

The Theology of Missions

What is God's plan for mankind?

Scott Crawford
2/3/2008

Contents

Introduction.....	2
Mission Theology	3
God's Mission in the Old Testament	5
God's Mission in the New Testament.....	6
Summary and Conclusion	8

Introduction

Central to all biblical thought is the sovereignty of God. God is the creator and sustainer of all things (cf. Col 2; Rev 4-5). He is absolutely supreme and orders all things according to His liking. All creation is thus subject to His dominion. Since creation was made for God's pleasure, it is subservient to His plan and purpose. Revelation Chapters Four and Five provide a picture of the ultimate worth of God as well as the ultimate purpose of creation. The apostle John reveals the purpose for creation is to honor and magnify the Creator. All things were created by Him with all things created for His pleasure. Throughout all eternity, creation will worship and praise the Creator.

The crowning achievement of God's creation was mankind. Man was made in the likeness and image of God (cf. Gen 1:26). Being made in the likeness of God means man shares similar attributes of God, namely love and holiness. Man was created as a moral being in innocence. He was given a will with the ability to choose. Further, man was created by God for a specific purpose – to have dominion over the earth. Hence, man was made to rule over the earth by serving God as an administrator over the Creator's handiwork. "God's grand design is to reproduce Himself in human personalities, especially His traits of love and holiness. . . . He sought to relate to them by love, not coercion. . . . With this in mind He made Adam and Eve partners in His rule."¹

God placed Adam and Eve in the garden for two main reasons: firstly, to have fellowship with them while enjoying an exchange of love; secondly, to test their competency. If man was going to rule over God's creation, he must be qualified. God sought to test man by allowing man to prove his ability as well as his willingness to submit to the will of God. If man had passed the test, he would have enjoyed eternal rulership over God's kingdom on earth. Man would have been able to eat from the tree of life, and sin would not have entered the human race.²

The Bible records the cosmic problem of sin (man's sin and angelic sin) and how it relates to God's kingdom, namely His kingdom on earth. The orderly rule of God's kingdom is what God plans to restore. This theme of God's kingdom, specifically the earthly kingdom, is central to scripture. God's will is for mankind to worship and serve Him as a sovereign in His kingdom. Throughout all eternity, man will worship God by reigning forever and ever in the kingdom of God (1 Cor 15:24-28; Rev 22:5).

Thesis: It is for the purpose of man's reign that God instituted His mission to save man, thus restoring man to his proper position in the kingdom of God. Ultimately, the mission of God finds its fulfillment in man's worship and service to God in His Kingdom.³

¹ Stanley A. Ellison, "Everyone's Question: What is God Trying to Do?" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 3rd Edition, 1999), 18.

² Ibid, 18.

³ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God In Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 11.

Mission Theology

Since the 1950's several terms have developed to address the content and context of mission theology.⁴ The word "mission" is simply defined as a task or undertaking with a purpose. According to Moreau, Corwin, and McGee, the theological perspective of "mission" refers to "everything the church does that points toward the kingdom of God."⁵ The term "missions" describes the specific task of making disciples of all the nations.⁶ This work of missions is the activity of the church throughout the entire world. A "missionary" is "a messenger with a message from God, sent forth by divine authority for the definite purpose of evangelism, church-founding and church edification."⁷ Thus, the mission of God is being accomplished during the present dispensation through the missions initiative of the church, which involves the work of missionaries.

A relatively new term, "Missio Dei," Latin for "the sending of God," comprehensively describes "everything God does in relation to the kingdom and everything the church is sent to do."⁸ Mission originates with God the Creator.⁹ His sovereign decision to create and then subsequently restore a fallen creation through His supreme missionary the Lord Jesus Christ lies at the heart of all theology. The Bible is "a record of theology in mission – God in action in behalf of the salvation of mankind."¹⁰ His mission to bring all things into accord with His eternal purpose culminates in the coming kingdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 15:24-28; Eph 3:11; Rev 11:15; 12:10; 20:1-6). The doctrine of God, Man, Sin, Creation, Eschatology, and all other biblically revealed topics affix to the mission of God. In other words, the purpose of God revealed in His mission serves as the anchor for all aspects of theology.¹¹ God's purpose for restoration of the kingdom drives all that He does.

