

## Missio Dei and the Mission of the Church

by Eddie Arthur

### Introduction

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. 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.[1]

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 essay 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[2].

### History

The term *missio Dei*, itself has a long history and can be traced at least as far back as Augustine[3]. It was 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[4]. 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*. This idea was picked up by Hartenstein who used the term *missio Dei* to distinguish it from the *missio ecclesiae*; the mission of the church[5]. However, it was at the 1952 Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Council that the concept of *missio Dei* was fleshed out in detail. The term *missio Dei* was not actually used at the Willingen meeting though it was used by Hartenstein[6] in his summary of the conference.

### Willingen

The meeting at Willingen in Germany took place at a difficult time in the life of the Church. The Second World War had been replaced by the cold war and the church was coming to terms with the expulsion of missionaries from China.[7] Against this pessimistic background Willingen fleshed out the theology of mission that Barth, Hartenstein and others had been moving towards. In his report of the conference Hartenstein described mission as "participation in the sending of the Son, in the *missio Dei*, with an inclusive aim of establishing the Lordship of Christ over the whole redeemed creation[8]. According to Goheen, there are two new particular emphases on missiological thinking which emerged from Willingen.

First, mission is first and foremost God's mission. The church does not have a mission of its own. Rather the primary emphasis is on what God is doing for the redemption of the world. Thereafter, consideration is given to how the church participates in God's redeeming mission. Second, God's mission is defined in terms of the Triune character and work of God.[9]

The Trinitarian emphasis was particularly important. "Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology."[10]. Engelsen suggests that this emphasis on a Trinitarian basis for mission is a more important outcome from Willingen than "the somewhat ambiguous phrase *missio Dei*." [11] While there was substantial agreement on the use of terminology and the Trinitarian nature of mission, the Willingen participants were unable to agree on the extent of God's mission and the Church's role within it.

### Post-Willingen

"In Willingen and period following, two major – and somewhat competing – approaches to *missio Dei* emerged. The first one, a

dominant view in the Willingen meeting, understood mission as God's evangelizing action through the church. The second, which raised serious opposition to the dominant Willingen view was developed later... It conceived *missio Dei* as God's activity in the secular world over and above the church, saying, 'the world provides the agenda.'<sup>[12]</sup>

Goheen defines these two points of view as Christocentric-Trinitarian and Cosmocentric-Trinitarian<sup>[13]</sup>. (Philip<sup>[14]</sup> uses the terms church-centric and world-centric). The Christocentric sees God's mission as centering on the work of Christ through the Church, whereas the Cosmocentric view (of which the Dutch missiologist Hoekendijk was the most prominent proponent) sees God's mission as being active in all of the cosmos. For Hoekendijk, the church is an appendix<sup>[15]</sup>, to God's work. "When one desires to speak about God's dealings with the world, the church can be mentioned only in passing and without strong emphasis."<sup>[16]</sup> For Hoekendijk, God is at work in the world which then has an effect on the church, as opposed to the classical view which saw God at work in the church and through the church to the wider world.<sup>[17]</sup> The stress on God's mission through the wider world and not just the church was such that Newbigin could write that "Mao's *Little Red Book*' became almost a new Bible.<sup>[18]</sup>

Through the 1960s an increasing number of people from a variety of confessional backgrounds adopted Hoekendijk's views<sup>[19]</sup> to such an extent that at the 1968 Uppsala conference of the WCC "the church was often ridiculed and ... the church itself was seen as an arena for mission"<sup>[20]</sup>. "By consequence, evangelism practically disappeared from the mission agenda of mainline churches in the West and North"<sup>[21]</sup>.

Through the decade of the 1960s there was an increasing polarization between those who took opposing views of the role of the Church in mission. Broadly speaking, Evangelicals continued to believe in a dynamic role for the church in mission, whereas those with an ecumenical perspective tended to follow Hoekendijk's Cosmocentric model. This difference in views led to a split "between the evangelical churches and the ecumenically aligned churches and organizations and thus to one of the biggest polarization processes in the church in the west since the Second World War"<sup>[22]</sup>. One consequence of this split was the establishment of the evangelical Lausanne movement as a counterpoint to the World Council of Churches<sup>[23]</sup>.

