

The Mission of God's People

Biblical Theology for Life

A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission

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CHAPTER 2

PEOPLE WHO KNOW THE STORY THEY ARE PART OF

WORLD MISSION AND THE BIBLE STORY

So where shall we start? A great number of books (and sermons) on the topic of Christian mission start with the Great Commission – the final words of Jesus to his disciples before his ascension, sending them out into the world to make disciples of all nations. It's a natural instinct to start there because it chimes in with so much else that the New Testament has to say about Jesus and his followers, and about Paul and the early Christians. Mission confronts you whichever gospel you read to find Jesus, and it only intensifies after that in Acts and the epistles.

Matthew's Jesus instructs his disciples to make disciples and baptize in all the world. Luke's Jesus commissions his followers to go to Jerusalem, Judaea and the ends of the earth, and John's Jesus says "as the Father sent me, so I send you". The story of Acts *is* the story, or rather a story, of early Christian mission. And...the letters [of Paul] confirm that not only he but a good many other Christians...believed it their business to travel around the known world telling people that there was "another king, this Jesus".

World mission is thus the first and most obvious feature of early Christian praxis.¹

And we have to ask, Why? What was it that made Christianity a missionary faith from the very start? What made the first followers of Jesus so passionately, courageously and unstoppably committed to telling the world about him?

Well, you might respond, because Jesus told them to. They had the Great Commission. It was a matter of obedience. And that would be true, given the endings of Matthew, Luke and John that we have just noted – though we should remember that the Gospels were not written until well after the church's mission had been going for many years, so the written record of Jesus' words was not in their hands, as it were.

Christianity did not spread by magic. It is sometimes suggested that the world was, so to

speaking, ready for Christianity: Stoicism was too lofty and dry, popular paganism metaphysically incredible and morally bankrupt, mystery religions dark and forbidding, Judaism law-bound and introverted, and Christianity burst on the scene as the great answer to the questions everyone was asking. There is a grain of truth in this picture, but it hardly does justice to historical reality. Christianity summoned proud pagans to face torture and death out of loyalty to a Jewish villager who had been executed by Rome. Christianity advocated a love which cut across racial boundaries. It sternly forbade sexual immorality, the exposure of children, and a great many other things which the pagan world took for granted. Choosing to become a Christian was not an easy or natural thing for the average pagan.

*N. T. Wright*²

But if this simple obedience to the Great Commission were the major reason *in the consciousness* of the early Christians, it is surprising that it is never mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. Don't misunderstand me here. I am not suggesting for a moment that the Great Commission never happened, only that it is not referred to as an explicit driver for the missionary expansion of the church in the New Testament after Acts 1.

Or some people have argued that the world was simply ready for the Christian gospel, such that the message just spread like wildfire, filling the vacuum, as it were, of the failure of other philosophies and worldviews. But this is an inadequate explanation, even if there is some truth in it. The Christian message may indeed have answered questions that other religions and philosophies could not, but that did not mean that joining the despised Christian sect was instantly attractive. Calling people to conversion was to confront them with serious and costly demands.

So what compelled the first followers of Jesus, Jews as they were, to make the world their mission field?

Knowing the Story

“Jews as they were” – I slipped that in because it is the key to the answer. That is, those first believers *knew the story they were in*. And they knew the story because they knew their Scriptures. They were Jews. They knew the story so far, they understood that the story had just

reached a decisive moment in Jesus of Nazareth, and they knew what the rest of the story demanded.

In fact, when the first missionary journeys produced a sudden influx of “pagan” converts (let’s call them Gentiles, or people from the non-Jewish nations from here on), and when that in turn produced a big theological problem for the Jewish Christians, how was the problem resolved? They met in Jerusalem in the first council of the Christian faith, and the event is recorded in Acts 15. As an aside, it is worth noting that the first Christian council was called because of the problems caused by highly successful Christian mission. It would be wonderful if all church committees, councils, conferences and congresses had the same cause!

