

***What is Mission?***  
by W.L. Bredenhof

The definition of mission is not presently at the center of controversy in missiological circles. A survey of recent volumes of missiological journals reveals that many missiologists appear to assume a working definition and never take pains to make it explicit. It appears that, especially in evangelical circles, issues of mission praxis (especially contextualization) occupy the center of our discussions, while more basic issues, perceived by some as rather abstract (such as the definition of mission), have been for the most part forgotten or left to the introductory textbooks. Even in the introductory textbooks, a definition is often given without any significant development or defense.<sup>1</sup> Part of the reason for this missiological lacuna undoubtedly rests with the fact that the issue is one on which unanimity may never be found. However, another reason could be that missiology has not fully appreciated the significance of this issue.

In this paper, I intend to argue that the definition of mission is crucially important for missiology. It is not something that can be taken for granted. Even if complete agreement on the definition is not forthcoming, we can examine the Scriptures and determine some basic common denominators for a definition. Laying aside a detailed investigation into historical perspectives on the definition, I propose to develop a definition based on exegesis of key Scripture passages. We will also briefly examine two issues directly related to the definition.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the recent textbook *Introducing World Missions: a Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey*, A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 9, 17.

To say that the issue is not at the center of controversy is not to say that it has not received attention. Numerous scholars have ventured definitions ranging from the all-inclusive to the very narrowly restricted. As an example of the former, consider John Stott's definition, "Mission describes everything the church is sent into the world to do. 'Mission' embraces the church's double vocation of service to be 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world'."<sup>2</sup> The problem with these sorts of definitions is that they are vulnerable to Stephen Neill's trenchant criticism: if everything is mission, then nothing is mission.<sup>3</sup> Broad definitions threaten to make the term "mission" meaningless – in which case, Neill argued, another word will have to be found to describe the Church's obligation to reach out to those without Christ.

On the other end of the spectrum, we find definitions like this one from a currently authoritative work on short-term missions:

Christian mission is "sending messengers (missionaries) away from their 'normal' home culture as soon as possible, and into another culture and people (intended receptors), for the express purpose of proclaiming with word and deed (the intended activity) the Good News that sets any person free from anything that binds them."<sup>4</sup>

One problem with these kinds of definitions is that mission is cross-culturally restricted. Missionaries from India working in their own culture in India are not technically "missionaries" with these types of definitions. The time factor ("as soon as possible") is

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<sup>2</sup> John R.W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen C. Neill, *Creative Tension* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 81-82.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Peterson, Gordon Aeschliman, R. Wayne Sneed, *Maximum Impact Short-Term Mission: the God-commanded Repetitive Deployment of Swift, Temporary, Non-professional Missionaries* (Minneapolis: STEMPress, 2003), 52.

also problematic as it ties into the being sent away from a home culture. Finally, “anything that binds them” is troublesome since it is not concretely defined. In the final analysis, for instance, one could be bound by legitimate obligations to one’s family.

Of course, historically speaking, we are not the first ones to discuss this issue. Speaking out of the tradition with which I am most familiar, the definition of mission was discussed at several Reformed Synods in the Netherlands. At the Synod of the Liberated (*Vrijgemaakte*) churches in 1948, for example, numerous reports were presented on the matter of mission. New approaches were being considered on a number of fronts. Specifically, a “Mission Order” that had been adopted by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1902 was under intense scrutiny. This Mission Order was a special church order specifically dealing with mission. Included with this Mission Order was provision for the institution of *hulpdiensten* (auxiliary services); these included schools (theological and general) and medical services. In this context, some of the reports to Synod 1948 dealt directly or indirectly with the matter of the definition of mission. One of these reports was particularly concerned with whether or not *hulpdiensten* should be included under the notion of *zending* (mission).<sup>5</sup> The fact that the deputies who penned the report could not reach consensus is indicative of the complexities inherent in the discussion.

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<sup>5</sup> *Rapport over de verhouding van den zendingsarbeid tot medischen en onderwijs-arbeid op de zendings-terreinen (kwestie ‘hoofd’ –en ‘hulp-diensten.’) uitgebracht door de Deputaten, benoemd vanwege de Generale Synode te Amersfoort 1948 tot herziening van de K.O. (art.52) en Z.O. volgens art. 65 and 129 der Acta, aan de Kerken voorgelegd* (Kampen: Drukkerij Ph. Zalsman, 1950).

