



Spring 2012 · Vol. 41 No. 1 · pp. 81–96

Theological Foundations for Mission: Do We ‘Get’ the Big Picture?

Bryan Born and Mark Wessner

* To fully understand the mission of God we need to start at the beginning, with God’s original intention to establish a “good” creation characterized by righteousness and love, and then consider the far-reaching consequences of humanity’s rebellion. In addition, instead of leap-frogging the rest of the Old Testament in our quest to recognize the crucial importance of the cross of Christ, we must consider God’s plan for the people of Israel who were called to be “a light to the nations.” Following his resurrection,

We must understand that the cross of Christ deals with the consequences of human rebelliousness at all levels—spiritual, physical, intellectual, social, economic, environmental, and cosmic.

Jesus himself highlighted the close linkage of Israel’s calling, the cross, and mission in Luke 24:44–49. God’s mission is one of redemption, restoration and reconciliation of all that he has created. As with the Old Testament people of God and the first Christians, the challenge for us as the church is to partner with God in his all-encompassing mission.

We are arguing that the Old Testament provides the essential foundation for a proper understanding of New Testament mission theology and practice. We will return to this passage near the conclusion of this article, but for now we want to highlight three key points from Jesus’ conversation with his disciples after the Emmaus Road experience (Luke 24:44–47 NIV, *passim*). First, Jesus employed the entire Old Testament (Law, Prophets, and



Spring 2012
Vol. 41 No. 1

pp. 81–96

Article subjects

- ◆ [Mission/International Church](#)
- ◆ [Theology: Biblical and Systematic](#)

Psalms) when instructing his disciples. Second, he “opened their minds” to enable them to understand that the Scriptures pointed directly to the death and resurrection of the Messiah. And third, he highlighted the missional imperative of the Old Testament—repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all the nations. “The Old Testament, argues Jesus, leads both to the Messiah and to mission—and that is how disciples of Jesus (whose minds have been opened by him to understand it) must read it” (Wright, “Whose World?”).

MANY YEARS AGO...

Think back to when you were young. Perhaps you were in elementary school or high school. In that context, what were some of the stories that you were forbidden to read, watch, or listen to? The question that follows, of course, is *why* were certain stories “off limits,” as declared by your parents, teachers, or someone else?

Stories have the amazing, and perhaps unequaled, ability to influence our lives, our worldviews, and even our actions and behaviors. Stories shape us. One doesn’t need to look far in order to see this reality at work. There are many categories in and through which stories, or narratives, are at work, and we will highlight just three.

Family stories. Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone for the first time, and within minutes you thought to yourself, “This person must be a *Smith*”? It might have been their attitude, their continual reference to an event or experience, or even their posture (pride or shame). There was something about the person that caused you to almost instinctively identify their family background. In that context, you were sensing part of the family story that they were functioning with.

Cultural stories. In North America, one of the dominant stories is the self-identity of the American people. Whenever and wherever an American describes what it means to be American, almost inevitably, the foundational experience of “independence” is emphasized. Whether in reference to an official event in 1776, the driving essence behind the entrepreneurial spirit, or in the context of foreign policy, “independence” is the cultural story that has shaped the American psyche.

Religious Stories. Religion and spirituality, of course, have tremendous stories to share as well. In the context of recent history,

is it possible to have a conversation about what it means to be Jewish without referencing the story of the Holocaust? Can we talk about Islam without referencing certain political and/or military events? Or can we speak of Hinduism without having a picture of Gandhi come to mind?

Stories shape our realities. Whether we unconsciously assume the stories as part of our lives or we consciously embrace them, stories influence how we see and respond to the world around us.

A recent trend in the Western world has been to individualize our spirituality and reshape religion to be about ourselves, and there is danger in that. When we see ourselves as the sole creators of our own stories, and when we neglect the realities that are bigger than us, we can accidentally become designers of our own truth, our own values, and our own mission. And inevitably, our “truth” benefits us, often at the expense of others.

MISSION AND STORY

What is the connection between mission and story? The answer, we believe, is both simple and profound. Our mission is an expression of our story. And in many cases, our theology is also an expression of our story—at least the story with which we identify.

Most of the time we think, talk, act, and plan in ways that are generally consistent with the stories that have shaped our lives. If part of my story is the experience of being raised by a single parent, it will likely influence the church ministries that I am involved in. If part of my story involves significant drug addiction and an experience of freedom, it will probably influence the kind of people I am attracted to, and also how I talk with them. If my story tells me that God’s primary salvific concern is for my particular soul, it will influence my concept of, and participation in, mission.