The problem was solved *not* by referring to the command of Jesus. One could easily imagine Peter standing up to say to the critics, “Listen, friends, *Jesus told us* to go and make disciples of all nations and that is what Paul and Barnabas are doing. So back off!” But instead, James settles the matter by reference to the prophetic Scriptures. He quotes from Amos 9 and affirms that what the prophet foresaw is now happening: the house of David is being restored and the Gentile nations are being brought in to bear the name of the Lord. That’s where the story pointed, and that’s what was now happening.

Or come with Paul to Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13. It was a Gentile city, but Paul went to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath, as he usually did. What did he do? He told them their own story (the Old Testament narrative) as a prelude to telling them about Jesus and then adding “the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus” (Acts 13:32 – 33). The story led to Jesus, Messiah, crucified but risen.

But the story went further. For when some of the Jews rejected the message while Gentile “God-fearers” (converts to Jewish faith) accepted it, Paul had an Old Testament passage for them too, to justify his missionary appeal to them. He quotes Isaiah 49:6 and applies it to himself and his missionary colleagues:

“For this is what the Lord has commanded *us*:

“ ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ”

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. (Acts 13:47 – 48; italics added)

Once again, Paul could easily have said, “*Jesus* commanded us to bring this good news to

you Gentiles.” He could even have referred to the specific missional command that he, Paul, had personally received in his conversion-commissioning encounter with the risen Christ on the way to Damascus. But instead, Paul points to the Scriptures and the story they tell – the story that leads inevitably to the gospel going to the nations. And he took that “story-yet-to-come” aspect of the words of the prophet and heard in them a command from the Lord himself.

In fact, even for Jesus himself this was the foundation of the Great Commission. Luke gives us the fullest account of how Jesus commissioned the disciples after his resurrection, and what is striking is the emphasis that Luke (and Jesus, of course) placed upon the understanding of the (Old Testament) Scriptures. Luke 24 describes the first day in the life of the risen Jesus. And how did he spend it? Teaching the Scriptures. Another aside: As an Old Testament teacher most of my life I find this a rather reassuring thought that Jesus spent the afternoon and evening of his resurrection day systematically teaching the Old Testament.

What we would give for the notes of those two lectures! For there were in fact two “Resurrection Lectures”, and they were subtly different.

Messiah and Mission

The first was on the road to Emmaus to the two disciples whose big problem was their disappointment that the redemption of Israel, which they had hoped Jesus was going to accomplish, did not seem to have happened. Jesus went through the whole canon of the Old Testament (“Moses and all the Prophets”) to explain how it all led up to him, the Messiah, and how his death and resurrection were in fact the way God had kept his promise to Israel (Luke 24:13 – 27). So that first lecture went through the Old Testament *in order to make sense of the story so far* – the story that led up to Jesus himself, the whole point, purpose and destination of the story.

But then, in the evening, with the rest of the disciples in Jerusalem, Jesus went through the Old Testament for the second time – not because they didn’t know it (they probably knew huge sections of the Old Testament by memory), but to help them *understand* where it led.

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This

is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, *and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.*” (Lk. 24:44 – 48; italics added)

This time, you notice, he surveys the Old Testament *in order to make sense of the story from there on* – that part of the story they were about to embark on, of bearing witness to the saving power of the death and resurrection Jesus to all nations. In other words, for Jesus, “This is what is written” governed not only the *messianic* meaning of the Scriptures, but also their *missional* significance. The Old Testament tells the story that not only leads up to Jesus but one that also leads on to mission to the nations.

Jesus often spoke about how the course of his own life – his suffering, death and resurrection – was governed by the Scriptures. Here he is extending that to the ongoing mission of the church as well. It is all part of the same great story that the Scriptures mapped out. This means that the Great Commission was not something Jesus thought up as an afterthought – something for the disciples to be getting on with while he went back to heaven. It was not just something that rested solely on his own authority as the risen Lord (though, of course, it is fully warranted by that, as Matthew’s version makes clear). It was the inevitable outcome of the story as the Scriptures told it – leading *up to* the Messiah and leading *on to* mission to the nations.