Scholars do not debate an issue unless they believe it is important. Why does the definition of mission matter? Among other reasons, a definition of mission is helpful for circumscribing the discipline of missiology – the science of mission. However, there is an even more basic issue at stake. David Bosch was correct when he wrote that there is “much more than mere academic gymnastics at stake here.”<sup>6</sup> The basic issue here is not a definition *per se*, but obedience to Christ. It is safe to assume that everybody involved with this debate will agree that mission is about doing something. Before ascending into heaven, Christ sent his followers to do something.<sup>7</sup> When we search for a definition of mission, we are inquiring about what that “something” is. If we are going to be obedient to Christ, we have to know what it was he was saying.

In other words, we arrive at a question of exegesis. In his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, John Stott proposed to explore the Scriptures to reach a definition of mission. As already indicated, I do not agree with his end product, but I have a great deal of appreciation for his method since Stott takes the authority of Scripture seriously. So, we too should ask the question: what do the Scriptures say to the question of “What Is Mission?” As we ask this question, we should remember that the issue here is not a definition *per se*, but obedience. Hence, we can be satisfied with common denominators and not necessarily agree on a rigidly delineated definition. Nevertheless, a tentative attempt will be made to provide such a definition in this paper.

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<sup>6</sup> David J. Bosch, “Mission and Evangelism: Clarifying the Concepts,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 68 (1984), 161.

<sup>7</sup> In the Vulgate the word used is a form of *mitto*, *mittere*, *misi*, *missum*, “to send.”

## The Old Testament

Even though we are examining something Christ told his followers to do before he ascended into heaven, the Old Testament is not irrelevant. The Old Testament provides important background for the development of mission in the Scriptures. Though it is difficult to link it etymologically to the notion of mission, the earliest pages of the Old Testament portray a God who seeks out that which is lost. There is no question that God's concern is the salvation of his sin-stained creation, particularly the crown of that creation – man.

As the Old Testament unfolds, we see God working towards the fulfillment of his plan for redemption. At certain points, God provides hints that his plans are broad and universal. We see this particularly in the relationship God established with Abraham. The well-known passage of Genesis 22:18 illustrates this beautifully: “In your seed all the nations of earth shall be blessed...”<sup>8</sup> However, the bulk of the Old Testament is taken up with God's interaction with the one people directly descended from Abraham. As he relates to that one people, on occasion we can hear notes that sound like the music of mission. When God brings his initial commission to the prophet Jeremiah, it is clearly a matter of God “sending” (Jeremiah 1:7) the prophet. This sending was mostly focused on the one people of God, but it included messages concerning the nations. Most of these messages were prophetic judgments, but occasionally there are positive notes as well, particularly with Moab, Ammon, and Elam.

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<sup>8</sup> All passages are NKJV, unless otherwise noted.

Some of the Old Testament's most anticipatory passages, missiologically speaking, are the section of servant songs in Isaiah. Here too, we read of a servant being sent by the LORD (Isa. 42:19). However, unlike with Jeremiah, it is clear that this servant is ultimately sent with good news. He impacts not only the affairs of God's people, but also the affairs of the nations. This servant has often been seen as a metaphor for the people of Israel and, more proleptically, as a prophecy of Jesus Christ. With this in mind, it is clear that the root idea of the sending of a messenger or servant with God's Word was present in the Old Testament.

We can see this also with the Psalter. Many of the Psalms exhort God's people to verbally announce his glorious kingship to the nations. In Psalm 96, the people of God are told to "Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns...'" This can be understood as a prototypical call to mission in the Old Testament. However, this call was not taken very seriously by Israel in the old covenant. Though there was some proselytism in later Old Testament Judaism (cf. Matt. 23:15), it was not comparable to the scale and intensity of the early Christian mission.

The Old Testament people's lack of mission-mindedness was most clearly evidenced in the account of Jonah. Jonah was sent to Nineveh – the clearest approximation of a missionary in the Old Testament. Jonah's reluctance as a missionary prophet is not merely a personal indictment on the prophet, but a vivid portrayal of Israel's ethnocentric understanding of God's plans for the world – their failure to understand the scope of God's promises to Abraham, David and others. Because of these

redemptive-historical factors, there could be nothing more than an incipient mission in the Old Testament. This incipient mission was relatively undefined – it seems to consist of announcing God’s kingship over and judgment on the nations. Finally, it was not only relatively undefined, it was also not taken seriously in its execution. That would have to wait until the Spirit-filled era of the new covenant. The most we can say is that Christ’s sending of the apostles was latent in the Old Testament messianic promises and prophecies.<sup>9</sup>

### **The New Testament**

The mission which was incipient and rudimentary in the Old Testament becomes full-blown and animated in the pages of the New Testament. It starts with the Son of God himself being sent into the world to seek and save that which was lost. It continues with the same Son of God sending out his followers. Our task at this point becomes identifying the purpose of this sending out. Why did the Lord Jesus send out his followers? What were they being sent out to do?