Several biblical topics have been proposed as the central theme of scripture. Jesus Christ is the central person of biblical revelation. The grace of God is a wonderful theme running throughout the Bible. However, "the Bible is the story of the redemption and reign of man in God's kingdom through Christ, the Savior and King."¹² The King and the kingdom of God are inseparably intertwined. Concerning the theme of the kingdom, McClain wrote, "The Kingdom of God is, in a certain and important sense, the grand central theme of all Holy Scripture. In approving this affirmation we are not forgetting the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ... but as we contemplate Him and His manifold glories as revealed in the Word of God, we shall

⁴ Moreau, Scott A.; Corwin, Gary R.; McGee, Gary B., *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 71.

⁵ Ibid, 72.

⁶ Ibid, 71.

⁷ George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), 248.

⁸ Moreau; Corwin; McGee, 73.

⁹ Ibid, 73.

¹⁰ Peters, 9.

¹¹ Moreau; Corwin; McGee, 76.

¹² Thurman Wisdom, *A Royal Destiny: The Reign of Man in God's Kingdom* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2006), 9.

inescapably come sooner or later to the Kingdom of which He is the divine center. For it is in this Kingdom that the Father's eternal purpose in the incarnate Son shall be certainly and completely fulfilled."¹³

Accompanying the central theme of the kingdom of God are several motifs related to mission theology. Firstly, Jesus' person and work is seen throughout all of scripture (cf. Luke 24:27; John 5:39). He is the King and inseparable from His kingdom. He is the central person with regard to the mission of God (cf. Luke 4:18-19; Heb 1-2). Secondly, the Holy Spirit is the agent by which God convicts sinners, empowers believers to be witnesses, and petitions God for the believer's guidance.¹⁴ The Third Person of the Trinity makes it possible for men to carry out the mission of God – hence to be missionaries or sent ones with the message of God's impending kingdom (cf. Matt 24:14). Thirdly, Israel was singled out by God for an eternal purpose. From Genesis Chapter Twelve through the remainder of the Old Testament, this chosen nation is in focus. They were the channel through which God would eternally bless all nations. Jesus declared, "Salvation is of the Jews." (John 4:22) Fourthly, the church is God's chosen vessel during the current dispensation to witness to the world. The church serves the Lord by continuing to work out His mission on the earth. Eagerly anticipating the coming kingdom, the church will enjoy a favored position with Christ in His kingdom (cf. Rom 8:17-25; Eph 1-3; Rev 2:26-27; 3:21). Other motifs are contemplated,¹⁵ but these four complement the central theme of the kingdom. They bring unity to the mission of God as well as the missionary purpose of God's people.

The nature of God necessitates the centrality of mission in theology. God is love, light, and spirit. His love is displayed by His actions. The ultimate act of love was the sending of His Son for redemption and restoration of the kingdom (cf. John 3:16; Heb 1-2). God displayed himself through the light of His Son Jesus (cf. John 1:5). Being light, God is concerned that men understand the way of life so they may avoid the way of destruction. The spiritual aspect of God's nature (cf. John 4:24) points to His transcendence. He is outside all created things. The very act of creation displays His outgoing nature. "God is not a God of isolation. He is not out there in outer space and silent, a spectator or neutral. He is not a withdrawn God. He may be hidden, but He is not absent. He may be silent, but He is not indifferent. He may not be overtly seen, but He is not uninvolved...He is the God of history – a God of relationships."¹⁶ The nature of God explains His mission to bring all things into harmony. He desires love, peace, and unity in His kingdom. His nature also explains why He would determine to save mankind instead of allowing the tragedy of sin to run its full course to eternal destruction.

God is the only Eternal being in existence with His nature revealed in scripture as being holy, loving, and just. The love and grace of God are immediately recognized when He is seen creating all things. His holiness, love and justice are also observed in the redemption and

¹³ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968), 5.