You could say about the church’s worldwide mission that Jesus commanded it because the Scriptures demanded it. Jesus knew the story too. You could say, in another sense, that’s because he wrote it.

TAKING THE STORY AS A WHOLE

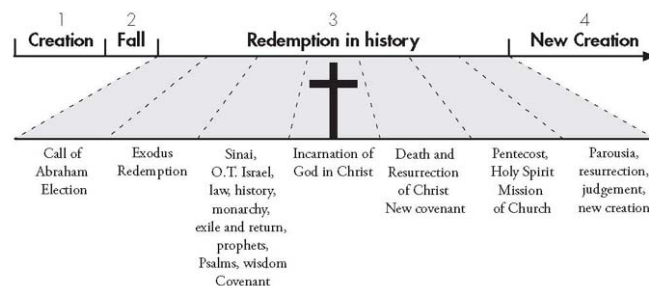
So we are seeking, in this book, for a “Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission”. What better examples could we follow than Jesus and Paul? We need to pay attention to the whole story of the Bible and see our mission in the light of all of it.

“Just do it” seems to have spilled over from Nike to being the slogan of some forms of Christian mission. I was at a large mission mobilization congress where the slogan was “Just go!” My first reaction was to say, “Just hold on.” Even Jesus spent three years training his disciples before he told them to “Go”, and even that time was scarcely enough to radically reshape their scriptural understanding in the light of his own identity, to understand where the

biblical story was leading in relation to himself and the future of Israel and of the world. How much more is such training needed when we hear that Bible reading and knowledge among evangelical Christians is at a shamefully low ebb.

Indeed, we need to ask ourselves right up front: How well do you actually know the biblical story? If Jesus and Paul saw fit repeatedly to go over it with those who knew their Old Testament Scriptures inside out, how much more do we need to make sure we are familiar with the content of the Bible as a whole? Tragically, even among Christians with great enthusiasm for world mission, there is often not only profound ignorance of great vistas of biblical revelation, but even impatience with the prolonged effort that is needed to soak ourselves in these texts until our whole thinking and behaviour are shaped by the story they tell, the worldview that story generates, the demands it lays upon us and the hope it sets before us. The attitude of some is that all you need is the Great Commission and the power of the Holy Spirit. Bible teaching or biblical theology will only serve to delay you in the urgent task. Presumably I can take comfort in the fact that you are reading this book, which means that this is an attitude you don't share.

I find it helpful to visualize the biblical story as an actual line on which one can plot key points. The four major sections of the biblical story line are – Creation, Fall, Redemption in History, and New Creation. Within the Redemption in History section, of course, falls by far the largest portion of the biblical story, and it needs further subdivision.



1. Creation

The Bible does not begin at Genesis 3 (or end at Revelation 20). You might think so when you listen to some presentations of the Bible's message and mission. That is to say, the Bible is not just about the solution to our sin problem and how to survive the day of judgment. It

begins with creation and ends with new creation. So our biblical theology of mission needs to take this great beginning and ending seriously.

The creation narrative provides two of the fundamental planks for the foundational Christian worldview, for it answers two of the most fundamental questions that all philosophies and religions answer in different ways: *Where* are we? and *Who* are we? That is to say, first, what is this universe in which we find ourselves? Where did it come from and why does it exist and is it even real? And then, second, What does it mean to be human? Are we gods, or merely animals that have evolved a bit further than the rest? Does human life have any value, meaning and purpose?

The distinctive answers that the Bible gives to these questions have profound implications for our understanding of mission in God's world in the midst of human beings like ourselves, made in the image of God.