## Today

In the intervening years, new insights have been read into the concept of *missio Dei*, leading to a slight blurring of the extremes of interpretation. However, these two broad understandings of *missio Dei* –Christocentric and Cosmocentric - can still be discerned in the literature. For this reason we will examine the way in which the different views of *missio Dei* have an impact on teaching about the Kingdom of God, the Church and other religions.

### Missio Dei and the Kingdom of God

Vidcom published a book entitled *Missio Dei* in 1965; in this book he closely tied *missio Dei* to the Kingdom of God. However, Vidcom used Kingdom of God in two distinct ways; the rule of God over the whole of creation and the restoration of relationships with God and humanity through the death of Christ. This inconsistency facilitated<sup>[24]</sup> the divergence in understanding of *missio Dei* which developed during the 1960s.

If the Kingdom of God is seen as being God's rule over the whole of creation, then its realization is primarily in terms of social and ethical transformation. This view sees the advancement of the Kingdom as including the whole of history with the Church as a witness or perhaps a participant in its realization. This view clearly aligns with Hoekendijk's view of *missio Dei*. The alternative view of the Kingdom acknowledges that God rules over all of history, but sees the Kingdom as specifically referring to the impact of the redemptive work of Christ. In this view, which fits a Christocentric view of *missio Dei*, the Church is the people who belong to the Kingdom and clearly must play a central role in its inauguration.

### Missio Dei and the Church

Historical, denominational missions were functioned as European-based national churches extending their boundaries into unreached parts of the world<sup>[25]</sup> with their own institutional expansion and survival as priority<sup>[26]</sup>. *Missio Dei* brings a correction to this view by putting God, not the church or denomination, at the centre of mission. Mission is the originator of the Church, not the other way round<sup>[27]</sup>.

As we have seen, Hoekendijk placed a strong emphasis on mission being God centered: "Church-centric missionary thinking is bound to go astray, because it revolves around an illegitimate centre"<sup>[28]</sup>. This strong emphasis led to a virtual repudiation of any role for the Church in mission.

By way of contrast, Newbigin<sup>[29]</sup> suggests that the Trinitarian nature of mission implies an important role for the Church. Communication and community lies at the heart of the Trinity and therefore must lie at the heart of Trinitarian mission. The call to conversion is a call to become part of a community, the Church, and comes from that community. Others express similar

thoughts: “Both the church and the mission of the church are tools of God, instruments through which God carries out this mission.”<sup>[30]</sup> “Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world. The church is viewed as an instrument for that mission”<sup>[31]</sup>. In this view, the whole purpose of the Church is to support the *missio Dei*<sup>[32]</sup> and Church structures exist in order to serve the community in mission<sup>[33]</sup>.

### Missio Dei and Other Religions

While the Church is key to God’s work in the world, *Missio Dei* teaches us that we need to see God on a broader canvas than just through the work of the church.

“Mission as *missio Dei* necessarily relativizes Western understanding of mission. God cannot be restricted to what has been and is happening in Western cultural Christianity. God’s work is universal in its impact”<sup>[34]</sup>.

Seeing God at work in a universal sense implies that Christians need to have a humble approach to other religions. For some, who adopt the cosmocentric approach to *missio Dei*, this means that they see other religions as being able to bring salvation in the same way as Christianity<sup>[35]</sup>.

“The Mission of the Church is not God’s only mission. It is not even his only world-wide mission... Few of us Christians know much about God’s mission in the Islamic venture, God’s mission to India and nowadays to the world through the Hindu venture”<sup>[36]</sup>.

Those who take the Christocentric view agree that we need to enter into humble dialogue with other faiths, however they also stress that it is important to “do justice to our Trinitarian faith” and “to point people to Christ”<sup>[37]</sup>.