This question is really the focus of what some claim to be the most important “Great Commission” passage in the New Testament, *viz.* John 20:21. Some argue that John’s version of Christ’s words is the crucial one.<sup>10</sup> I do not agree that any one passage is more crucial than the others. They belong together as a coherent whole. Together they give us a complete picture of Christ’s sending out of the apostles.

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel M. Zwemer, *Into All the World, The Great Commission: A Vindication and an Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1943), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 23.

The passage in John 20:21 reads, “So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’” John quotes the Lord Jesus with similar words in John 17:18, “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” The context there is the time prior to the crucifixion and resurrection – at this point, the Lord Jesus is praying. Interestingly, in John 17:18, we find the verb *ἀποστέλλω* in the aorist with both clauses, whereas in John 20:21, the first verb is *ἀποστέλλω* and the second is *πέμπω*, the first being perfect, and the second being present. The verb *πέμπω* is not used by John prior to 20:21 with the apostles as object. *Ἀποστέλλω* is used in this manner only in John 4:38, referring to the Lord Jesus sending out the apostles to reap what they have not worked for. With *ἀποστέλλω* used with respect to Christ, the difference between the aorist in 17:18 and the perfect in 20:21 is striking. The switch to the perfect could be explained by the post-resurrection context in which the redemptive work is virtually completed.<sup>11</sup> With *ἀποστέλλω* and *πέμπω* used with respect to the apostles, the difference between the aorist and the present is not striking on its own. It is only striking when put in contrast with what these texts say about Christ. For while the lexicological evidence suggests that *ἀποστέλλω* and *πέμπω* are virtually synonymous and thus the sending of Christ and his apostles have a close analogy, the grammar suggests that there is an important difference.

Indeed, this difference has not always been appreciated. Consequently, some draw strong parallels between Christ being sent into the world and believers being sent

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<sup>11</sup> See R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1942), 1370: “The redemptive mission of Jesus is now finished; this is the sense of the extensive perfect, ‘has sent me,’ denoting an act now complete.”



out.<sup>12</sup> However, Christ's sending into the world was a unique event and facile comparisons are in danger of devaluing the unique character of the incarnation.

Furthermore, as D.A. Carson points out,

John's gospel does not set forth our going as an 'incarnation.' The observation is more than a narrow point of picky exegesis: under the guise of the 'incarnation' model of Christian mission some now so focus on 'presence' and identification with those being served that the proclamatory, kerygmatic, 'good news' elements are largely suppressed.<sup>13</sup>

John 20:21 (and John 17:18) does imply somewhat of an analogy between the mission of Christ and the mission of the apostles. However, the grammar demonstrates that this is not a direct identity. This is an important point: the Lord Jesus Christ was sent into this world with a very unique and specific task: the redemption of His elect, a task which was virtually completed at the time of John 20:21. No one else ever has nor will perform the same task. But the Lord Jesus sends out His apostles, and by extension, His church, to gather the fruits of what He has accomplished. This involves the work of the Holy Spirit, as is evident by Christ's words in verse 22, "Receive the Holy Spirit." J. DeJong adequately summarizes the passage: "He now sends His apostles in the power of the Spirit in order to gather the harvest, that is to bring forth the fruits of His task...He sends the Spirit into the world to work with the Word for the completion and fruit of His Work."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor Bible) (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1036: "The special Johannine contribution to the theology of this mission is that the Father's sending of the Son serves both as the model and the ground for the Son's sending of the disciples."

<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson, "Christology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (EDWM), ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 191.

<sup>14</sup> J. DeJong, "Even So I Send You – Some Reflections on the Current Missionary Task of the Church – (2)" in *Clarion* 45.21 (October 18, 1996), 473.

The important point in the passage is this: Christ is the one who sends out his apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit. The passage is deliberately brief and its message rather simple. It could be paraphrased like this: “I was sent by the Father. Now I am sending you.” Such a paraphrase captures the essential difference between the tenses in the two clauses and also maintains the overlap in semantic domains between ἀποστέλλω and πέμπω. To accomplish this, the paraphrase works with a lesser-known meaning of καθως, namely “since” or “on account of.” Thus, a more literal translation would read, “Since the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Rather than providing a base for all manner of theologizing about the parallels between the mission of the Son and that of the apostles, the intent of the passage seems to be to invite the reader to ask: “Sent to do what?” What are the apostles sent to do? To answer those questions, we are forced to the broader context of the book of John in the first place. From John 17:18, we know that the “sending” or “mission” was “into the world.” In the following context, in John 17:21,23, it is evident that there was an element of being sent into the world so that others would believe the message embodied by Jesus Christ. In the immediate context of John 20:21, we see that this message includes the forgiveness of sins as a significant feature (verse 22). All of that fits with the broader purpose of the Fourth Gospel, as given in John 20:31. However, the answer at this point is still rather nebulous. Hence, to gain more clarity, we need to examine the broader Scriptural context, particularly the parallels in the Synoptics.