2. Fall

Human disobedience and rebellion against the Creator God brought disastrous results (Gen. 3 – 11). Evil and sin weave their way into every aspect of God's creation and every dimension of human personhood and life on earth. *Physically*, we are subject to decay and death, living within a physical environment that is itself under the curse of God. *Intellectually*, we use our incredible powers of rationality to explain, excuse and “normalize” our own evil. *Socially*, every human relationship is fractured and disrupted – sexual, parental, familial, societal, ethnic, international – and the effect is consolidated horizontally through the permeation of all human cultures, and vertically by accumulation through the generations of history. And *spiritually*, we are alienated from God, rejecting his goodness and authority. Romans 1:18 – 32 outlines all of these dimensions in its analysis of the fruit of Genesis 3.

If there is good news for such dire realities, it needs to be pretty big. The glorious truth is that the Bible gives us a gospel that addresses every dimension of the problem that sin has created. God's mission is the final destruction of all that is evil from his whole creation. Our mission therefore has to be as comprehensive in scope as the gospel the whole Bible gives us.

3. Redemption

God chose not to abandon or destroy his creation, but to redeem it. And he chose to do so within history through persons and events that run from the call of Abraham to the return of Christ. While every part of this great story has its particular contribution to the whole, we do need to see this whole section of the line as a fundamental unity – the single great saving act of God. I think the unity between the Old and New Testament sections of this part of the biblical story of redemption is why Revelation pictures the redeemed humanity in the new creation singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (Rev. 15:3). This will save us from the common misunderstanding that the Old Testament is Salvation Plan A (failed), and the New Testament is Salvation Plan B (success). That is a severe distortion of the story. But without falling into that trap, we can still trace the two main parts of the story in Old and New Testaments.

Old Testament

By the time the story has reached Genesis 11, the human race faced two huge problems: the sinfulness of every human heart, and the fracturing and confusion of the nations of humanity. God's plan of redemption addressed both. In the call of Abraham God set in motion a historical dynamic that would ultimately not only deal with the problem of human sin but also heal the dividedness of the nations.

The election of Abraham was explicitly for the blessing of all nations on earth. God's command and promise to Abraham can legitimately, therefore, be called the first Great Commission – "Go...[and] be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:1 – 3). God's plan, then, was to deal with the problem of humanity – sin and division – through Israel, the people of Abraham.

The exodus provides the prime Old Testament model of God acting as Redeemer. This is what redemption looks like when God does it. It is an act that simultaneously demonstrates God's faithfulness, justice and love. And the people who know themselves to be the redeemed people of this God, now revealed as YHWH, are called upon to model before the nations what it means to be redeemed and to live redemptively in their own society.

At Sinai, God entered into covenant with Israel, still with the rest of the nations in view,

calling them to be his representatives (priestly) and to be distinctive (holy). He gave them his law as a gift of grace – not so that they could earn his salvation, for they had already been redeemed, but to shape them as his model people, to be a light to the nations.

As the history of Israel moved forward, however, through the era of the settlement in the land, the judges, and the monarchy, it became increasingly clear that Israel not only could not and would not live by the standards of God's law in response to his saving grace, but actually proved themselves to be no different from the nations. The law itself, as Paul saw so clearly, exposed the fact that Israel was as much in need of God's salvation as the rest of the nations. There is no difference, all have sinned. Israel, the servant of the Lord, called to be a light to the nations, turned out to be a failed servant, blind to God's works and deaf to his Word. They too needed God's salvation.

Nevertheless, the Old Testament continues through the prophets to point forward and to insist that God would keep his promise to bring blessing to the nations and salvation to the whole world, and that he would do so through Israel. In other words, the failure of historical Israel was anticipated by God and did not represent a failure of *God's* plan. In the mystery of his sovereign purpose it would lead to salvation going to the ends of the earth as God always intended. But if Old Testament Israel proved to be unfaithful, how could it then happen?

