ‘China shock’), mission went through a period of self-critical evaluation. Part of this evaluation noted how mission was conceived as the path from the church to the church.² While this may seem a rather simple observation, it uncovered a decisive logic. The church was the primary witness to the gospel. This witness was itself contingent on church members being built up in the Christian faith and such maturation depended on practices, institutions and liturgies – on an ecclesial culture. Mission, as a consequence of this ecclesial logic, became the process of replicating in other contexts those practices and structures and even morals deemed necessary to

the building up of this otherwise defined witness. Mission method, in other words, appeared very much like colonisation: the exportation of a culture to other cultures, not necessarily to replace these, but to lie on top of them and to provide the governing and orienting structures. The important point to be made here is that the lamented missionary colonialism was consequent not, as is often assumed, on the act of cross-cultural mission itself, but on the underlying ecclesiology and its understanding of Christian witness. It was consequent on a concept of the church for which movement into the world was secondary, i.e., non-essential, to its nature and witness.

That our ecclesiologies embody such a problem should not come as a surprise for it corresponds to a similar concern in the doctrine of the Trinity: the problem of how God's movement into the world belongs to who God is in and for Godself. The highlighted problem of mission in relation to church, or, in the words of Karl Barth, the problem of how human beings might become and be witnesses to the great acts of God is primarily 'a *divine* problem—the problem of God's *own* being'.³ To introduce this concern, Barth reformulates Anselm's famous question '*cur Deus homo?*' (why did God become human?) to read '*quo iure Deus homo?*' (by what right did God become human?). The traditional answer, according to Barth, assumes a 'cleft or rift or gulf in God Himself, between His being and essence in Himself and His activity and work as the Reconciler of the world created by Him.'⁴ The possibility of God becoming human rests in a 'determination of God to be "God against God",' that he 'came to be outside of Him[self] as He became ours'.⁵ God, in order to come to us as Jesus Christ, must betray his own being. Barth does not himself develop the ecclesiological ramifications of this position, but one could draw noteworthy parallels with how mission has been traditionally configured in relation to the church.

Barth's counter-position argues that in his coming in his economy God lives his own proper life. 'The divine intervention which creates fellowship reveals itself and takes place, not as something which is alien to God, *but as a mediation which is most proper to Him*, which takes place first in Himself, in His divine life from eternity to eternity'.⁶ In this, of course, Barth is concerned with God's aseity. God does not become something different in his economy; who God

is in his economy is who God is from all eternity. Or, what occurs in God's creating of fellowship between himself and the human is something which first occurs in God's own being as Father, Son and Spirit. As Trinity, encounter and partnership already belong to who God is without any abstraction or contradiction. Barth will even say that '[w]hat is primarily in God is the transition which takes place in that distance'.⁷ This is so because God as Father, Son and Spirit is 'history in partnership'.⁸ Together, these terms indicate that the partnership of the Father and the Son is not 'merely a first and static thing which is then succeeded by the history as a second and dynamic. [...] There is only the being of God as the Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of both and in whose eternal procession they are both actively united.'⁹ In that God is known only through God alone, the history of God's own life is closed; any form of emanation is impossible. But insofar as God causes the covenant between himself and human beings to take place, there we participate in the history in partnership that is the triune life of God himself.

This may appear somewhat abstract, but it is of decisive significance for *missio Dei*. It is as God in and for himself for and to all eternity transitions the gap between the above and the below that he is missionary. God's own life is the event of witness, and in making human witnesses God lives his own proper life.

In christological terms, Jesus Christ as the mediator, his being true God and true human, constitutes no rift in the being of God, but belongs to the mediation proper to him as Father and Son. As in God, this partnership of the divine and the human is not a static that requires some external to become a history. It is already a history and a history with a special character: the character of witness. Witness is not, in this way, a third formal thing beside his being true God and true human – it is the living relationship of the divine and the human. This is, again, first true in God himself. Where God lives, as he does in Jesus Christ, 'life is not only possibly but truly, not only maybe but definitely, not only secondarily but primarily, declaration, and so light, truth, word and glory [...] The true and living God speaks and is light.'¹⁰ Any attempt to depict Jesus Christ apart from his act of witness can only result in an abstraction; it is not a description of the living God, but of a mute idol. In other words, Jesus Christ's being a

witness is not accidental or secondary to him. Where there is witness, so there is the living history of the divine and the human. This further means that Jesus Christ's own humanity – and therefore our humanity with him – needs to be narrated in terms of his mission.