Matthew 28:18-20 provides the most well-known version of the Great Commission: “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.” Though formerly much of the emphasis fell upon the participle *πορευθεντες* (“Go”), it is generally recognized today that the imperative *μαθητευσατε* (“make disciples”) is the key to understanding this version of the Great Commission.<sup>15</sup> The command in this passage is to “make disciples.” To be sure, that may involve some kind of movement, though the duration and physical length of that movement is left unspecified. This discipling will also entail triune baptism and a teaching of all that Christ has commanded. Already at this point, we have some idea of what *μαθητευσατε* involves, or at least something of the way in which it is to be accomplished.

Nevertheless, it would be helpful to reflect further on the content of this command. The verb *μαθητευω* is, surprisingly, rarely used in the New Testament. Aside from three uses in Matthew, it is used once in Acts. In Matthew 13:52, the Lord Jesus says, “Therefore every scribe instructed (*μαθητευω*) concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.” This seems to indicate some kind of educational activity done by the Lord Jesus akin to what the Jewish

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<sup>15</sup> See J. Ronald Blue, “Go, Missions,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* Vol.141, No. 564 (October/December 1984), 342-344.

scribes had been doing.<sup>16</sup> In Matthew 27:57, Joseph of Arimathea is described as someone that the Lord had discipled. Finally, in Acts 14:21, Luke describes Paul and Barnabas as having not only preached the gospel in Derbe, but also as having had made many disciples. From this overview of the use of this verb, it can be said that the verb *μαθητευω* expresses something that the Lord Jesus did and something that Paul and Barnabas were likewise engaged with. Matthew 13:52 contains an implied imperative or invitation for Jewish scribes to be the objects of *μαθητευω*, while our passage in Matthew 28 contains a direct imperative to be the subjects of the verb.

Because of the limited usage of the verb, we are forced to cast a wider net and look at the related word *μαθητης* (disciple). The usage of this term is distributed rather evenly over the four gospels and Acts, being found 252 times. As to be expected, many of these usages describe the core group of twelve that the Lord Jesus gathered to himself. However, there is also a wider use of this word to describe all those who follow the Lord. This usage was found already during Christ's earthly ministry and it continued after his ascension. In fact, we find that before believers were known as Christians, they were known as disciples (Acts 11:26). Hence, the term *μαθητης* defined what believers were about.

In its basic sense, *μαθητης* meant "learner" or "student." In Matthew 23:8-10, it becomes clear that the relationship between Christ and believers is one of a teacher with his students. The students are aiming to become like their master, as a student in a

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Kvalbein, "Go therefore and make disciples....The concept of discipleship in the New Testament," *Themelios* 13.2 (Jan./Feb. 1988), 49.

rabbinic school would aim to become as his rabbi. This replication of the master can be seen quite vividly in Christ's words in John 13:13-15. The aim, therefore, can be said to become an obedient follower, one who does exactly as his master does. In the New Testament, a disciple learns by hearing his master and doing exactly as his master does.<sup>17</sup>

From this brief word study we can conclude that, in Matthew 28, the Lord Jesus means that he wants to see the apostles going and making obedient followers in all the nations. As a means to reach that end, Christ Jesus sends out his apostles to baptize and teach. Though the imperative is directly given in this passage, it can be seen as a natural development since making more disciples is something that disciples instinctively do. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit has seen fit that what should be instinctive is underlined with a direct command: Jesus Christ sends out his apostles to all nations to make disciples. They are to be baptizing and teaching to reach that end.

When we come to Mark 16:9-20, we encounter a well-known text-preservation problem. The canonical integrity of these verses is brought into question by most modern translations and commentators. In fact, the recent commentary of R.T. France maintains that the verdict is “virtually unanimous” – there is a broad consensus that these verses are not original to Mark's Gospel.<sup>18</sup> The same consensus appears to extend to missiological circles, though not quite as broadly.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 685.