### Evangelicals and *Missio Dei*

*Missio Dei* is a theology which emphasizes both the imperative for mission and the Sovereignty of God. It is surprising, therefore, that Evangelical Christians (especially those of a Reformed background) who tend to emphasize the same things, have apparently paid little attention to *missio Dei*<sup>[38]</sup>. Lee<sup>[39]</sup> says that evangelicals lag behind ecumenicals in developing a *missio Dei* theology, though he does not explain why that might be so. Wickeri says that conservative evangelicals’ “understanding of mission is quite different to the *missio Dei*”<sup>[40]</sup>. It is no surprise that when evangelicals do talk about *missio Dei*, they adopt a Christocentric view rather than follow Hoekendijk’s line<sup>[41]</sup>. It could well be that the strong separatist strand which is often a feature of Evangelical life means that they are reluctant to adopt a term which is in some way ‘tainted’ by liberalism or secularism. The divide in Evangelical circles about the role of social action in mission also impacts their adoption of *missio Dei*. Chai says that the Evangelical mega-churches in Korea see mission purely in terms of salvation and so suggests that they do not take *missio Dei* seriously<sup>[42]</sup>. However, there is increasingly a strong Trinitarian aspect in Evangelical missiology. This is illustrated by the Iguassou declaration: “All the persons of the Godhead are active in God’s redeeming mission”<sup>[43]</sup>.

### Trinitarian Mission

The fact that *missio Dei* is used as a term to cover such a wide range of meaning does detract from its usefulness. Kirk<sup>[44]</sup> says “*missio Dei* has been used to advance all kinds of missiological agendas”. Possibly, because of the confusion which this lack of definition engenders, the term is actually used less frequently in current literature as compared to twenty or thirty years ago<sup>[45]</sup>.

There are a number of weaknesses in the cosmocentric understanding of *missio Dei*. The understanding of the Kingdom of God as covering the whole of human history does not seem to reflect Jesus’ assertion that the Kingdom ‘drew near’ through his ministry (Mark 1:15). Equally, the approach that sees other religions as being missions equivalent to the mission of the Church does not do justice to Jesus’ claims to uniqueness, nor the Trinitarian nature of God. However, perhaps the greatest weakness in the cosmocentric approach is the idea that God’s kingdom is being inaugurated through a continual improvement in social and ethical conditions. In the 1960s against a background of technological advance and colonial-independence this may have seemed attractive. However, hindsight reveals these improvements to have been false hopes, amounting to little more than a different form of Western religious imperialism<sup>[46]</sup> which did not do justice to the Biblical narrative of fall and redemption.

Despite the breadth of interpretation applied to the term, Bosch defends the concept of *missio Dei*. “...it cannot be denied that the *missio Dei* notion has helped to articulate the conviction that neither the Church nor any other human agent can ever be considered the author or bearer of mission. Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world.”<sup>[47]</sup> Kirk emphasizes the Trinitarian nature of mission. “When Christian communities speak about God, by definition they speak about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There simply is no other God.

Therefore to speak about *missio Dei* is to indicate, without any qualification, the *missio Trinitatis*.”[48]

Despite the real disagreements which continue to exist, there is, according to Kirke[49] and Richebacher[50] a degree of consensus is appearing about the theological understanding of God’s mission. “During the past half a century or so, there has been a subtle, but nevertheless decisive, shift toward understanding mission as God’s mission.”[51]

Placing God at the centre of mission also involves a reorientation of thinking; “a shift from church-centered mission, to a mission-centered church”[52]. “The theology of mission has become missionary theology”.[53] In other words, the agenda for missionary thought and action is defined by the character of God, not the activities of the Church. The implications of this in the life and practice of the Church are far reaching.

“evangelism is God’s work long before it is our work. The Father prepares the ground, the Son gives the invitation and the Spirit prompts the person to respond in repentance and faith to the good news.”[54]

The Trinitarian nature of *Missio Dei* brings all three persons of the Godhead into focus in missionary theology. This has not always been the case, for example, Goheen suggests that before Willigen, Leslie Newbigin did not give any attention to the role of the Father in mission.[55]

### **The Father in Mission**

The overwhelming motive for mission is the compassion and love of God for his creation[56] and the end point of mission is the Kingdom, the reign of God over his people. These twin themes from *missio Dei* establish the motivation and attitude of the church in mission. Motivated by God’s love, the Church should not seek to dominate or impose itself upon other people or organizations and individual church groups or organizations should not seek to exercise their rights to the detriment of others or of God’s mission. “God’s reign cannot be reduced to a human level or made to serve human purposes.”[57] The historic confusion of the Church’s mission and the secular political process in Christendom is excluded by *missio Dei*. With this in mind, Wickeri raises serious questions about the alignment between the Church and the political state in the United States today, especially in the light of the war in Iraq[58].