In pneumatological terms, the Holy Spirit transitions the history of Jesus Christ and our own histories, and is himself the guarantee of that transition. Again, this is true for us in relation to Jesus Christ because it is first true in God. The Spirit, as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, transitions the partnership of the Father and the Son. In him, the history takes place and is revealed as such. Likewise, the Spirit intrudes upon our own closed and circular histories, disturbing and transcending our self-occupation to enter into Jesus Christ's own history. This disturbance, in other words, is precisely our union with Jesus Christ. The Spirit does not shape the Christian community in correspondence to a God whose movement into his economy is secondary to who he is. The Spirit of the living God creates a community in correspondence to the God who lives his own proper life in coming to us. The Spirit is the 'summoning power of the divine promise, which points the community beyond itself, which calls it to transcend itself and in that way to be in truth the community of God – in truth, i.e., as it bears *witness* to the truth known within it, as it knows itself to be charged with this witness and *sent out* to establish it.'¹¹ The unity and witness of this community rests not in some conception of purity that treats the entrance of gentiles into the church as a dilution of the church's witness.¹² It is the unity of the Spirit in transitioning – and not collapsing – the histories of many tribes, tongues and nations into the history of the one Jesus Christ.

For the Christian community, it must first be said that if witness describes God's own history, then it must also describe the history of his body. We depart here from the position that regards witness as indicating our contemporary distance from God, some form of penultimate and provisional act essentially unrelated to the eternal enjoyment of salvation.¹³ Instead, it is only possible for human beings to become and be witnesses to the acts of God when God himself transitions the gap between himself and us. Our being witnesses is an act of God for it is entry into God's own self-knowledge. Our being witnesses is the living history of our fellowship with God.

This is so because, as God is missionary from and *to* eternity, so mission characterises our eternal future. Mission is not a contingency limited to the period before the *eschaton*; such a position begins with a phenomenon based in historical accident and human capacity, not with the God who is Father, Son and Spirit. Life in the Spirit is life in the realism of Easter and this is a life conditioned by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and thus by our eschatological sending into all the world. This is not to place mobility over against stability. Indeed, such a binary opposition, I suggest, is consequent on the assumed rift whereby God is truly Godself only in repose behind his economy. Nor is the missionary externality of the Christian community contingent on the power and capacity of the community. It is the power of the *parousia*. It is the power of fellowship with God. To be sure, in the *eschaton* the promises of God will be a reality, but they will not be other than what is promised. They will not be other than what Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit has accomplished here and now. Jesus Christ will not be other than who he is, and he is the witness of God. This future is eschatological not because it is potentially unreal, but because it is real now and so will be real then. We will always be, in other words, witnesses to God's glory.

As much as this confirms the freedom of the church to structure itself according to its witness, it equally rejects treating the structure of the community as a mere external. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of this community in which all the barriers have been destroyed. The Spirit structures the church in correspondence to reconciliation's completion and reconciliation is complete after the nature of God's own perfection: it is itself eloquent and radiant. In accomplishing the reconciliation of the world, God himself lives, which is to say, reconciliation is itself a completed act that, precisely in its completion, takes place. It is real as it occurs and in its occurrence it attests to the reality of the reconciliation already real in Jesus Christ.

This, on the one hand, reinforces the importance of the Christian community as a *community*, a living fellowship. On the other, it gives that community a missionary form, for reconciliation means crossing the boundaries outside the community that have already been crossed within the community. The missionary form of this fellowship, in other words, is not some idle implication formulated beside an

otherwise defined substance of reconciliation. To again cite Barth, 'reconciliation generally and as such, does not merely take place for itself in a special sphere closed off by the resistance and contradiction which it encounters. On the contrary, it takes place as it establishes Christian knowledge in the world and in and among the [people] who are reconciled in its occurrence.'¹⁴ Any failure on behalf of the church to be active in reconciliation is, foremost, a failure to participate in the history of Jesus Christ. This is simply to confirm one of the central affirmations in *missio Dei*, '[t]here is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world.'¹⁵ Likewise, Christian edification, our maturation in the faith, is not divorced from our being reconciled and being active in reconciling. Edification occurs as the Spirit draws the community beyond itself, and as it follows the Spirit so it receives the fruit of the Spirit. Mission, in other words, is basic.