<sup>19</sup> Two examples of proponents for the longer ending's authenticity in missiology are Samuel Zwemer in *Into All the World*, 69-86, and, less forcefully, George W. Peters in *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 172. Two examples of opponents are Mortimer Arias and Alan Johnson in *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 36-37, and

The problem is that the verses are missing from Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, along with a fair number of other manuscripts. From this external evidence and the internal evidence (lexicological and stylistic), following mainstream canons of textual criticism, many New Testament scholars have excised the longer ending. However, if one does not accept those mainstream canons, a different conclusion can be reached. I find the critiques of J. Van Bruggen and others of the mainstream canons to be compelling.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, I do not *a priori* accept the superiority of Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. The fact that the longer ending is missing from these Codices requires explanation, but it does not automatically void the canonicity of this passage. Moreover, the internal evidence argument is also based on mainstream canons which are vulnerable to critique. In this case, too, the arguments are not compelling to exclude Mark 16:9-20 from the canon. Without belaboring the point, it remains possible to assent to the concluding words of John Burgon, “that not a particle of doubt, that not an atom of suspicion, attaches to the last twelve verses of the Gospel According to St. Mark.”<sup>21</sup>

The relevant verse for our purposes is verse 15, “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.’” As in Matthew, there is one main command. However, this time it is *κηρυξάτε*, “preach the gospel.” Only one participle accompanies the imperative in the Markan version, *viz.* *πορευθεντες*. Again, movement

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Joel F. Williams in “Mission in Mark,” in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 146-147.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, J. VanBruggen, *The Ancient Text of the New Testament* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1976).

<sup>21</sup> John W. Burgon, *The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel According to S. Mark* (Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1959), 334.

is indicated but the physical length and duration of the movement is left unspecified. The important verb in this verse is the imperative of *κηρυσσω*.

The Lord Jesus sends out the apostles to preach the good news. The word *κηρυσσω* indicates that this preaching is of an official character, it is the message of a herald who has been appointed by an authority figure. In antiquity, a *κηρυξ* was required to be faithful in delivering the message exactly as it had been given to him. With this condition being fulfilled, it could be known for certain that a higher authority stood behind the message.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, there is also here a connection with mission – for the *κηρυξ* was not only appointed, but also **sent** to deliver his message.<sup>23</sup> Jesus Christ sends the apostles as heralds with the specific message of the *εὐαγγελιον*, “the good news.”

What is the good news mentioned here? It is defined most obviously by what we read in the immediate context. In verse 16, the Lord Jesus speaks of belief, baptism, and salvation. But in the broader context of the gospel, the *εὐαγγελιον* is what the whole book of Mark is about. Mark 1:1 frames the *εὐαγγελιον* christologically with an emphasis on Jesus being the Son of God. Mark portrays Jesus Christ in his divine activity.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere in the gospel, we hear that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour. The fact that he is Lord comes through with the theme of discipleship in the gospel. The fact that he is Saviour comes through not only with the weighty emphasis on the passion narrative in the gospel, but also Mark’s attention to the many healing miracles performed

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard Friedrich, “*κηρυξ*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, Vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 687-688.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 713.

<sup>24</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Revised Edition) (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 63.

by Jesus. Mark's gospel is holistic in that it includes the whole person, body and soul. Hence, we can say that the gospel includes the good news that Jesus Christ takes hold of and transforms the entire life by his saving power. From here, we can draw a conclusion for Mark 16:15: Jesus Christ sends out his apostles to preach, to officially herald the good news that he is divine Lord and Saviour all over the world.

Luke 24:46-49 presents us with a slightly different but not incompatible picture. Unusually, the only direct imperative in this passage comes from verse 49: "stay in the city." The Lord Jesus commands the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the promise of the Father comes upon them, a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. It is worth noting that, like John, but unlike Matthew and Mark, the command is given here with reference to the Holy Spirit. The mission command is carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. With this command, there is an accompanying implication indicated by the *ἔως*. The implication is that once the Holy Spirit gives them "power from on high," that will be the right time to go and leave the city. "Wait now and go later in the power of the Spirit," seems to be the essence here in this Lukan version of the Great Commission.

But what are they supposed to do when they go at a later time? We find evidence of that in verses 46 and 47. In verse 46, the Lord Jesus speaks of what was written regarding the necessity of the Christ suffering and rising from the dead on the third day. In verse 47, he goes further and says that Scripture (here the Old Testament) had prophesied that repentance and the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations in



his Name, starting at Jerusalem. This passage affirms that not only the New Testament, but also the Old Testament has an all-inclusive view of the salvation of the nations.<sup>25</sup>

The words of the Lord Jesus in this passage also lay out a divine-human effort to carry this out. The divine Word prophesied that it would be accomplished and ultimately, under God's sovereign power, so it will be. At the same time, the prophecy concerning the nations also lays a burden upon the hearts of the apostles, not merely to be witnesses in some passive sense, but also to be active participants. Verse 48 indicates that not only have the disciples been witnesses in the past, they are going to be witnesses in the future.