If “story” is profoundly foundational, and if “mission” is an expression of our story, do we, as followers of God, know the story that we are a part of? And do we know the whole story? An incomplete story will result in an incomplete mission.

To work through the relationship of story and mission, as a way of identifying the theological foundations for mission, we will cover four primary areas—cosmos, calling, cross, and commission. It is important to note that there are many more areas to consider if one is to arrive at a fully orbbed theological understanding of

mission. Our purpose here is introductory.

MISSION AND THE COSMOS

If we turn our minds to “God’s story” for a moment, what do we see? Who is God and what is he all about? What or who is the focus of God’s mission? Where do we fit into what God has done, is doing, and will do in the future?

To start to answer these questions, we need to start at the beginning. Specifically, we will look at the first eleven chapters of Genesis, from two different perspectives: we will use the human response to the freedom given by God as described in Genesis 3 as the turning point, and will explore both the “before” and “after” pictures.

From the beginning, God’s activities and interests were cosmic. His eyes were on all of “the heavens and the earth,” not just the earth, and certainly not on humanity alone. The merism “heavens and earth” occurs throughout the Old Testament, and is often associated with God’s role as creator (Gen. 1:1; 2:1, 4; 14:19, 22; Isa. 42:5; 65:17). The sense and usage of the term is that God created everything, whether known or unknown by humankind at the time. Starting with the very first words of Genesis, God’s scope, his arena, has been cosmic.

At six different times during the days of creation, God assessed what had been done and he observed to himself that it was good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). At the end of the sixth day, as he surveyed all that he had made—the entire created cosmos—God concluded that everything was not just good, it was *very good* (1:31). Then, God stopped and rested, likely not out of fatigue, but rather out of satisfied contentment that everything was complete (2:1). It was all just as he had intended.

As God completed his work on day five of creation, he issued a command to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill.” This command was not directed toward humanity, but rather toward the living creatures in the seas and every kind of winged bird in the sky (Gen. 1:22). The next day, God issued the identical command to the male and female whom he had just created (Gen. 1:28). And finally, after the tragic events of the Flood, God reiterated his original command to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill” to Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1). Clearly, God built in (and expected) an element of ongoing multiplication based on the original creation,

from generation to generation. As we will see in the next section, however, both positive and negative elements are able to “increase in number and fill.”

In and through the process of creation, God ensured that the entire created reality, not just humanity, was good, was designed to carry on from generation to generation, and was somehow connected to God himself. Everything, however, was about to change.

When Adam and Eve chose to act on their own wisdom rather than God’s, the world literally changed—not just for them, but for all of creation. Christopher Wright uses four categories (Wright, *Mission*, 40) to catalogue the devastating impact the sin had upon the created world, and we will expand them in this paper to show their cosmic impact.

Physical

- ◆ *Pain*. The introduction of sin brought physical pain into the world, for both the woman during childbirth (Gen. 3:16), and the man during manual labor (Gen. 3:17).
- ◆ *Curse*. As a direct result of human sin, the ground itself became cursed, became difficult to cultivate, and produced thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17–18).
- ◆ *Murder*. Within a very short timeframe, the first murder occurred—the first intentional destruction of human life (Gen. 4:8).
- ◆ *Natural Disaster*. Animal, bird, and human life was destroyed by the first “natural disaster” due to ongoing and increasing wickedness (Gen. 6–7).

Intellectual

- ◆ *Avoidance of Responsibility*. After being questioned by God, both Adam and Eve immediately avoided answering God’s questions, and did not “own” their actions (Gen. 3:12–13).
- ◆ *Normalized Sin*. Wickedness and evil became accepted and expected throughout humanity (Gen. 6:5).
- ◆ *Self-Sufficiency*. Reminiscent of the “fall” itself, humanity later banded together with the belief that they could determine their own identity.

Social

- ◆ *Blame*. Not only did sin result in personal responsibility being

avoided by both Adam and Eve, but they also had the audacity to try to shift the blame to others (Gen. 3:12–13).

- ◆ *Marital Strain.* The sinful desire for self-determination spilled over into the very first marriage, shattering the original unity (Gen. 3:16).
- ◆ *Family Tension.* Brother attacked brother (Gen. 4:8–9), man killed man (Gen. 4:23), and father cursed son (Gen. 9:24–25).
- ◆ *Fear.* Rather than living in unity, humans now feared each other (Gen. 4:14).