What then is *missio Dei*? It is first a call for the Christian community to worship God as he is, and it belongs to God from and to all eternity to come to us in creation, reconciliation and redemption. The community called by this God cannot expect its life to be other than that revealed in Jesus Christ. That is, it should not order its witness in terms of a withdrawn repose beside which its movement into the world is a betrayal of its true existence (as one sometimes encounters in contemporary treatments of *koinonia*). The opposite is true. As Jesus Christ's own coming as a witness to the Father is God living his own proper life, so the church's own coming into the world under the impulsion of the Spirit to witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus is proper to its own life. Mission cannot be a secondary thing beside some other more fundamental Christian spiritual existence, nor can the impetus for mission come from some external accident, such as the discovery of new worlds, or the loss of membership numbers. This is because missionary witness is internal to the gospel itself, as it is internal to the very glory of the triune life. From this perspective, we should acknowledge some of the criticisms occasioned by missions against received ecclesiologies and theological systems.

To counterbalance such an assertion, however, *missio Dei* remains an action of God's own perfect life. He has not simply handed this over to the human, to the Christian community, or to history as such. The missionary sending of the church, in other words, cannot be detached

from the work of the Spirit and the Son. We follow and witness to their work in the world, and we do this as reconciled communities engaging in active reconciliation with those afar off. Though such communities necessarily have a missionary form, *missio Dei* is not some form of missionary *carte blanche* where everything is permitted for the sake of a phenomenologically-grounded concern for church growth. It does not allow for communities of homogenous packets, which simply replicate local patterns under the sanctifying presence of the cross. Nor will all the Western church's problems be solved through simple structural changes determined by some notion of contextual needs.

Let me conclude with a concrete observation. When, in 1792, William Carey wrote his famous *Enquiry*, he developed his positive work against a particular assumption: mission, according to the Reformers, ended with the apostles. One may debate the point, but this should not blind us to Carey's constructive position. For him, Matt 28:18–20, the so-called Great Commission, rendered mission an on-going necessity. Mission was a command of the risen Lord, one that demanded a response of human obedience. While this position, which finds confirmation in many contemporary statements on mission, created a certain space for mission, it came at a particular cost. The rationale for mission within theological discourse became contingent upon finding overt commands to 'go' within the New Testament. This, I suggest, has had a problematic effect on our preaching. While one might expect to hear a special 'missionary sermon' once a year, often accompanied by a special collection, it is not something one hears on Resurrection Sunday (although John 20:21 is today the key mission text) or at Pentecost. Nor are the significant passages which deal with the Christian community as one of Jew and Gentile and the related issues of the law and the gospel treated in missionary terms, to give but a couple of easy examples. We stand guilty, in other words, of not giving mission a positive theological shape and of teaching our communities the unimportance of witnessing across boundaries for their faith and spiritual growth.

Until we begin to think with our congregations through the nature and form of Christian mission in terms other than simple command, until we understand that mission is not a simple means by which the gospel is spread but itself belongs to the gospel, until we understand

that the communication of the faith belongs to the cultivation of the faith, until we understand that witness to God indicates not distance from but fellowship with God, structural changes will only achieve so much.

Finally, *missio Dei* tells us that witness, fellowship and joy are essentially related (1 John 1:1–5). It is with joy and in peace that we encounter one another and the world around us. It is the joy of being the children of the God who did not remain distant from us, but whose glory includes his coming to us.

Notes

- ¹ World Council of Churches Department on Studies in Evangelism, *The Church for Others, and the Church for the World: A Quest for Structures for Missionary Congregations* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967), 19.
- ² See J. C. Hoekendijk, “The Church in Missionary Thinking,” *International Review of Mission* 41 (1952): 324.
- ³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (trans. of *Kirchliche Dogmatik*; ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), IV/2, 342f. (my emphasis).
- ⁴ Barth, *CD* IV/1, 184.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 184, 185.
- ⁶ Barth, *CD* IV/2, 341 (my emphasis).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 344.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Barth, *CD* IV/2, 344f.
- ¹⁰ Barth, *KD* IV/3.1, 87; *CD*, 79.
- ¹¹ Barth, *CD* IV/1, 152 (my emphasis).
- ¹² See, for example, the curious argument in George A. Lindbeck, “The Church”, in *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi* (ed. G. Wainwright; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 178–208.
- ¹³ See, as a single example, George Hunsinger’s statement that ‘[w]itness is seen as penultimate, and eternal life as the ultimate,

form of fellowship.’ George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 181.

¹⁴ Barth, *CD IV/3.1*, 214.

¹⁵ Norman Goodall, ed., *Missions Under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1953), 190.