There is one similarity here with Mark's version. We find that in verse 47 with the use of the verb *κηρυσσω*. Again we have here the official preaching, the word of a herald bringing a message from a higher up. The official character is here underlined by the addition of "in His name." Further, that official preaching consists of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. It seems that in Luke, the content of the herald's message is defined much more precisely than in Mark and it fits with the emphasis on repentance and forgiveness found throughout Luke's writings.<sup>26</sup> From Luke's gospel we can conclude that Christ, in fulfillment of the Old Testament, sent out his apostles in the power of the Spirit to witness to his suffering and resurrection and to preach officially repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations.

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<sup>25</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 1075: "...both Old and New Testament proclaim a *Christ for all the nations.*"

<sup>26</sup>C.F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM, 1990), 923: "Its content corresponds with Luke's emphasis on repentance and forgiveness in the teaching and ministry of Jesus...Apart from Mark 1:4 this form of words is confined to Luke-Acts in the NT, and it governs the presentation of the church's mission in Acts."

Luke gives the Great Commission in another form in Acts 1:8: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The key idea is that the apostles will receive power from the Holy Spirit. As in Luke’s gospel, the Great Commission is given here with an accent on the work of the Spirit. As a result of the pouring out of the Spirit, the apostles are to be witnesses for Jesus Christ, starting in their immediate vicinity and slowly working outward. Interestingly, the Lord Jesus is quoted as using the future rather than the imperative. The words may therefore appear at first glance to be merely predictive. However, even though the future is used here, it is most likely an imperatival future, having a “universal, timeless and/or solemn force to it.”<sup>27</sup> This understanding also makes the most sense given the parallels in the gospels.

As in Luke 24:46-49, the apostles are not so much sent out as commissioned with a task. To be sure, there is a geographic locale attached to the commission, implying both a sending out and a going. However, the emphasis is not on the sending and going here. Rather, it is on the fact that Christ commissions his apostles to be witnesses (*μαρτυρες*). The NT idea of a witness comes with a legal connotation. A witness gives sound testimony to the truth of something and this sound testimony could stand up under legal scrutiny. A witness speaks about what he or she has seen and heard (cf. Acts 4:20). The apostles, therefore, were commissioned in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring a

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<sup>27</sup> See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 569: “Evidence that the imperative is used for such commands can be demonstrated by Synoptic parallels (in which one Gospel has the imperative while the other has the future indicative) and textual variants (in which the imperative is found in some MSS, the future indicative in others.”

sober word of truth about Jesus Christ that could convince a doubtful world that he is truly the Saviour of all mankind.

Going through the book of Acts, this is exactly the picture that we see of the early Christian church. The church goes out from Jerusalem into the whole world and witnesses for Jesus Christ, giving sound testimony that he is the Saviour of the whole world. When we look at the church in Acts, there are certainly acts of mercy and kindness, but the emphasis always falls on the verbal heralding of the good news of Jesus Christ. Going through Acts, one cannot help but notice the numerous sermons and speeches. Kerygmatic speech makes up 20 to 30 percent of the book.<sup>28</sup> The verbal proclamation of the church is front and centre. It seems that the apostles and other early Christians understood very well what it was that Jesus Christ had commissioned them to do.

Another New Testament passage that explicitly ties being sent with the verbal proclamation of the gospel is Romans 10:15, “And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things.’” In this passage, *κηρυσσω* is connected with *ἀποστελλω*, possibly invoking the words of the Lord Jesus himself in the gospel accounts of the Great Commission. In this passage, the sender(s) is (are) not explicitly identified. However, in the immediate context of Romans 10, particularly with the quotes

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<sup>28</sup> Steve Walton, “Acts: Many Questions, Many Answers,” in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), edd. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne, 238. Just a cursory survey reveals gospel proclamation reproduced in chapters 2-4, 7, 10, 13, 17, 20, 22, 24, 26, and 28. This does include the instances where gospel proclamation is described but not reproduced.

from the Old Testament, it is evident that God is the one who sends prophets and preachers. In three of the quotes, God’s words come through the prophets.<sup>29</sup> In the broader context of Scripture, particularly of the New Testament passages examined thus far, it is Jesus Christ who does the sending. Jesus Christ sends men to herald or preach the gospel. Again, this passage makes it very clear that this is about kerygmatic speech.