Spiritual

- ◆ *Fear of God.* The first consequence of sinfully rejecting God's instruction was fear. Fear of God himself (Gen. 3:10).
- ◆ *Alienation from God.* Although humanity was formed from the ground in the Garden, sin caused humanity to be banished from the presence of God in the Garden (Gen. 3:23).

God's original design encompassed all of reality (both physical and non-physical), and since the problem of sin has invaded all aspects of the cosmos, the only satisfactory solution must also impact the entire created order.

MISSION AND CALLING

The creation and the fall narrative provide us with the essential foundation for understanding God's universal purposes with regard to all humanity. It is common for Christians to view the Old Testament as an explanation of why God had to send Jesus to save us. God's first plan was for the people of Israel to fulfill his purposes, but when they proved the utter inability of humans to live righteously, God sent Jesus to effect salvation. When viewed this way, the story of the people of Israel has little meaning to us, except as an example (mostly bad).

However, there is another way to understand the story. Beginning in Genesis 12:1–3, we find that God established a covenant with Abram, promising him that he would become a great nation and that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through him" (Gen. 12:3). Abram's descendants, the people of Israel, were elected for the sake of the nations. The Apostle Paul highlights the significance of these words in Galatians 3:8. "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the *gospel in advance* to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through

you.’” This text clearly demonstrates that God is the author of mission—he initiates, blesses, saves, and sends; he created a holy nation according to his purposes.

Following the narrative of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the story of the Exodus stands out as the defining moment in the history of the people of Israel. At Mount Sinai Yahweh established a covenant with his people, and in the process of doing so provided three key descriptors for the Israelites—“God’s treasured possession,” “a kingdom of priests,” and “a holy nation” (Exod. 19:3–6). In light of the declaration in Exodus 19:5, “for all the earth is mine,” the description of Israel as “God’s treasured possession” stands out. Israel was unique because God had an especially important role for his people to play in salvation history. “Her life was to give clear evidence of Yahweh’s rule over her, and thus to be a model of his lordship over the whole world” (Köstenberger and O’Brien, 34). Israel’s calling was global in scope.

The second identifier, “a kingdom of priests,” has two critical elements. First, we see that the people of Israel were to serve as a sign or symbol of God’s reign on earth. God’s intent was that they would embody a kingdom of *shalom*, where God’s righteousness, justice, and peace would reign supreme. The covenant invited Israel to enjoy peace with God, with themselves, with others in community, and with all creation. Yahweh’s kingdom was to be characterized by his own passion for justice, integrity, and compassion, with a special concern for the weak, poor, and marginalized (Deut. 10:12–22). Second, all of Israel was called to live as a nation of priests—intermediaries between the God who had revealed himself to them and the pagan nations around them. Through devotion to their covenant relationship with Yahweh, they were intended to direct their neighbors to the one true God.

The final descriptor, “a holy nation,” emphasized that Israel had been completely set apart for God’s purposes. Although holiness has often been understood in terms of separation from the world, it would be better to think of it in terms of “difference” from the world. Ken Esau of Columbia Bible College has coined the term, “Wow, weird!” to describe Israel’s approach to mission. The people of Israel were designed to have such a different way of life that the nations surrounding them would be so surprised that they would ask, “Who are these people, and who is this Yahweh, the God they worship?” As Wright points out, “What sets Yahweh apart is not

that he looks different, but that he calls for a people who will look different, with a different way of life, a different social order, and a different dynamic of worship” (*Deuteronomy*, 51). Mission in the Old Testament should be understood in centripetal terms. As the nations witnessed the difference Israel’s covenant with Yahweh made in their community life, Israel would attract the nations.

Israel—Light to the Nations

Israel’s missional role as an attractive force, drawing the nations towards Yahweh through their covenant faithfulness, is highlighted by another Old Testament description of the people of God—light to the nations (see Isa. 42:5–7). As Yahweh’s treasured possession, they served as a light illuminating the reality of the one true God. A major thrust throughout the entire Old Testament is to demonstrate that Yahweh is God, and no other gods are worthy. Israel’s way of life, their commitment to justice, humility, and mercy (Micah 6:8) was to provide evidence of this truth. Commenting on Isaiah 46, John Piper underscores this point: “The difference between the true God and the gods of the nations is that the true God carries and the other gods must be carried. God serves, they must be served. God glorifies his might by showing mercy. They glorify theirs by gathering slaves. So the vision of God as one whose passion for his glory moves him to mercy impels missions because he is utterly unique among all the gods” (Piper, 51). Israel’s mission was not a matter of going but of being, to be what God called them to be, to exemplify the utter uniqueness of Yahweh’s reign of shalom in the sight of the nations.

