

# Mission: A Problem of Definition

Keith Ferdinando  
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Summary by Steve Addison  
[www.movements.net](http://www.movements.net)

***“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean,  
neither more nor less”***

Humpty Dumpty

If words are defined by their use, then the variety and breadth with which “mission” is used suggest that Stephen Neill’s prophecy may have been fulfilled: “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.”

It is problematic to call people to engage in mission when the meaning of that engagement remains elusive.

Two of the factors have produced the present ambiguity.:

1. There has been the recognition that communicating the gospel is not the only thing Christians are sent into the world to do. Among evangelicals there is renewed recognition of the implications of the doctrine of creation, including the cultural mandate, coupled with revived awareness of the significance of social and economic issues for Christian discipleship.
2. Increasingly widespread pluralist and inclusivist approaches to non-Christian religions imply that evangelism is not a necessary, perhaps not even a desirable, function of the church. Accordingly, the focus of mission is located elsewhere—in the physical care of the suffering, for example.

## Four views of mission

Four principal contemporary understandings of mission may be identified. They can be visualised as concentric circles, ranging from approaches which are broad and inclusive, to those which are increasingly narrow in definition.

### 1. The Missio Dei

The broadest approach of all is that sometimes identified as missio Dei. In its literal sense the Latin expression simply draws attention to the fact that all Christian mission is God’s: he alone initiates, empowers, directs, and blesses all true mission.

However, as it is used in contemporary missiological debate, the term means rather more than this, identifying mission as everything God wills to do in the world, whether through the church or outside it. This in turn implies that non-Christians may be positively involved in God's mission without knowing it.

This entails a potential marginalisation of the role of the church, which is not the unique human vehicle of the *missio Dei*. Approaches of this type are expressed in different ways. One such is the idea that the kingdom of God advances as people of any religion or none seek to do good in the world.

Thus, the pursuit of justice, the furthering of human dignity, the reconciliation of hostile groups, the care of the environment, all reflect God's will for his creation and so all are part of his mission whoever the agents may be. Such an approach was evident at the ninth assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in 1968, with its tendency to identify revolutionary social movements as the work of God in the world, and to "let the world set the agenda."

Belief in humanity as created in the *imago Dei* and in the notion of common grace has in the past provided sufficient basis for affirming that God is active outside the church, within the structures and organisation of human society for example, in order to preserve them from decay, to further justice and order, and thereby to facilitate the disciple-making mission of the church (cf. 1 Tim 2:2). All of this reflects his providential rule in history, but it is quite distinct from the sort of apostolic mission that is described in the Acts of the Apostles, whose purpose lies in calling men and women to become disciples of Jesus and members of God's people.

The issue is then not simply that of increasingly loose terminology, but of fundamental change in the concepts of salvation and the kingdom of God. However, this involves an understanding of God's kingdom substantially different from that which Jesus proclaimed. For him it was not primarily the reconstruction of human societies within history, but God's sovereign intervention to save and to judge, reconciling sinners and creating a new community: "It is the abstract idea of God being king, his sovereignty, his control of his world and its affairs. . . . We may seek it, pray for it, preach it, enter it, but men do not create or achieve it."

Thus, "salvation does not exist in history beyond the church and . . . the kingdom of God comes only as Christ is acknowledged as king." There is indeed a distinction between history and salvation history, between world and church, between God's providential rule over the earth and his redemptive intervention within it: the notion of *missio Dei* as used by some collapses these pivotal distinctions, and thereby not only loses a word but also the very distinctiveness of God's work in Christ.

## **2. The Cultural Mandate**

A second approach defines mission more narrowly: "the church's mission, then, encompasses everything that Jesus sends his people into the world to do."

Significant is the idea that humans are sent into the world to fill it and rule over it as God's image, exercising authority over his realm (Gen 1:26-28).

Among evangelicals a major factor driving this understanding of mission has been a justified reaction against a dualistic—and very influential—approach to discipleship, which has tended to disparage the “secular” realm. In opposition to this there has been a recovery of the Reformed vision of glorifying God in all legitimate “callings,” and not just in supposedly “spiritual” roles. Such an approach is rooted in an affirmation of Christ’s Lordship over all creation.