### Defining Mission

Given that brief survey, it is possible to formulate a “lowest common denominator” answer to the question, “What is Mission?” Several elements have been isolated in the passages examined. Our study of the usage of *κηρυσσω* has indicated that we are looking at something official – it has to do with a solemn office or duty. Furthermore, *κηρυσσω* is indicative of a verbal act, as are the verbs *μαρτυρεω* and *μαθητευω*. The content of this speaking is captured in the use of the noun *εὐαγγελιον*. Moreover, all of the passages either speak of or imply a going out. Three of the passages we surveyed placed some emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit, so this should be accounted for in the definition. Finally, the ones who are targeted by this command are identified as *παντα τα εθνη* or *τον κοσμον απαντα*. The target audience is the broadest conceivable.

Putting those elements together, I propose the following definition:

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<sup>29</sup> In verse 19 with Deut.32:21, in verse 20 with Isa. 65:1, and in verse 21 with Isa. 65:2.

*Mission is the official sending of the church to go and make disciples by preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ in all nations through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Several elements of this tentative definition deserve further comment. First of all, I propose that mission is the official sending *of the church*. Jesus Christ sent out his apostles, and we understand from elsewhere in Scripture that those apostles stood as representatives of the entire church.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, mission belongs with the church. Through the apostles, the church has been sent out by Jesus Christ.

The second thing I want to note with this proposed definition is that it is an *official* task. In other words, it is closely connected to office. In many Reformed churches there are special officebearers who are sent out to be missionary ministers. With their verbal preaching and witnessing, they are ambassadors and heralds of Jesus Christ. They are standing in for Christ. When unbelievers accept them, they are accepting Christ. When unbelievers reject them, they are rejecting Christ.

However, that is not to say that believers who are not officebearers cannot be regarded as missionaries under certain conditions. We recognize that all believers have a general office which includes being a prophet, confessing the name of Christ. All believers can witness to the good news of their Saviour. However, when it comes to mission we should keep things tied as closely as possible to the church. Working under

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<sup>30</sup> This is made clear by the fact that the Lord Jesus, in Matt. 28, spoke of “even to the end of the world.” See J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1961), 74.

the supervision of a church, unordained believers can legitimately claim the title of “missionary.”

The geographical location of this task is also worth noting. In our proposed definition it says, “in all nations.” This captures the Biblical data accurately. “In all nations” -- what this means is that it makes no difference whether or not the outreach is done cross-culturally, in our own country or overseas. To further clarify, in this definition, “nation” is not to be identified with a “country.” Many countries contain a multitude of nations or “people-groups.” The borders of nations often transcend the borders of countries. This understanding of the term fits better with the Biblical usage of the term *τὰ ἔθνη*.<sup>31</sup>

### **Distinguishing Mission and Evangelism**

This brings us into a brief discussion of whether there is any difference between mission and evangelism. Traditionally, many Reformed missiologists have maintained a distinction between the two concepts. Among others, J. Verkuyl follows this distinction: “Evangelism (*evangelistiek*) has to do with the scientific study of communicating Christian faith in Western society, while missiology centers on communicating it in the regions of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.”<sup>32</sup> However, with the advent of globalization, this formulation of the distinction has lost any usefulness. The peoples and cultures of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean are now increasingly

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<sup>31</sup> See Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “ἔθνος” in TDNT, Vol. 2, 369.

<sup>32</sup> Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 9.

found in Western society. In similar fashion, Western society is increasingly distanced from the Christian influences which formerly made its position unique. Therefore, it is no longer viable to formulate a distinction between mission and evangelism based on the place where the Christian faith is communicated.

David Bosch made a different proposal, arguing that

Mission is a much wider concept than evangelism. It is the total task which God has set the Church for the salvation of the world. Mission therefore has to do with crossing of frontiers between Church and world, frontiers of all kinds: geographical, sociological, political, ethnic, cultural, economic, religious, ideological...Mission means being sent by God to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal.<sup>33</sup>

To support this understanding, Bosch appealed to Luke 4:18-19. However, this passage speaks only of the task of the Lord Jesus and says nothing about the mission of the church. In the same article, Bosch defined evangelism with the words of Emilio Castro, “Evangelism is... ‘our opening up the mystery of God’s love to all people inside that mission, the linking of all human lives with the purpose of God manifested in Jesus Christ.’ As such evangelism is the heart of mission.”<sup>34</sup> Bosch went on to state that evangelism

consists in the proclamation of salvation in Christ to non-believers, in announcing forgiveness of sins, in calling people to repentance and faith in Christ, in inviting them to become living members of Christ’s earthly community, and to begin a life in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bosch, “Mission and Evangelism,” 169.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