New Testament

The New Testament presents to us the answer that the prophets point towards: the One who would embody Israel as their Messiah, who would be faithful where they had been rebellious, who would be obedient unto death, and through his death and resurrection would bring about not only the restoration of Israel but also the promised salvation to the ends of the earth.

So the story line of the Bible moves on until “when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman...” (Gal. 4:4). The incarnation of God in Christ brings two new factors into our theology of mission: the inaugurated presence of the kingdom of God and the incarnational model and principle itself.

In Jesus, the reign of God entered human history in a way not previously experienced – though the expectation of it and the ethical implications of it are thoroughly rooted in the Old

Testament. The dynamic action of the kingdom of God in the words and deeds of Jesus and the mission of his disciples changed lives, values and priorities, and presented a radical challenge to the fallen structures of power in society. To say “Jesus is Lord”, and not Caesar or any of his successors, is a major missional mandate in itself. Luke can find no more missional way to end his second volume than by leaving Paul in Rome where he “*proclaimed the kingdom of God* and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ – with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31; italics added).

But, as the parables of Jesus emphasized, God inaugurated his reign in hidden, humble ways – choosing to enter the world himself, coping with all its limitations and frustrations. It is a pattern that Jesus then laid on his followers for their own costly engagement with the world and all its issues, as he prayed to his Father – “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18; cf. 20:21).

The cross and resurrection of Jesus bring us to the central point of the whole line of redemption in history. Here is God’s answer to every dimension of sin and evil in the cosmos and all their destructive effects. The gospel presents us with an accomplished victory that will ultimately be universally visible and vindicated. If we have been as radical as we ought in our analysis of the effects of the fall, then we must be equally radical and comprehensive here in our understanding of all the ways in which the cross and resurrection reverse and ultimately destroy those effects. The cross must be central to every dimension of the mission of God’s people – from personal evangelism among individual friends to ecological care for creation, and everything in between.

Just as the exodus redemption led to the creation of the covenant people of Old Testament Israel, so the Easter redemption led to the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the birth of the church. But while the church as the community of followers of Jesus was birthed at Pentecost, its roots go back, of course, to the people of God since Abraham. For the church is nothing less than the multinational fulfillment of the hope of Israel, that all nations will be blessed through the people of Abraham. The *expansion* of Israel to include the Gentiles (note carefully: not the *abandonment* of Israel in favour of the Gentiles), in and through Christ, fulfilled the promise to Abraham and accomplished God’s purpose to solve not only the problem of Genesis 3 (human fallenness and sin), but also of Genesis 11 (racial dividedness and confusion). This is why it is so important to recognize that the church by its very nature is *part* of

the gospel for its existence, for as a community of reconciled sinners from all races it demonstrates the gospel's transforming power.

Two realities from this part of the line inform our theology of mission: first, the presence of the Holy Spirit making available to the people of God the same transforming power that energized the life and ministry of Jesus and raised him from the dead; and second, the existence of the church itself as the missional community of those who have responded to, and entered, the kingdom of God by repentance and faith in Christ, and who now seek to live as a transformed and transforming community of reconciliation and blessing in the world.

4. New Creation

The return of Christ will not only bring to its grand finale that section of the Bible story line that we have called redemption in history, it will also inaugurate the ultimate fulfillment of the whole point of the story – namely, the redemption and renewal of God's whole creation.

The Bible includes in this climactic part of its story line, of course, the reality of judgment. The day of judgment is something that the Bible warns about, from Amos's thunderous reversal of Israel's shallow optimism about "the day of the LORD", through the warnings of Jesus, Paul and Peter about the judgment seat of God, to the terrifying visions of Revelation. The reality of judgment is at one level *part* of the gospel, for it is good news that evil will not have the last word but will ultimately be destroyed by God. And at another level it is the bad news about the wrath of God that makes the gospel such eternally good news for our fallen world.

