

Mission

INTRODUCTION

God's people exist for the sake of the world, not simply for themselves. This is the basic principle implied in the call to be missional. We are a "so that" people, called by God so that the nations might be blessed (Gen 12; Matt 28:18-20). As Emil Brunner famously quotes: "The Church exists by mission just as a fire exists by burning."

PRINCIPLES

1. Participants in the Mission of God

Our mission is a participation in the more ultimate and prior mission of God, which is to restore creation and the life of humanity from the ravages of sin. We are a part of His mission. This is the family business into which we are called when we are saved. Consider these two quotes:

God himself has a mission. God has a purpose and goal for his whole creation... And as part of that divine mission, God has called into existence a people to participate with God in the accomplishment of that mission. All our mission flows from the prior mission of God. (Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 24)

The church's function in this story is to participate in God's mission... The church is the community that experiences in the midst of life the power of God's renewing work and thus embodies the *comprehensive and restorative salvation* of the kingdom for the sake of the world. (Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church in the Biblical Story*, 19, emphasis his)

2. Mission in the Framework of the Kingdom of God

Another helpful window into this is to consider the biblical theme of the kingdom of God. In Mark 1 Jesus comes proclaiming the gospel, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." The kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God. It is where creatures submit to God's rule willingly, for their good and joy. Christ embodied the kingdom in His life and secured His redemptive rule through His death and resurrection. The Church enjoys the life of Christ's kingdom in the midst of a world that does not fully embrace His rule. We bear witness to what Christ has done and will do in the future when He returns.

3. Our Role: Witness Through Words AND Deeds

Since Christ presently reigns over a world that does not submit to Him, we are sent as ambassadors. Through our lives and with our words we bear witness. We embody and announce, we demonstrate and declare the redemptive rule of King Jesus. This means we do not pit words and deeds against one another. They are distinct but inseparable in our witness to the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus. But since entrance into the kingdom is predicated upon faith in Christ, evangelism/proclamation does take on a certain priority. Our good deeds should function as a bridge to gospel words, flow naturally from gospel truths, and bear witness to the power of the reign of Jesus.

4. Community and Mission

Too often we do not grasp and live into the communal aspect of mission. Michael Goheen argues that mission "is not a task assigned to isolated individuals; it is an identity given to a community" (*A Light to the Nations*, 115). It is the community, living under Christ's rule, that functions as a present outpost of the kingdom of God. The mission of God's people since the call of Abraham was to be a contrast society for the common good. Through our distinctive communal life we are to exhibit a certain missional magnetism. It is often the case that people tend to be drawn to the community created by the gospel before they are drawn to believe in the message of the gospel. And this is not something to be disparaged. The Christian community itself is one of the fruits of the work of Christ since our salvation includes adoption into a new family, formed by the gospel which breaks down walls of hostility to make once enemies into "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:11-22). The reconciled and united body of Christ functions as a lens through which the gospel truths can be interpreted (this is what Lesslie Newbigin refers to by describing the congregation as the "hermeneutic of the gospel"). The community formed by the gospel should evoke questions from the watching world to which the gospel is the only possible answer (cf. John 13:35). So embrace the community in the mission.

5. Work and Mission

Our daily work is missional because we have always been called to use the raw material of creation to develop God-glorifying culture (Gen 1-2). Consider how your work, whether paid or not, reflects the character and purposes of God and, therefore, participates in His mission. In the arenas of our work this would include considerations of

excellence, ethics, and evangelism. The work itself participates in the purposes of God (if it is not intrinsically evil) and, therefore, we should labor diligently to honor the Lord (Col 3:23; cf. 1 Cor 10:31). Through these good, just, and beautiful labors we provide foretastes, or proximate anticipations, of the shalom of the coming new creation. And, if the chance arises, we should share the message of the gospel with our co-workers, clients, and customers in an appropriate way.

6. Worship and Mission

There is a reciprocal relationship between worship and mission, though worship is more ultimate. John Piper famously quotes, “Missions exist because worship doesn’t.” By this he highlights the primacy of God’s glory and the human need to worship Him. Therefore a major component of our mission is to make worshippers. Our evangelistic missions will cease when we die or when Christ returns, but our worship will never end. The other side of this equation is that worship is missional because the joy which characterizes the life of God’s people particularly in our assemblies should attract and evoke questions (Acts 2; 1 Cor 14). So make it a priority to participate in the gathered worship of our church, and invite and expect non-Christians to be present.

7. Meals and Mission

Hospitality is huge. Meals were central in the ministry of Jesus. What is so powerful about meals is how they bring mission to the ordinary. They enable much more life-on-life interaction where the quality of your life can be examined and deep conversations are welcomed through the warmth of the table. Meals invite profound intimacy and they function as a great leveler of social classes. If you are regularly having meals with those far from Christ, you are being missional.

8. Neighbors AND Needy (Beyond the Neighborhood)

When Jesus was questioned about eternal life, He answered with the commandment to love the Lord and one’s neighbor. When asked who constitutes one’s neighbor, He told the parable of the Good Samaritan and exhorted the lawyer to be a neighbor who shows mercy. We must understand our neighbors as first and foremost those whom we naturally come across in our lives, particularly in our physical neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. We bear a particular responsibility for those we see most often. To think missionally we should consider how we might turn strangers into neighbors, neighbors into friends, and friends into family.

But it is often the case that our neighborhoods are made up of people just like us. If we only ministered to those in our local neighborhoods we might not ever participate in God’s mission and consistent call upon His people to bless the poor and love the marginalized. Our mission to the “needy” (a catch-all term for the poor and marginalized) flows from God’s heart for justice and mercy (Prov 31:8-9; Amos 5:23-24; Isa 58:3-7). We must figure out ways to interact with and bless those who suffer from systems of injustice and disastrous events.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Neighbors -- With whom do I interact daily? Who among them would be categorized as strangers, as acquaintances, as friends, and as family? How can I move toward these people to know them better and bless them?

2. Needy -- Do I have any avenues to interact with the marginalized in Austin (i.e., the poor, oppressed, widows, orphans, etc.)? How can I participate with God in justice and mercy?

3. Communal Mission -- What opportunities do I have to introduce my non-Christian friends to my church community, and vice versa? Am I taking advantage of opportunities to meet the non-Christian friends of other members in my church family? How can we provide tastes of the community formed by the gospel so that they might further consider the claims of the gospel?

4. Meals -- Am I opening my home to bless others? Could I tithe my meals to minister to others (i.e., taking two meals a weeks to eat with non-Christian friends, or fasting for two meals a week and giving the money to a charity or directly using it to feed someone in need in Austin)?

5. Work -- Do I have a vision for how my work participates in the mission of God? How it reflects/images God’s character as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer and joins His purposes in the world? What kingdom foretastes, what approximations of shalom is my work providing?

6. Words and Deeds -- Which comes more easily for me: gospel proclamation in words or kingdom demonstration through deeds? Why is that? How can I integrate them more?