It is, nevertheless, a recent departure to define such engagement with the world as “mission.” What is happening, then, is an inflation of the concept of mission

### **3. Social Action**

A third approach limits the missiological agenda more narrowly still to what is termed “social action,” along with proclamation and the making of disciples.

While social action is rarely given precise definition, it refers to the alleviation of human suffering and the elimination of injustice, exploitation, and deprivation. It is thus specifically remedial and transformative, in a way not necessarily true of all that Christians do to glorify God in his world.

Social action in mission can be traced from the time of the apostles. Concern was never limited to relief. The itinerating missionary carried with him a bag of medicines, new or better seeds and plants, and improved livestock. Nevius introduced the modern orchard industry into Shantung. The Basel missionaries revolutionized the economy of Ghana by introducing coffee and cocoa grown by families on their own land. James McKean transformed the life of Northern Thailand by eliminating its three major curses—smallpox, malaria and leprosy. . . . They fought fiercely for human rights in combating opium, foot-binding and exposure of girl babies in China. They waged war against widow-burning, infanticide, and temple prostitution in India.

There are numerous approaches to the issue. What is particularly in focus here is the viewpoint which understands social action as a necessary partner in mission alongside disciple-making, both being required components in a “holistic” approach. Thus evangelism and social action have been represented as equivalent to the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird.

### **4. Making Disciples of All Nations**

The innermost of the four concentric circles emphasises the making of disciples as the essential, exclusive content of mission.

The mandate of the great commission is that of making disciples, which in the context must surely indicate something closely parallel to Jesus’ own practice in the discipling of the twelve.

The preferred term here—rather than evangelism—would be discipling, or making disciples, which signifies the process not only of bringing people to faith but of fostering

their spiritual growth in terms of relationship with God and his people, and of obedience in all areas of life: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19).

Such an understanding of mission has been prevalent until recently, and is the presupposition of Eckhard Schnabel’s study of New Testament mission, which he identifies as “the activity of a community . . . that is convinced of the truth claims of its faith, and that actively works to win other people to the content of faith and to the way of life of whose truth and necessity the members of that community are convinced.”

An approach such as this can moreover be misunderstood in other ways.

**First, it need in no way imply that Christian engagement with the world in general (the second circle) and social concern (the third circle), are invalid.**

It does not entail a return to Gnostic neglect of the world and its pain. Rather it is compatible with a biblically holistic discipleship—living to God’s glory and seeking his will in all of life. Among other things that will imply the pursuit of justice in the distribution of the fruits of the earth and of righteousness in the ordering of society, as well as the relief of the destitute and sustained efforts to bring about a transformation of their condition.

It is impossible to really know Jesus and be indifferent to the plight of the poor.” The point here is not to deny the importance of Christian social commitment, but to maintain distinctions in the interests of clarity, and to reserve the word mission for the discipling of the peoples. For those who respond to the gospel and are effectively disciplined, social engagement then becomes an integral part of their Christian life and obedience.

**Second, distinguishing mission from social action does not mean that missionaries will not engage in the latter.**

Christian love and faithful discipleship may emphatically demand that missionaries—precisely as disciples—would respond to human need and injustice wherever they may encounter it.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the provisos above, mission in the sense of proclamation and the making of disciples retains a distinctive and, it is argued here, primary place in the life of the church.

The basis of such a position has often been articulated.

**First, there is a distinctive apostolic mission taking place in Acts which is an expression of explicit obedience to the great commission.**

Its focus is on winning people to the faith and to the way of life which that faith produces, and its method is proclamation of the word of Christ.

It is also true that Acts portrays believers engaging in social action—caring for widows, for example—but that is a consequence of apostolic mission rather than its substance: it is one of the forms—albeit a vitally important form—which faithful discipleship takes among those who have responded to the gospel. Nevertheless, it does not have the same place as the making of disciples itself, and this relates to the obvious fact that Christian social

engagement depends on the existence of Christians, and there would be none if disciples were not made.

Howard Marshall writes: "I am a quite unrepentant advocate of the priority of evangelism, since that is quite clearly central to the NT . . . ."