Suffering Servant

However, we all know that the people of Israel largely failed to live up to God’s purpose for them. They, too, were still in need of forgiveness, redemption and cleansing. But in the Servant Songs of Isaiah, Yahweh reveals that he will still accomplish his purposes through them. Israel’s corporate identity is fused together with that of the Suffering Servant who will bring hope and healing to the nations. The mission of the Suffering Servant embodied justice, compassion, and liberation (Isa. 42:1–9), but it would also involve rejection and apparent failure (Isa. 49:4; 50:6–8). However, God would vindicate his Servant, and his mission would be extended to include all the nations of the earth (Isa. 49:6). Isaiah 52:13–15 describes this reality: “See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many

who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness—so *he will sprinkle many nations*, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand” (Isa. 52:13–15).

In this way, the mission of the Servant would fulfill God’s original intentions for the people of Israel. This is the Old Testament hope for the nations—the Suffering Servant would take upon himself all the consequences of our sin, suffering for our rebellion against the one true God.

MISSION OF THE CROSS

When we understand God’s missional intentions with the people of Israel, then Jesus’ role as the Suffering Servant who inaugurates the reign of God stands out all the more. The Gospel accounts clearly emphasize that Jesus knew he had been sent on a mission. “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (John 4:34). He understood the purpose of his mission (cf. Matt. 9:12–13; Luke 19:10; John 10:10), and he was fully aware that his death would be necessary (cf. Mark 8:31–32; 10:45; John 12:23–33). When considering Jesus’ mission, the missing element at times is the vital connection between his role as the initiator of a new kingdom and his death and resurrection. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus’ public ministry begins with the gospel announcement that the reign of God is at hand (1:14–15). In the unique person of Jesus Christ, God’s reign was made clearly visible. As many biblical scholars have noted, the reign of God is not so much a place as the domain or rule of God’s power. The kingdom is “not a realm to be entered but an event to be experienced” (Marcus, 674–75). When Jesus called people to repent and believe, he was inviting them to get on board with what God was already doing in the world.

Luke records Jesus’ synagogue sermon in Nazareth where he reads from Isaiah 61:1–2. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). When Jesus declared that Isaiah’s prophecy was being fulfilled before their eyes, he was teaching

them that the Kingdom was in a real sense present—a new order had arrived. Graham Cray spells out the implications: “In the anointing of the Spirit upon Jesus, we see the inauguration of an era which is characterized by forgiveness of sin, physical healing, deliverance from demonic oppression, restoration of liberty, the end of oppression, the initiation of major social and economic reform, an end to nationalism and hostility, and the availability of God’s favor to all who will respond—although it is especially offered to the poor as the King intervenes to restore justice” (Cray, 38).

Furthermore, the Kingdom was powerful not just in terms of the miracles Jesus performed but in terms of how he called people to live—he called for an upside-down kingdom. He was announcing Good News for all who are willing to admit their need—the poor, the sick, sinners, all of the oppressed. This was Good News that would make an immediate difference—not a “pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die” utopian message.

Why stress the connection between the kingdom of God and the cross? It is on account of Western Christianity’s tendency to interpret the gospel message as an individualized “spiritual” experience that has little impact on the world. Some forty years ago, missionary E. Stanley Jones addressed this issue: “Many took the gospel of the kingdom in a modified form as a personal, spiritual refuge in which they could run and be safe now or as a place of reward in heaven. They didn’t reject it, they reduced it. And in reducing it they rendered it innocuous now. It wasn’t God’s total plan and program for life, now, but a reward thrown in at the end.” And more recently, Darrell Guder has written: “The tendency to individualize God’s gift of salvation, to separate it from God’s healing purposes for the world, must be rejected as unbiblical....I have elsewhere used the term ‘reductionism’ in reference to this focus on the individual benefits of salvation to the exclusion of the missionary duty that accompanies the calling to follow Christ and I regard it as the pervasive problem of Western Christianity” (Graham, 29). We must understand that the cross of Christ deals with the consequences of human rebelliousness at all levels—spiritual, physical, intellectual, social, economic, environmental, and cosmic.