With the 1991 publication of his *magnum opus*, *Transforming Mission*, Bosch had slightly changed the equation. The meaning of mission was no longer clear:

We may, therefore, never arrogate it to ourselves to delineate mission too sharply and too self-confidently. Ultimately, mission remains undefinable; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections. The most we can hope for is to formulate some *approximations* of what mission is all about.<sup>36</sup>

This change in approach to the definition of mission may be related to Bosch's view on the relationship of Scripture to missiology. Regardless, Bosch maintained his 1984 definition of evangelism in *Transforming Mission*. Similarly, he maintained that mission is wider than evangelism, but moved away from regarding evangelism as the heart of mission, preferring to describe it as "an essential dimension of the total activity of the Church."<sup>37</sup>

Since I do not agree with Bosch about the definition of mission, I cannot agree with his formulation of a distinction between mission and evangelism. At the heart of this disagreement is a difference of methodology – Bosch did not seem to regard the exegesis of the Scriptures as a valid method to determine one's definitions.<sup>38</sup> In the approach taken with this paper, evangelism and mission are closer than Bosch would have allowed. In fact, they are nearly to be identified with one another. If we understand evangelism as a communication of the εὐαγγέλιον, then evangelism is what

<sup>36</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



the church has been sent to do: “preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ.” In other words the mission of the church is evangelism.

## Mission and Missions

Another oft-used distinction with which we have to reckon is the one between mission in the singular and missions in the plural. Bosch ties this distinction into the difference between the *missio Dei* and *missiones ecclesiae*. Mission is the *missio Dei* and missions are the *missiones ecclesiae*. Bosch writes, “‘Mission’ singular, remains primary; ‘missions’ in the plural, constitutes a derivative.”<sup>39</sup> Bosch’s distinction is predicated upon an acceptance of the concept of *missio Dei*. Bosch elaborates on the concept, “In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God.”<sup>40</sup> Insofar as God is one who seeks out that which is lost, there is a kernel of truth in this concept, however, J. DeJong argues that the notion of *missio Dei* is inadequate, as it “tends to blur the specific mandate given by Christ to his church”<sup>41</sup> Though mission begins with the eternal decree of the Father, it is historically executed through the mandate of the Son given to the church. In this picture, there is one mission. The church carries out the one mission given to her by Jesus Christ. While the *missio Dei* notion does underscore the Triune God’s involvement as the author and primary agent of mission (specifically through the work of the Holy Spirit), it cannot be used to make a meaningful distinction between mission and missions.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>41</sup> J. DeJong, “Even So I Send You,” 473.

Others take a different approach to the question. In the evangelical world, George Peters argued that mission was a more comprehensive term, referring to the total task of the church in the world: “It is the church as ‘sent’ (a pilgrim, stranger, witness, prophet, servant, as salt, as light, etc.) in this world.”<sup>42</sup> Peters maintained that missions are the actual work and “the practical realization of the mission of the church.”<sup>43</sup>

Biblically speaking, the distinction between “mission” and “missions” is groundless and indefensible. There is one mission given by Jesus Christ to the Church. Nevertheless, we recognize a common parlance in which missionaries speak about their mission, i.e. the organization under which they do their work. This comes close to the manner in which Peters expressed the distinction. The historical development of disparate churches or denominations involved with mission work is the only defensible explanation for the continuing use of the plural “missions.”

## Conclusion

It has been noted that the word “mission” often carries with it a negative connotation in our modern era. For that reason, some have considered whether it is necessary to retain the word in the life of the church. After all, some might argue, the word itself is not found in the Scriptures – though ἀποστέλλω comes close. Furthermore, the word has become worn out and unduly multivalent.<sup>44</sup> Despite all this, it

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<sup>42</sup> Cited by A. Scott Moreau, “Mission and Missions,” in EDWM, 637.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Klauspeter Blaser, “Should we stop using the term ‘mission’?” *International Review of Mission* 301 (January 1987), 68-71

is clear that the word is here to stay. Moreover, even if the word is not expressly used, the concept is no less derived from God's Word than the doctrine of the Trinity. Just as the doctrine of the Trinity required clear definition for the sake of purity and truth in the church, so also there is a strong need to be clear about the definition of mission.

The definition of mission matters because it is a matter of obedience to Christ. We cannot be slack in our obedience, rather we must exert ourselves to understand first what Christ would have us do, and second, how he would have us do it. This is the task of missiology, the science of missions. Missiology has the task of delineating the what and how of missions – and to be obedient to Christ, the task has to be undertaken in submission to the Scriptures.