**Second, if men and women are alienated from God and face eternal judgement, then communication of the message of reconciliation must have precedence over social action.**

Again, this is not to deny the necessity of social engagement. However, the thrust of the New Testament is that eternal realities have immeasurably greater significance than temporal ones. We may feed the hungry, heal the sick, release the oppressed, but if they remain alienated from God then their gain is relatively small, for the eternal reality has a significance that infinitely surpasses the circumstances of the present (cf. 2 Cor 4:17).

One major reason for a tendency to move away from a focus on mission as disciple-making and towards broader definitions has been a loss of belief in the eternal consequences of human lostness and in the uniqueness of Christ's work as the means by which human beings are restored to the Father. Under those conditions the emphasis necessarily moves away from the spiritual and eternal and towards the physical and temporal.

The loss of those doctrinal certainties about sin and hell and Christ that fostered missionary endeavour in previous generations, has been a major factor at both popular and scholarly levels in changing definitions of mission.<sup>47</sup>

**Third, mission may take place in the absence of social action, but never in the absence of discipling.**

The making of disciples is the sine qua non of authentically Christian mission; it is, after all, what Jesus explicitly commanded at the end of his earthly ministry, to which the New Testament bears abundant testimony.

**Fourth, the making of disciples of Jesus Christ constitutes in itself a major step towards social and economic change.**

The causes of poverty are complex and disputed, and it is beyond the scope of this discussion to debate them. A major contributory factor, however, is culture and, more specifically, the worldview that underlies it.

Thus fatalism, belief in the notion of limited good, the prevalence of corruption and of the attitudes which foster it, animistic thinking, and bondage to a fear of occult powers, may each contribute to a worldview which sustains poverty and injustice:

However, poverty arises not only from factors external to the poor and over which they have no control, but also from powerful but debilitating beliefs that shape their societies. Consequently, measures to alleviate poverty are frequently unlikely to yield lasting success if they do not address critical cultural issues. However, by its nature the gospel should produce radical worldview change that will positively impact society as truth replaces falsehood through the renewing of minds (Rom 12:2).

Samuel Escobar makes the point in discussing the social impact of South American Pentecostalism: “They [Pentecostals] do not have a social agenda but an intense spiritual agenda, and it is through that agenda that they have been able to have a social impact.”

He quotes David Martin’s verdict on Pentecostalism:

Above all it renews the innermost cell of the family and protects the woman from the ravages of male desertion and violence. A new faith is able to implant new disciplines, reorder priorities, counter corruption and destructive machismo, and reverse the injurious and indifferent hierarchies of the outside world.

Mangalwadi makes a similar point in reflecting on William Carey’s approach to social ills in India:

Carey struggled against specific social evils, just as his friends in England were continuing their struggles against evils. But Carey’s confidence was not in his social protest or social action, but in the gospel. This is the very opposite of those Christians who put their hope for change in their “social action.” . . . [Carey] believed that if we disciple nations, we will increasingly see God’s will being done here on earth.

Social change occurs through those who have been transformed by the gospel—through transformed communities of God’s people who become salt and light in their societies. It is fruit rather than substance of mission. Communication of the gospel in its richness is the most significant “social action” that missionaries can undertake.

## Conclusion

Certainly the extent of Christian engagement with the world is not limited to disciple-making but includes involvement in every area of life—all for the glory of God. The problem, however, is that if the making of disciples is subsumed under a category of mission which is much broader and far more inclusive, its absolute importance risks being compromised.

There is a danger of the marginalisation of disciple-making if its distinct and unique nature is not specifically recognised and singled out as the great work of the people of God—the work that they alone can do.

If the concept and centrality of mission after the manner of the apostles is to be retained, its distinct identity must be secured through a vocabulary, specific words, that names it. This is what is being lost in the present confusion of definition

The importance of the issue can scarcely be overstated. The great theme of Scripture is God’s redemptive mission to call a people for his own glory among whom he will dwell; and those he calls are in their turn to engage in mission as his co-workers by making disciples of Jesus Christ. Definitional ambiguities must not be allowed to obscure the absolute centrality of that vital task.