As Jesus is the one who makes kingdom life possible, five consequences of human sinfulness are directly addressed by means of Christ’s redeeming work on the cross.

1. Jesus dealt with the guilt, shame, and fear created by human sin and rebelliousness.

On account of Christ's sacrificial death, we have been set free from the consequences of our sin. At the cross, the wrath of God is satisfied by Jesus' faithful obedience (Rom. 3:21–26), and we are now forgiven and reconciled to God (Rom. 5:8–9; Eph. 3:12). "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Furthermore, Jesus willingly took our shame upon himself, becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13; Heb. 12:2). We are welcomed home as children of God, co-heirs with Christ, free to embrace God as *Abba*, Father (Rom. 8:1–17; also Heb. 2:11). Because of Christ's atoning sacrifice for our sins, our lives are characterized by love, not fear (1 John 4:9–19). The cross of Christ brings forgiveness from guilt, freedom from fear, cleansing from shame, reconciliation with God, healing and hope.

2. Jesus defeated the powers of evil.

It was precisely at the cross that Christ emerged victorious over the power of Satan and his forces (1 Cor. 2:6–8). "Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself" (Aulén, 4). On both personal and corporate levels, God in Christ "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Col. 1:13). The Apostle John tells us that Jesus came for the express purpose of destroying the devil's work (1 John 3:8). On a personal level we find that the power of sin and Satan has been broken by the self-giving love of Jesus, and the Spirit of Christ empowers us to live in righteousness. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). Furthermore, we are assured that the cross of Christ has broken the demonic grip of Satan's personal and structural/systemic forces which oppress, crush, and ruin human life. "At the cross, the kingdom of God conquers evil, not by superior force, but because Jesus takes upon himself the full brunt of sin and exhausts its power" (Goheen, 105). As the Apostle Paul writes in Colossians 2:15: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The victory has been

won!

3. **Jesus destroyed the power of death.**

Adam and Eve were warned that sin would result in death, but because of Jesus' sacrifice we now have life. Quoting Isaiah and Hosea, Paul joyously exclaims, " 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54b–57). Paul understood the significance of living at death's door. Those of us who have had the privilege of ministering to the dying, who have had the joy of introducing people to Jesus in their last moments of life, understand Paul's depth of emotion. Jesus said, "The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). When reflecting upon the amazing gift of eternal life in Christ, it is best to simply quote God's Word: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14).

4. **Jesus broke down the barriers of enmity.**

We should glory in the amazing gift of personal salvation, but we must also realize that Jesus' death on the cross effected reconciliation, not just on the individual level between us and God, but also on the broader social level, calling for the re-establishment of God's intention for *shalom* between all peoples engaged in conflict. "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (Eph. 2:15b–16). "Ancient divisions are healed, and those once estranged are now fellow citizens in the household of God, together with the apostles and prophets, in a new society built upon Christ the cornerstone" (Schreiter, 83). Having been reconciled to God through Christ's death, we are now new creations, empowered to serve as Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration in a world of sin and strife (2 Cor. 5:14–21). The missional implications of Christ's reconciling work are immense.

5. Jesus healed and restored his whole creation.

When we consider the world around us today, we may struggle to grasp the cosmic dimensions of Christ's death and resurrection. Yet that is exactly what the cross is all about—it is the undoing of all the physical, spiritual, social, economic, political, environmental, and cosmic evil unleashed into the world by our sin and rebellion against the Sovereign Creator of the universe. The mission of God includes the liberation and restoration of his whole creation in Christ (Rom. 8:19–22; Eph. 1:9–10). “And at the cross God accomplished this, in anticipation, even though we do not yet see it finally completed” (Wright, *Salvation*, 186).

God's cosmic mission of reconciling “all things” to himself is most forcefully described by the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:15–20:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him *all things* were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things* have been created through him and for him. He is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

What more can be said, except that God has invited us to be partners in his astounding mission.

MISSION AND COMMISSION

Mission and the cosmos, mission and calling, mission, and the cross. Now what? How does a modern follower of Jesus integrate the mission of God into everyday life? Put another way, how do we live the reality and mission of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, both personally and vocationally?

For followers of God prior to Jesus, religious life, political self-identity, and missional thinking were all shaped by one *foundational experience*—the Exodus. The Torah, with its description of creation, fall, calling, redemption, and law, formed the *literary foundation* for all Israelite interaction with the rest of the world.