¹⁴ Moreau; Corwin; McGee, 83.

¹⁵ Ibid, 79-85.

¹⁶ Peters, 58.

restoration of the fallen creation. Paradoxically, even though God is the creator and sustainer of all life, He became one of the created suffering death for their sake. Truly, mission has its origin in God's effort to provide mankind with eternal life and regal purpose in His kingdom.

God's Mission in the Old Testament

Immediately after the fall of man, God took action to fulfill his eternal purpose declaring the defeat of Satan with a view to the restoration of the kingdom through mankind (cf. Gen 3:15). Approximately, two thousand years transpired before God's word revealed more specifically how God planned to bring about His plan. With the calling of Abram (Gen 12:1-3) God began to show how He would elevate one group of people to carry out His plan of redemption and restoration. Abram and his physical descendants were not singled out to exclusively receive eternal life. Quite the contrary, they were chosen sovereignly by God for the regal purpose of exemplifying and proclaiming the mission of God to the Gentiles. To conclude eternal life was exclusive to Abram's physical descendants ignores the multitude of Gentiles saved prior to and after him.¹⁷

Genesis 12:1-3 reveals how God would bless Abram in a three-fold manner: Abram would father a great nation, He would be blessed by God personally, and He would possess a great name. The purpose for these blessings was so that Abram would be a blessing to the Gentiles. This text serves as the primary mission text for the remainder of biblical revelation.¹⁸ Abram was chosen by God for the specific purpose of furthering God's initiative to reclaim that which had been lost by Adam.

As time progressed, Abram's name was changed to Abraham, meaning father of a multitude. Then he miraculously fathered Isaac who in turn fathered Jacob. Furthermore, Jacob's name was changed to Israel, which means prince of God, showing the regal purpose of God for him and his progeny. This regal purpose is vividly portrayed in Exodus 19:4-6 which is another monumental Old Testament text revealing the mission of God. In this passage, God declares that the nation of Israel was to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. When God delivered the nation of Israel from Egypt it was for a specific purpose – to serve or worship Him (cf. Ex 3:12; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). The regal nation of Israel was to worship God by serving in a mediatorial role between Him and all the other nations. It was God's will that all the earth know Him through Israel and for all the earth to be "filled with the glory of the Lord." (Num 14:21) As mediators, they were to live in a holy manner so that they would be recognized by the Gentiles as God's special people. "They were to be a missionary nation."¹⁹ Following the previously revealed purpose for Abram's blessing (so that he would be a blessing) Israel was to continue in this purpose.

¹⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Israel's Missionary Call" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 3rd Edition, 1999), 10-11.

¹⁸ Ibid, 11.

¹⁹ C. Gordon Olson, *What In The World Is God Doing? The Essentials of Global Missions* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2003), 28.

In order to enjoy the benefits of their majestic calling, Israel was required to obey the Lord. Through their obedience, God's plan to fill the earth with His glory would be accomplished. The key to their obedience was faith. They were to believe God, trusting in His ability to give them victory while providing for their every need. Further, they were to live according to God's standards being separate in that respect from the Gentiles. Unfortunately, they failed to believe or obey. Loss of privilege as well as a history of despair and defeat ensued.

The regal missionary purpose for the nation of Israel is made very evident throughout the Old Testament.²⁰ They were to be a "light unto the Gentiles" (Isa 49:6). Jerusalem was to be the world's capital city where inhabitants from all nations would worship and praise the Almighty (cf. Ps 87). The psalmist proclaimed, "That thy way may be known upon the earth, thy saving health among all nations." (Ps 67:2) God's plan was that when the nations saw the blessing of God upon Israel, they would come to believe in the God of Israel and be saved. The sending of Jonah to Nineveh makes known the will of God for Israel's evangelization of the nations. When Solomon's temple was built, it was not exclusive to Israel. Rather, it was to be a house of prayer for the nations (cf. 1 Kings 8:41-43; Isa 56:6-7). Both Zechariah and Malachi envision the Gentiles and Israel living together in peace. The whole earth was to be engaged in the worship of the God of Israel (cf. Zech 2:11; Mal 1:11).