Our children are now all grown adults. Recently (perhaps when they thought it was safe to tell us) they told us of a game they used to play as children. They would go in the lounge, when my wife was in the kitchen or garden, or I was out at work, and do everything they knew they weren't allowed to: jumping up and down on the sofa, throwing the cushions at each other, etc., until one of them would call out "Mummy's coming!", at which point they all had to sit down and be quiet and the last one down was "out". For if "Mummy's coming", there will be joy or grief when the moment of judgment arrives. "Let's go play 'Mummy's coming,' " they would say, apparently.

"God is coming", shouts the whole creation again and again, according to the ending of

Psalm 96. And then it bursts into odes of joy at the thought of it. For if “Mummy’s coming” is a matter of childish fear (or joy, depending on what she sees when she opens the door), what does it mean for the whole creation, for you and me, to know for certain that “God is coming” – to put things right forever?

Through believing the story, we are drawn in to the action and find ourselves caught up in the saving movement of God. We learn to “indwell” the story so looking out from within the biblical world with new eyes onto our postmodern lives and world: we stop trying to make the Bible relevant to our lives and instead begin to find ourselves being made relevant to the Bible. We give up the clumsy attempt to wrench the ancient text into our contemporary world and instead bring our world back into collision with, and cleansing by, the strange new world of the Bible. Through believing the story, we allow our minds to be continuously renewed by the normative narrative of God. . . . Jesus calls all his disciples away from a faith in which God is available to bless their business into a faith in which disciples are available to God to be part of his business. And God’s business is a multi-national company with branches everywhere!

*Philip Greenslade*³

Our mandate for world evangelization is the whole Bible. It is to be found in the *creation of God* (because of which all human beings are responsible to him), in the *character of God* (as outgoing, loving, compassionate, not willing that any should perish, desiring that all should come to repentance), in the *promises of God* (that all nations will be blessed through Abraham’s seed and will become the Messiah’s inheritance), in the *Christ of God* (now exalted with universal authority, to receive universal acclaim), in the *Spirit of God* (who convicts of sin, witnesses to Christ, and impels the church to evangelize) and in the *church of God* (which is a multinational, missionary community, under orders to evangelize until Christ returns).

*John Stott*⁴

But the Bible does not end with the day of judgment. Beyond the purging fire of judgment and the destruction of all that is evil and opposed to God’s good purpose, there lies the new heavens and new earth, in which righteousness and peace will dwell, because God himself

will dwell there with his redeemed people from every nation.

When we take our biblical theology of mission to the end of the line in this way, it generates biblical faith and hope – that irrepressible optimism that should characterize all Christian action in the world. The mission of God’s people is not only driven forward by the command of Christ, it is also drawn forward by the promise of God,

“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ ”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” (Rev. 21:3 – 5)

This, then, is the grid of the Bible’s own story line, which shapes and energizes the mission of God’s people. This was the story that the early followers of Jesus knew, and it was their confidence in this story, and the certainty that they had a part to play in it, that led them out into the world in mission. This is the story that we need to know we are part of. For our mission is nothing less (or more) than participating with God in this grand story until he brings it to its guaranteed climax.

As we think through our biblical theology of the church’s mission in the light of this story, it has a profoundly illuminating power.

Creation provides our foundational values and principles.

The fall brings us down to the realities of the cursed earth and the pervasive tentacles of human and satanic wickedness.

The Old Testament shows us the scope of God’s redeeming purpose, worked out in a specific historical and cultural context, and models for us in amazing detail (from the law, the narratives, prophets, wisdom and worship of Israel) the kind of practical responses that please God (and those that don’t).

The incarnation brings God right alongside us in our struggle and calls us to embody and be agents of the reign of God through Christ.

The cross and resurrection enable us to experience and share the power of true reconciliation, love, hope and peace, and to seek the atoning, redemptive work of God even in the most apparently irredeemable human situations.

The Holy Spirit in the church provides the guidance and the power to expect real change

in lives and societies, while keeping our eyes on the corporate, not merely individual, dimensions of Christian mission.