By means of various personal practices and national events, the people were frequently called to remember that they *were slaves* in Egypt (Exod. 13:3; Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22). The text of the Torah also reminded them that they *were redeemed* from the land of Egypt (Exod. 13:3; Deut. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 21:8).

For the first Christians, the centrality of the Exodus was absorbed (but not erased) by the centrality of the cross. According to Wright, Jesus saw his own redemptive actions as an extension of the Exodus:

The clearest reference to the exodus in the Gospels comes when Jesus met with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. According to Luke “they were talking about his exodus that he intended to fulfill in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31, my translation)...Specifically, they were referring to the fulfillment of “exodus”, achieved for national Israel under Moses, now to be achieved for the world by Jesus. His imminent and fully intended death would constitute God’s great act of redemption. (Wright, *Mission*, 103)

Of course, there are many New Testament references to the centrality of the cross, not only in connection with the redemption of humanity, but also as the central focus of Christian life and mission. Power, reconciliation, forgiveness, and more are associated with the cross in 1 Corinthians 1:17–18, 22–24; Galatians 6:14; Colossians 1:20; and 2:14. The core question then is, *how do we, today, live the reality and mission of the cross, both personally and vocationally?*

MISSION, COMMISSION AND LUKE 24

In our opening discussion we referred to one of the disciples’ first, and possibly the most enlightening, encounters with the newly resurrected Jesus as recorded in Luke 24. After eating with the astonished disciples, Jesus commissioned them with the following

words:

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. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:46–49)

Let's look at three key terms in Jesus' conversation with his overwhelmed followers.

Witness. What is a witness? As we see in the passages below, a witness is someone who has experiential knowledge that results in missional action.

Acts 1:8—"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be **my witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts 2:32–33—"God has raised this Jesus to life, and **we are all witnesses** of it."

Hebrews 11:1–12:3—"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such **a great cloud of witnesses**, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."

1 John 4:13–14—"And **we have seen and testify** that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world."

Revelation 2:13—"You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, **my faithful witness**, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives."

Notice that the references above describe people who lived before, during, and after the cross as "witnesses." God has always called his followers to be his witnesses. While the object of the witness has shifted from Exodus to cross, the imperative to be a witness has not changed. The Greek term that is translated as witness is *marturo/martureo*, from which we get "martyr"—the ultimate expression of witness.

Moving from past to present, then, the question is, in what sense is a modern follower of Jesus a witness to the cross? Have you or I experienced the reality of Jesus? Has our experience with Jesus motivated us to embrace and express the all-encompassing

mission of God?

Sending or being sent cannot exist in isolation. It always takes two parties—one to do the sending, and one to be sent. The mission of God and his people works the same way. If our understanding of “witness” has a missional focus, so too does our understanding of “send/sent.”

As we look at the following passages, the theme of being sent from or by God for his missional purpose is evident:

John 20:21–22—“As the Father has **sent me**, I am **sending you**.”

Acts 10:34–36—“You know **the message God sent** to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”

Acts 28:28—“Therefore I want you to know that God’s **salvation has been sent** to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

Romans 10:14–15—“And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they **are sent?**”

1 Peter 1:12—“It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit **sent from heaven**.”

1 John 4:9, 14—“He **sent his one and only Son** into the world that we might live through him...And we have seen and testify that the Father has **sent his Son** to be the Savior of the world.”

God is a sending God. His people are a sent people. The Greek term used in these verses is *apostello*. Somehow, in and through God’s missional methodology, his people, his truth, and he himself become intimately connected and work together to achieve his grand purposes. We, as followers of God, are sent out as the mission of God!

The Spirit. If followers of God are first and foremost *witnesses* of the reality of Jesus, and are *sent* out to be and act as missionaries for God, one question remains. *How* are followers of God sent out to be missional witnesses?

In many contexts, and at many times throughout history, the

question of *how* has sometimes been understood as a question of methodology. But perhaps that is insufficient. If we are witnesses of God, sent *by* God, then it just might be that we are sent *with* God.

Let's review a few verses again, and see the role that God himself plays in his followers' transformation and participation in his mission.

John 20:21–22—“And with that he breathed on them and said, **'Receive the Holy Spirit.'**”

Romans 7:6—“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in **the new way of the Spirit**, and not in the old way of the written code.”