The message of the Old Testament longs for the redemption and restoration of the entire earth through God's chosen people. The prophesied kingdom is eagerly awaited by the prophets (cf. Isa 2: 61-66; Ez 36:22-23) where the entire earth will live in harmony under the rule of God.²¹

God's Mission in the New Testament

As the divine drama unfolds in the New Testament, God turns His attention upon the church to fulfill His mission. Because of Israel's hardness, God elected the church²², comprised of Jews and Gentiles (cf. Eph 3:6), to be a witness to the world. Jesus commanded His disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24: 46-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). This task of making disciples is the church's work of missions.²³ This work is carried out by missionaries, churches, and other Para-church organizations around the world. The purpose for the church's missions initiative is essentially twofold: to win converts and to disciple them onto maturity. God desires mature believers to rule in His Kingdom (cf. Matt 5:3-12; 24:42-47; 25:14-30; Eph 4:1-16; 1 Thess 1:12; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 2:26-27; 3:21; 19:8; 21:7).

²⁰ See the following key Old Testament passages relative to the missionary mandate: Gen 18:18; 22:18; 28:14; Deut 28:10; 2 Chr 6:33; Ps 67; 96; 105; Isa 40:5; 45:4, 22; 56:3, 6-8; 66:4; Jer 12:14-17.

²¹ Johannes Verkuyl, "The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 3rd Edition, 1999), 30.

²² While Israel's promises are primarily earthly, the church's promises are primarily heavenly (cf. Eph 1-3).

²³ Moreau; Corwin; McGee, 72.

The birth of the church at Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:1) anticipated the continued mission of God for mankind. God's mission directs the church's mission which is to prepare the world for the coming kingdom. To this end the church sends out missionaries. The directive of Jesus upon His ascension was for the disciples to wait for the power which would ensue from the Holy Spirit. Upon reception of this power, they were to take the message to the world – they were to be missionaries proclaiming the good news of God's mission of saving and restoring (cf. Acts 1:3-9). They were to make disciples of all nations by teaching the doctrine of Jesus (cf. Matt 28:20). The eleven apostles were successful at taking the gospel to the Jews, especially in Jerusalem, but it appears they were not as focused upon the Gentiles (cf. Acts 10:9-22). The lack of focus was most likely due to Jewish cultural barriers. In the plan and wisdom of God, the apostle Paul was chosen to spearhead the missionary effort outside of Israel to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:15; Rom 11:13; Gal 2:8; 1 Tim 2:7). Paul established Gentile churches throughout Asia and Europe. Paul did not allow cultural or ethnic differences to hinder the mission of God. He became “all things to all men” (1 Cor 9:22) in order to see Jew or Gentile saved. He conveyed the role of Gentiles in the new dispensation of the grace of God (cf. Eph 2-3). God was now allowing Gentiles to share in the regal privileges of Israel. While the church has not replaced Israel (cf. Rom 9-11), it is doing similar work with regard to God's mission during the present dispensation. The priestly role of Israel is now assumed by the New Testament believer (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6). Thus, “the mission of the members of the body of Christ is mediatorial in nature.”²⁴ As “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20), New Testament believers are to seek out the estranged in the world and lead them to a saving knowledge of Christ. Further, upon conversion, the work of discipleship looking forward to Christian maturity is the endeavor of the body of Christ. The goal for all believers is to be conformed to the image of Christ (cf. Rom 8:29; Phil 3:11-14). This is accomplished through the local church where believers are nourished and encouraged in an atmosphere of love and good works (cf. Eph 4:11-16; Heb 10:24-25). The fruit of discipleship is a mature believer who is a shining light in the world which illuminates the glory of God and His coming kingdom.

