



An Evangelical Understanding of The *Missio Dei* as Inclusion of Social Justice: A Critical Theological Reflection

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Abstract

The term missionary was initially employed in its contemporary sense for emissaries of the Pope and the royal families of Portugal and also Spain who were sent to convert people to Catholicism. Over the last two hundred years, the evangelical idea of mission has been inclined to be defined by people various theological scholars and some have concentrated on the "Great Commission" of Matthew 28. This article critically calls for a re-evaluation of the understanding of mission of within Evangelicalism that focuses on evangelism to be reconstructed to the Integral understanding of the *Missio Dei* which is a Latin Christian theological term that is generally translated as the "mission of God," or the "sending of God." It is a notion which has become progressively significant in missiology and in obtaining a clear understanding the mission of the church. This refocusing, positions God, the Father, at the centre of his mission and through Jesus Christ invites his church to participate with him on mission. This radical shift, calls for an understanding that the church is on a mission and this mission includes the praxis of social justice. While the contemporary Western world is preoccupied with individualism a belief in the Holy Trinity impels us to be concerned about relationships and society and social justice in general, and thus the values of individual accomplishment in a materialistic world and inter-person and national rivalries must take up very little, if any time at all.

Keywords: Mission, social justice, evangelical, soteriology, praxis.

Introduction

Swinton and Mowat (2006:6) argue, that theological reflection is critical reflection "on the practice of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practice in, to and for the world." Browning (1985:15) elaborates when he argues that "theology must be more than methodological; theology must be done in such that it "illuminates Christian practice in the religion to life's concrete problems and issues".

Thus, theology has to read and understand the signs of the times to respond to current challenges with the conviction that the transforming power of the Gospel is relevant and remains true in every context of human existence. The understanding of the *Missio Dei* when correctly promoted, can contribute to building strong communities of faith, the transformation of communities and nations. To reach this end, theology should constantly strive and reinvent itself to the challenges it faces from within the Church, the society, other religions and its local context, more specifically in South



Africa as the church becomes the agency through which the compassion and justice of God are revealed.

Theological Influence within Evangelicalism

Bebbington (2006:21) explains that Evangelicals places emphasis on the atoning work of Christ on the cross (crucicentism); the need for personal faith through conversion (conversionism) the supreme value of the Bible (biblicism) and the binding obligation to missions (activism) formed the “enduring priorities of the evangelical movement throughout the English-speaking world”. This soterian centred (evangelism) focus had created a dysfunctional understanding of the Gospel and the *Missio Dei* that focuses only on a person’s spiritual condition.

A theological influence among Evangelicals in general is the premillennial understanding of the eschaton. Dispensationalism is a feature within evangelicalism in South Africa, more particularly of the American personnel entering its ranks. Such an eschatology stressed the imminent return of Christ and, therefore, an urgency to proclaim the gospel to those who had not yet heard it. Thus, emphasis is placed on evangelisation and individual conversion because of how missionaries have impacted the ethos, structure and theological conviction of the churches as they worked with an understanding of the *Missio Dei* as the Mission of the church namely: evangelism.

This soterian centred (evangelism) focus creates a dysfunctional understanding of the Gospel as it relates to the *Missio Dei* thus creating a dualism between a person’s spiritual and physical condition. This anthropocentric focus, shows an imbalance in our missiological understanding. Therefore, it is imperative to redress this faulty assumption in the evangelical understanding of mission. I believe, that the right theological understanding (*orthodoxy*) of the *Missio Dei* will more likely lead to the right action (*orthopraxis*) in holistically, forming a community that is consistent with their convictions and that the story of Christ is a truthful account of their existence. Therefore, a Christian understanding of compassion is determined by the vicarious suffering of Christ (Gather 1978:724). This understanding must move us into seeing that the *Missio Dei* incorporates social action (Jm. 2:14).

Padilla (2009) argues, the most important question that should be asked with regards to the life and the mission of the church today is not related to its relevance, but to the content of the gospel... far more basic however, is the consideration of the nature of the gospel that could meet man’s needs. The what of the gospel determines the how it should effect practical life.

Teaching of the *Missio Dei* with the inclusion of Social Justice enables one to develop a theology that is based on compassion and justice that sees active and practical compassion as an issue of faith in Christ (1 Cor. 12:26; Heb. 10:34) that is founded on the *Missio Dei*.

Evangelicals and the *Missio Dei*.

Evangelicals while emphasising mission, have paid very little attention to the *Missio Dei* because Wicker (2004:182-199) states that the evangelicals’ “understanding of mission is quite different to the *Missio Dei*”. The concept of *Missio Dei* within evangelicalism is formulated strictly from a soterian perspective rather than seeing God’s mission in all of the world, a view that sees God as the centre (Theo-centric) of mission and not a church or denomination (Engelstevik, 2001:447-462).