1 Corinthians 2:4–5—“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a **demonstration of the Spirit's power**, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.”

1 Corinthians 12:7, 11—“Now to each one **the manifestation of the Spirit** is given for the common good...All these are **the work of one and the same Spirit**, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.”

Galatians 5:16—“So I say, **walk by the Spirit**, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

Revelation 22:17—“**The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'** And let the one who hears say, 'Come!'”

Imagine that the verses above are more than just words on a page. Imagine being infused by God with missional power! Imagine being a part of God's mission with God himself!

Not surprisingly, the themes of missional knowledge (witness), missional purpose (sent), and missional power (Spirit) are evident long before the first Christians spread out throughout the Mediterranean Basin after the day of Pentecost. God was not doing something new, but rather, he was simply working with his followers in the same way that he had been since the time of the Exodus. Moses himself incorporated all three elements into his life and ministry.

The closing words of the Torah (Deut. 34:10–12) provide a remarkable and precise summary of Moses as an unequalled prophet. Lying beneath our English translations is a tightly

structured description of the three elements that encapsulated Moses' mission. Moses was:

- ◆ “known by God face to face,” a clear reference to the personal, intimate relationship between the two. Moses was an unparalleled witness of the reality and heart of the God of Israel.
- ◆ “sent by God,” a description of whose mission it was (the LXX has *apostellō*).
- ◆ “with great power and might,” a repetition of the same language used to describe God's miraculous work through the Exodus (cf. Deut. 4:34; 26:8; Jer. 32:21).

The same three themes emerge—intimate knowledge/experience, being sent, reliance on and the display of God's power.

This leads us to ask three reflective questions for individuals and church communities:

1. To what extent do I have a personal experience with God that causes me to be a witness?
2. To what extent do I understand my sense of calling or mission?
3. To what extent do I rely on, and expect, the power of the Spirit to be on display in and through my life?

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have attempted to provide an over-arching theology of mission based on four key themes found within the grand narrative of Scripture: cosmos, calling, cross, and commission. The specific calling of the people of Israel within the cosmic scope of God's salvation plan is underscored by Paul's statement that Scripture announced the “gospel in advance” in God's promise to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you” (Gal. 3:8). Jesus Christ embodied that promise and proclaimed the Kingdom message of God's mission of love to restore the world to wholeness through his death and resurrection. “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we may receive the promise of the Spirit” (Gal. 3:14). The cross effected forgiveness of sin, victory over the demonic powers of Satan and death, reconciliation with God and one another, and the creation of a Spirit-filled community empowered to exemplify and make

known his reign of shalom here and now. This is a Good News message of liberation, restoration, wholeness, and salvation that is personal, social, global, and cosmic.

* This paper is based on a workshop conducted by the authors at “The Mystery of the Cross” conference held at the Kitchener Mennonite Brethren Church (Ontario), October 27–29, 2011.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aulén, Gustaf. *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. New York: Macmillan, 1969 (1931).
- Bjoraker, William. “How do Cultures Really Change? A Challenge to the Conventional Culture Wisdom.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28, no. 1 (2011): 13–22.
- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991.
- Cray, Graham. “A Theology of the Kingdom.” In *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel*, edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, 26–44. Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999.
- Goheen, Michael W. *A Light to the Nations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011.
- Graham, Bruce. “The Unshakeable Anchor in a Shakable Globalizing World.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28, no. 1 (2011): 23–31.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J., and Peter T. O’Brien. *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.
- Marcus, Joel. “Entering into the Kingly Power of God.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 4 (1988): 663–75.
- Piper, John. “Let the Nations be Glad!” In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3rd ed., edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 49–54. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999.
- Schreiter, Robert J. “Reconciliation and Healing as a Paradigm for Mission.” *International Review of Mission* 94 (2005): 74–83.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *Deuteronomy*. NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.
- . *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.
- . *Salvation Belongs to Our God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007.
- . “Whose World? Whose Mission?” <http://www.neac.info/talks/211145cw.pdf>.

Bryan Born is the director of the Intercultural Studies Program at Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, B.C. He formerly served as a

Bible teacher with MB Mission in Botswana and Lesotho, Africa. Mark Wessner is the lead pastor at Westwood Mennonite Brethren Church in Prince George, B.C. He is also an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at American Public University, and a Christian Studies Instructor at the University of Northern British Columbia.

ID: 8:13 #104:1666

© 2012 *Direction* (Winnipeg, MB).