The local church at Antioch is a good model of how a church should function with regard to mission. It is the first example of a missionary-sending church in the New Testament (cf. Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3).²⁵ The leaders of this church were not Jewish and apparently had been evangelized by someone other than the apostles. Because they were Gentile, they were not as hindered to concentrate on cross-cultural missions as the Jewish church at Jerusalem. The leaders were instrumental in teaching the word of the Lord (cf. Acts 15:35) so that the members would grow in grace (cf. Eph 4:11-16). When a church's leadership uses its God given gifts, the laity is able to mature in the faith. A mature laity will understand the mission of God (cf. Eph 1:17-23; Col 1:8-12) and participate by using its God given gifts for ministry (cf. 1 Cor 12-14). Love will characterize how mature brethren function. Love will motivate them to seek the

²⁴ Ibid, 87.

²⁵ Olson, 348.

kingdom of God and His righteousness (cf. Matt 6:33). They will follow the admonition to seek heavenly treasure (cf. Matt 6:20) instead of the carnal treasures of the present age. Further, a mature laity will be fervent witnesses in word and deed (cf. Matt 5:16; John 13:34-35). Part of their maturity will be expressed by being proactive concerning missions. The church at Antioch was focused upon spiritual discipline evidenced by their prayer and fasting regarding the sending of Paul and Silas on their first missionary journey (cf. Acts 13:3). This focus on prayer and fasting was motivated by their knowledge of God's desire to see all men saved and the kingdom restored (cf. Luke 19:10; John 3:16). Paul explained to Timothy how prayer should be made for all men in order that they might be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-4). The church at Antioch understood the mission of God and sought to help fulfill their part in His mission. Unity of purpose and effort is critical for a New Testament church. Pastors and teachers who build up the laity will see them working to fulfill the mission of God by witnessing to the world. The entire church's prayer will be "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt 6:10)

While all New Testament believers are certainly sent to be witnesses, not all are called to be missionaries.²⁶ Missionaries have a special calling and usually expand their witness beyond the general locality of their church. Their work usually involves traveling to an unreached region to proclaim the good news, set up churches, and further propagate the gospel. The leaders of the church along with the laity are to support the endeavor of its missionaries. All members of the church are to be unified and working for the Lord in all they do (cf. Col 3:23). Each has his own God given gift(s) which are critical for a unified, efficient missionary effort.

Thus, the church is charged with taking the good news of God's grace²⁷ and His kingdom to all people. It is also charged with perpetuating itself with structure and leadership. As believers mature, missionaries are sent, and churches are established, the mission of God will continue looking forward to the coming kingdom.

Summary and Conclusion

God's mission to bring about harmony to His kingdom continues to progress. The church currently proclaims the good news of salvation with a view to the coming kingdom. One day the grand petition will become reality – the kingdom of God will come, and the will of God will be done (cf. Matt 6:10) on earth as in heaven. This golden age is eagerly anticipated by all creation. It is for this purpose God is working through the church – to bring heaven to earth and restore what was lost when Adam fell (cf. Luke 19:10). Then mankind will worship and serve the Creator as rulers in His Kingdom.

²⁶ Ibid, 9-10.

²⁷ The initial message to unbelievers is salvation by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9). All members of the church are to proclaim this foundational message to the unregenerate. Paul provides a simple formula for spreading the good news in Romans 10:11-14. There must be one sent with a message in order for the lost to hear and subsequently believe the good news.

Bibliography

- Ellison, Stanley A. "Everyone's Question: What is God Trying to Do?" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 3rd Edition, 1999.
- Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. "Israel's Missionary Call" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 3rd Edition, 1999.
- McClain, Alva J. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968.
- Moreau, Scott A.; Corwin, Gary R.; McGee, Gary B. *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004.
- Olson, C. Gordon. *What In The World Is God Doing? The Essentials of Global Missions*. Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2003.
- Peters, George W. *A Biblical Theology of Missions*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972.
- Piper, John. *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God In Missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993.
- Verkuyl, Johannes. "The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 3rd Edition, 1999.
- Wisdom, Thurman. *A Royal Destiny: The Reign of Man in God's Kingdom*. Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2006.