The triumphalism of much of the world mission movement is drawn into question in the light of *missio Dei*[59]. There is also reason to question some aspects of American managerial missiology. Though, generally, there has been a step away from the idea of Church-centric missions; groups such as AD-2000 seem to be ignoring this trend. The elaboration of measurable and achievable goals, which is part of this missiological approach, could be seen as placing human technique and measurement at the centre of mission rather than God’s bigger agenda. Because God is the creator of the whole world, salvation is not limited to the salvation of souls but includes the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth.

### **The Son in Mission**

The incarnation lies at the heart of God’s mission and provides the content, model and the inspiration for the church’s mission (John 20:21).

“The *missio Dei* has always been the Gospel, good news about God’s goodness revealed in God’s word through Israel’s experience, leading up to its climax and culmination in Jesus Christ.”[60]

The heart of the church’s mission is to communicate this Gospel of Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection. But the message must be communicated in a manner which is consistent with the character of Christ. The incarnation demonstrates that God’s mission is not dependant on any one human culture or language.[61] Suffering, too is an intrinsic part of the *missio Dei*, rooted in the suffering of the Son. “*Missio Dei* always leads us by way of Golgotha, by the way of suffering”.[62] In becoming a man, Jesus became poor and spent a lot of time with the poor, and focusing on the needs of the poor is an intrinsic part of God’s purposes for the Church. Richebacher says that poverty is the most important sign of the missionary church because Jesus’ mission was fulfilled by becoming poor[63] and while we may not agree that this is *the* most important sign, it is clearly an extremely important one.

### **The Spirit in Mission**

Christ sent his Spirit to empower his church for mission and to enlighten those who are outside of the Kingdom. This means that the church must be reliant on the Spirit both for its own activities in mission and for the effect of its work. There should be no place for organization or planning which excludes the role of the Spirit.

“Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church on its missionary journey.”[64]

Newbigin[65] suggests that young churches, planted by missionaries from other cultures, should find their ethical guidance from the Spirit rather than from the teaching or mores of the missionaries. In this way, the Gospel will have an authentic

encounter with the new culture and allow the development of locally relevant Christian traditions and avoiding the imposition of the missionary culture.

## The Usefulness of *Missio Dei*

We have already indicated the usefulness of the *missio Dei* concept in providing a framework for placing God (in particular, the Trinity) at the centre of our thinking about mission.

The Trinitarian focus of *missio Dei*, combined with the focus on the Kingdom of God rescues the church from simply becoming an agent for social and economic change on the one hand or fundamentalism on the other[66] and provides a framework for mission in which the false dichotomy between social action and evangelism in mission can be eradicated. “The core of *missio Dei* is evangelism, the communication of the Gospel”[67] but this does not mean that we can turn our backs on the world and its needs. The call to conversion is a call to be witnesses to Christ by demonstrating his love and concern for the world[68]. An emphasis on *missio Dei* could be of great help to Evangelical churches in enabling them to overcome the sort of simplistic view of mission of which Chai complains, above.

Schrieter[69] suggests two possible domains in which *missio Dei* becomes a useful concept in a post-modern world.

“... the unity in diversity of the Trinity will be a key for a theology of religious and cultural pluralism that is the mark of postmodern thought and civilization. Second, Trinitarian existence provides a strong theological foundation for mission as a dialogical process of giving and receiving ... speaking out prophetically and opening oneself for critique.”

The concepts of mission in a pluralistic society and prophetic dialogue are ones which Evangelicals need to explore in more depth. The traditional declamatory – confrontational, even – evangelical approach to mission is becoming increasingly less culturally appropriate as pluralism expands. There is a real need to discover ways in which the truths of Christianity can be explored in a society which rejects claims of absolute truth and which sees all religious opinions as being equally valid. Meditation on the nature of the Trinity could be useful in exploring these ideas.

