

God's mission: the goal of history

Alex Bunn asks what is mission?



What do you see as the end or goal of history? Many Westerners hope for the establishment of liberal free market democracies around the world. Others despair at the looming environmental catastrophes threatening to convulse the planet. Many atheists assume that humanity is an accident of nature heading for extinction, at least by the time the sun fizzles out. But the biblical narrative tells of a sovereign God whose goal in history is to form a people for himself, for the praise of his glory in eternity.¹

Here's where mission comes in. What does that word mean to you? A short trip abroad in your summer holidays? Dispensing medical care with Christian motives? Righting an injustice? The word comes from the Latin *mittere* 'to send'. But it's confusing when a simple word is used in different ways. For example, many NHS trusts have their own 'mission statement' about the care they provide.² But Christian mission connects to the story of God redeeming his creation. Mission is a response to God's *sending* his people to complete this urgent task.



Alex Bunn is a GP in London and CMF Associate Head of Student Ministries

Theologians suggest four models of mission.³ *Missio Dei* is the mission or sending of God, who invites us to be co-workers.⁴ However some people expand *Missio Dei* to include everything God might will to do in the world, including compassionate medicine and care of the environment, irrespective of who does it. But in the biblical narrative 'salvation does not exist in history beyond the church and... the kingdom of God comes only as Christ is acknowledged as king.'⁵ Secondly mission could be fulfilling the *cultural mandate*, filling and ruling the world he sent us into.⁶ But that does seem too broad, and downplays the urgent priority Jesus gave to the gospel message. The *social action* model prioritises acts of compassion and justice in a needy world. But everybody can't do everything. What do people need most? We may be so disturbed by harrowing images in the media of crises – refugees, victims of conflict, drought, and disease – that we forget the eternal lostness of those who are without God and without hope. This need may be relatively invisible, despite being more serious.⁷

making disciples of all nations

Mission that isn't Jesus centred misses the most important sending of all: the sending of God's son to give us eternal life.⁸ This model reflects the Bible's main narrative of God's grand plan to make disciples of all nations:

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' (Matthew 28:18-20)

Without it, is a church really being church? 'The Church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning. Where there is no mission, there is no church'.⁹

Let's take a tour of the scriptures to see why

making disciples of all nations is the primary meaning of mission.

a biblical tour of mission

Why is mission even needed? Because we were made to worship and delight in the infinitely valuable, excellent and praise-worthy God, who alone would satisfy us. Instead we exchanged him for objects unworthy of our devotion, which don't love us back. The result was a world filled with folly, frustration and futility.¹⁰ Enter the God who grieves: when our mutiny wrecked our deepest relationships.¹¹ The God who yet yearns for us and pursues us: when we weren't looking for him, he came looking for us in the Garden of Eden. He has been asking 'where are you?'¹² ever since. His unreasonable love would spare nothing to save what was lost.¹³ The Bible is primarily this story of God's loving rescue mission to the peoples who rejected him, and restore worship to his world.

the sovereign God of history

But where would God's people come from? Contrary to popular opinion, the God of the Bible does not align with any particular tribe, nation or culture.¹⁴ He has no favourites, because he is the God of all nations:

'From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.' (Acts 17:26-27)

But following the fall, there was not much hope that men would seek and find him on their own. Noah was an unusually righteous man, but even he needed a miraculous intervention to save his family. Early cities such as Babel merely amplified man's defiance against his maker.¹⁵ So 3,000 years ago God called and sent one man, Abraham, to begin his epic mission to reach all peoples on earth:

*'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.'*
(Genesis 12:2-3)

Israel, a great nation

Abraham couldn't have imagined it would take almost two millennia for this promise to be fulfilled through his descendants, ultimately in Christ. It's been called the longest example of theological education in history! But it was first fulfilled in Israel. Moses saw the breathtaking privilege of Israel's place in history, a nation to showcase God's glory to the nations:

'What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?'
(Deuteronomy 4:7)

The highpoint of Israel's history was David's kingdom, when at least one nation seemed to be under God's kingly rule and blessing. God promised to establish David's kingly line over an eternal kingdom:

'I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.' (2 Samuel 7:12-13)

But when Israel's rejection of their God led to exile and the end of the monarchy in 597BC, hope turned to despair. What had happened to God's promises? How would they be God's pipeline of blessing to all mankind? The prophets foresaw another rescue, another exodus:

'In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria... The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along

with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."' (Isaiah 19:23-25)

Even Israel's enemies would have an opportunity to experience their own 'exodus'. This may have seemed outrageous to Israel, that their bitterest foes would have equal status as God's chosen people. Enemies who had enslaved, besieged and deported their countrymen. But this was a God without borders. He would send a 'servant' to make his mission truly global, as intended from the beginning:

'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.'
(Isaiah 49:6)

Christ the hope of the nations¹⁶

Today it is difficult to be optimistic about world peace and harmony, who can achieve it? Surely not even the United Nations. But eventually the nations will find their hope in a man who can. Because finally, where Adam and Israel failed, God sent his son on the greatest missionary journey: from heaven to earth, to do what we couldn't do for ourselves.¹⁷ He was the true Adam,¹⁸ a king in David's line¹⁹ and the true Israel.²⁰ He would fulfill all the promises made in the Old Testament, not just for Israel, but for his 'other sheep'.²¹ In the new was revealed what in the old was concealed: God's global purposes in history. Finally through him, all nations would worship and glorify God for his magnificent mercy:

'For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.' (Romans 15:8-9)

Through his triumph on the cross, he would finally bring that eternal kingdom that would fill

the earth²² and be its rightful king.²³

*'You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and
people and nation.*

*You have made them to be a kingdom and
priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.'*

(Revelation 5:9-10)

two epochs

So where does that leave us today? Previously, God let the nations 'go their own way'²⁴ and overlooked ignorance, 'but now' God calls all people everywhere to turn to Christ before he returns.²⁵

The coming of Christ was such a decisive event in world history that it divided into two: BC and AD.

It was a 'mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God' but now he intends that 'through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known'.²⁶ We are incredibly privileged to live in the gospel age, for which our forebears in faith yearned. The goal of history, God's mission to the nations, is coming to its climax. 'Even angels long to look into these things' (1 Peter 1:12).

Cornelius is an interesting example. Peter responds to his vision by declaring that God 'accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right'.²⁷ Some argue that those who honour God do not need to hear the gospel as they are already Christians without knowing his name. But even people of good character and god

fearers need to hear the message in words they can understand: Cornelius was told to send for Peter who would 'bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved' (Acts 11:14). Paul sums up the missionary imperative in our gospel age:

'How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' (Romans 10:14)

worship: the end and goal of mission

Mission is so important that the future of the world depends on it: 'And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come' (Matthew 24:14). When Christ returns to renew earth it will be filled with 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language', worshipping before the throne of the Lamb,²⁸ which is the final goal of mission. White-hot worship by a diverse international throng, finding satisfaction in Christ and declaring his praises.

So today, mission exists because worship doesn't. All of history is moving towards that goal, the ecstatic exaltation of God's worthy son amongst all the peoples of earth. What a privilege to be part of God's purposes for his world. Do you have God's heart for the outsider? How might he be sending you to continue his work? This edition of *Nucleus* is packed with ideas of how to participate in God's mission through medicine. How will you join in? ■

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