Our great future hope of new creation gives value and worth to all that we do in the present, for our labour is not in vain in the Lord, and shapes our response to the present by the revealed shape of the future.

THE MISSION OF GOD

The story we have just surveyed can be viewed, from another angle, as the mission of God. It is the story of how God in his sovereign love has purposed to bring the sinful world of his fallen creation to the redeemed world of his new creation.

It is the comprehensiveness of Paul's message that is impressive. He proclaimed God in his fullness as Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, Father, and Judge. All this is part of the gospel, or, at least, the necessary prolegomena to the gospel. Many people are rejecting our gospel today, not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be trivial. They are looking for an integrated worldview that makes sense of all their experience. We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without creation, or salvation without judgment, or vice versa. Today's world needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of Scripture, what Paul later in Ephesus was to call "the entire plan of God" (Acts 20:27 NAB).

John Stott (on Paul's sermon in Athens, Acts 17)⁵

God's mission is what spans the gap between the curse on the earth of Genesis 3 and the end of the curse in the new creation of Revelation 22.

God's mission is what brings humanity from being a cacophony of nations divided and scattered in rebellion against God in Genesis 11 to being a choir of nations united and gathered in the worship of God in Revelation 7.

God's mission, in other words, is what Paul probably meant when he said that he had spent several years in Ephesus teaching the church there about "the whole will [or counsel, or plan, or mission] of God" (Acts 20:27). It was a vast, comprehensive project of cosmic salvation, and even when speaking to a non-Jewish audience, Paul found ways of communicating its universal scope (Acts 17).

In my larger book, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*,⁶ I argued that we can read the whole Bible with a missional hermeneutic and then explored some dimensions of what happens when we do. That is where I have examined in more depth the missiological dimensions of such vast biblical themes as monotheism (the uniqueness of YHWH and of Jesus), idolatry, election, redemption, covenant, ethics, ecology, and eschatology.

This present book needs to be read in the light of the substantial exegesis and argument of *The Mission of God*. There is, of course, inevitably some overlap (we are, after all, talking about the same Bible!). But whereas in *The Mission of God* I was making a case for a missional hermeneutic of the whole canon of Scripture, seeing it as the deposit of and witness to the mission of God in all creation and history, in this book we are basically trying to answer the (only slightly!) more limited question, “What are *we* here for? What is the mission of God’s *people* as they live in God’s world and participate in God’s mission?”

SUMMARY

We began this chapter asking why the first Christians were so indomitably missionminded – determined at all costs to spread the good news about Jesus Christ to every corner of the world they knew. And the answer, we have seen, is that they understood clearly the dynamic thrust of the Bible’s own story line. They saw that story as the story of God’s own mission, and they saw their own part in the story, participating in its last great act, as “God’s co-workers” (1 Cor. 3:9).

So, in the chapters below, I have sought to follow roughly the outline of the story above, asking as we go along: What challenges and responsibilities face the people of God in their own mission in the light of this or that part of the biblical story? So I have selected texts that seem representative of such missional aspects of our life as God’s people. These are by no means all that could have served our purpose, but I hope they show at least two things: first, that we can and should draw our biblical theology of the church’s mission from the whole range of the Bible; and second, that when we do so, it becomes clear that the mission of God’s people is vast and various.

RELEVANT QUESTIONS

Prior to reading this chapter, how relevant were the OT Scriptures for your understanding of the church's mission? How has your view been impacted by the content of this chapter?

We tend to explain "the gospel" in the form of a series of propositions or doctrines. In the light of the whole Bible story, as summarized in this chapter, how would you summarize the gospel in more narrative form?

What suggestions can you make to help churches (including pastors, leaders, missions committees, etc.) to become more motivated for mission by having a better understanding of "the story we are in"? What impact would better teaching in this area have on our mission awareness and mission commitment?