*Missio Dei*, not only provides a theological key for mission in a post-modern age, it could also provide a motivational factor in a Western church which struggles internally with the challenges of post-modernism, pluralism and globalization. Interest in mission is declining among Evangelical churches in the West[70]. In part, this seems to be due to the impact of a post-modern mindset which sees all human narratives as being of equal value and importance. In this context, Christians become reluctant to ‘impose’ their views on others. Equally, many Western churches offer a vast panoply of opportunities for Christian service with mission being simply ‘what some people do.’ *Missio Dei* elevates mission from the level of human activities, rightly showing mission as being participation in something which God is already doing. Evangelism is thus no longer elevating one human opinion over and above another equally valid one. There is a clear divine sanction for mission and evangelism (as well as a motivation for an culturally sensitive approach) which are no longer simply activities of the Church, but are, rather, the principle *raison d’être* of the Church.

Over the past two hundred years, Evangelical missionaries, motivated for the most part by the *Great Commission* (Matthew 28:16-20) have played a key role in spreading the Christian message around the world. The call to ‘go and make disciples’ was necessary in an age when the geographical spread of Christianity was so limited. However, the great commission with its stress on activity plays into one of the weaknesses of Evangelicalism which so often stresses activity over and above spirituality. Gurder speaks reproachfully of people who are not actively experiencing the blessings of the Gospel, seeking to engage in mission[71]. There is a need for some evangelicals to step back from a focus on activity and the target driven approach of much of their missiology and to rediscover a theocentric view of mission which emphasizes character and spirituality over and above activity. *Missio Dei* and reflection on what many see as the key verse for Trinitarian mission, John 20:21 could provide the missing dimension.

The undeniable fact that *missio Dei* can still cover a wider range of meanings does place a potential limitation to its usefulness as a theological term. Equally, its association with secularized missiology means that some Evangelicals will be reluctant to use it to describe their own activities. However, there is no doubt that the underlying notions of theocentric, Trinitarian mission are ones which need to be explored further in Evangelical circles.

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[1] Wikipedia: the online encyclopaedia. [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

[2] In order to get an accurate picture of the development of the theology of *missio Dei*, we will need to consider the work of some authors who use the concept without having recourse to Latin terminology.

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[3] Engelsviken p.482

[4] Hoffmeyer

[5] Bevans and Schroeder p.290  
[6] Engelsviken p.482  
[7] Bosch p.370  
[8] Engelsviken p.482  
[9] Goheen p.117  
[10] Bosch p.390  
[11] Engelsviken p.482  
[12] Pachuau  
[13] Goheen p.117  
[14] Philip ch.5  
[15] Sundermeier p.560  
[16] Quoted in Engelsviken p.488  
[17] Engelsviken p.489  
[18] Newbigin p.18  
[19] Richebacher, p.592  
[20] Bevans and Schroeder p.291  
[21] Matthey  
[22] Richebacher p.594  
[23] Richebacher p.593  
[24] Engelsviken p.483  
[25] Engelsviken p.487  
[26] Guder 1998 p.5  
[27] Bevans and Schroeder p.298  
[28] Quoted in Engelsviken p.488  
[29] Newbigin p.76  
[30] Quoted in Engelsviken p.482  
[31] Bosch p.390  
[32] Bosch p.391  
[33] Bevans and Schroeder p.299  
[34] Guder 2000 p.20  
[35] Sundermeier p.567  
[36] Smith p.366  
[37] Richebacher p.597  
[38] Recker p.192  
[39] Lee p.143  
[40] Wickeri p.193  
[41] Engelsviken p.491  
[42] Chai p.548  
[43] Taylor p.17  
[44] Kirk p.25

- [45] Engelsviken p.490
- [46] Richebacher p.593
- [47] Bosch p. 391
- [48] Kirk p.27
- [49] Kirk p.25
- [50] Richebacher p.595
- [51] Bosch p.389
- [52] Wickeri p.187
- [53] Guder 2000 p.20
- [54] Kirke p.78
- [55] Goheen p.129
- [56] Guder 2000 p.32, Kirk p.27
- [57] Guder 2000 p.37
- [58] Wickeri p.191
- [59] Wickeri p.187
- [60] Guder 2000 p.47
- [61] Guder 2000 p.78
- [62] Suess p. 558
- [63] Richebacher p. 594
- [64] Newbigin p.57
- [65] Newbigin p.132
- [66] Suess p.552
- [67] Guder 2000 p. 49
- [68] Guder 2000 p.120
- [69] Quoted in Bevans and Schroeder p.293
- [70] Dowsett p.449
- [71] Guder 2000 p.151