Evangelicals tend not to use the term *Missio Dei* because it is in some way tainted by liberalism. Evangelicals see mission purely in term of salvation, therefore not taking the *Missio Dei* seriously impacting upon its social engagement in society (Chia, 2003:538-549). Again, Chester and Timmis (2007:103) argue, that divine activity in history was

discerned through a framework of the enlightenment values rather than the testimony of the Bible. They call therefore that the mission of God must be defined in biblical terms. Like most Evangelicals, the *Missio Dei*, is often used, not to provide a wider context to the mission of the church, but a contrast to the mission of the church. Most Evangelicals, therefore, see the *Missio Dei* as a liberal formulation and “shy” away from using it, for fear of being labelled liberal or maybe even the fear of having overseas funding suspended.

The understanding that the mission of the church is evangelism with the focus on the “saving of a person’s soul” as the Gospel, can be traced to the fundamentalist theological influence that viewed social engagement as an activity that is inextricably

linked to the loss of sound doctrine, spiritual dynamism, and a watering down of the gospel (Hack, 1993). This anthropocentric theological perspective on mission is evidenced by the focus on evangelism and church planting rather than a Theocentric focus on GOD’S MISSION.

Evangelical theology therefore must seek for an understanding of *missio Dei* in light of a missional hermeneutical reading of the Bible. Wright (2006:60-61) provides us with a precise definition of what a missional hermeneutic is:

A missional hermeneutic, then, is not content simply to call for obedience to the *Great Commission* (though it will assuredly include that as a matter of non-negotiable importance), nor even to reflect on the missional implications of the *Great Commandment*. For behind both, it will find the *Great Communication*—the revelation of the identity of God, of God’s action in the world and God’s saving purpose for all creation. Moreover, for the fullness of this communication, we need the whole Bible in all its parts and genres, for God has given us no less.

Stilsett (1999:5) argues that:

A theology from above, from God, is reflected and manifested in a theology from below. A theology from below joins revelation and praxis. It is in this dialogue of the divine with the humane that theology takes shape, and Christ becomes incarnate, to every new generation.

Conradie (2005) elaborates this even further: “to speak of God’s mission is to realise that mission is not primarily the work of the church but the work of God. God’s project is to establish the reign of God, not the church”. Thus, the church is an instrument used by God to bring about well-being to the world. The bringing out of wellbeing calls for an understanding of the *Missio Dei* that includes justice and compassion.

This understanding militates towards an understanding that compassion and justice are part of the God’s mission. Few themes are more central to any dialogue on social ethics than justice and compassion. Chester (2002:19) writes that the *Missio Dei* incorporates both the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is simply not that evangelism and social involvement are to be taught/done alongside each other.



However, instead, our evangelism must lead one to social engagement and *vice versa*. They are to be integral parts of each other. Chester (2002), Integral mission can be defined as the task of bringing the whole of life under the lordship of Jesus Christ and includes the affirmation that there is no biblical dichotomy between evangelistic and social responsibility. Because God shows concern the poor, the church must do the

same. Jesus Christ furthers this preferential option for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised in his statements and his ministry. Compassion is, therefore, the process of self-dispossession, where one puts self at risk, in a free re-enactment of the dispossessed state of those who suffer. Nouwen *et al.* (2005:4) further explain how this can be active in our life by stating:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.

The biblical word for justice in the Old Testament finds its meaning in two different words *sedaqah*, which is translated righteousness in the English Bible, means to fix something as it should be, when applied to the human actions and relationships it means to speak with conformity to what is right and expected (Lev. 19:36, Duet. 25:15). The second word is *sapat*, which refers to legal action over a wide range (judicial action), to act as a law giver, to act a judge by arbitrating between parties in conflict thus passing judgement. In its broadest definition, it means "to put things right". Another word that speaks of justice but in a more personal sense is *mispal*, this word is frequently used in reference to widows and children, and it means to act justly for those who might be exploited in an unfair world. Wright (2010: 91) states that while there is considerable overlap between these words, *sedaqah* is something you aim to achieve, whereas *mispal* is something you do. Metzger (2001) states "biblical justice involves making individuals, communities, and the cosmos whole, by upholding both goodness and impartiality. It stands at the centre of true religion, according to James, who says that the kind of "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (Jm 1:27). "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" (Prov. 29:7)." Escobar and Padilla (2013) state that simple liberation from human masters is not what the Gospel speaks. Freedom in Christian terms means subjection to Jesus Christ as Lord, deliverance from bondage to sin and Satan, the heart that has been made free with the freedom of Christ cannot be indifferent to human longing for deliverance from economic, political or social oppression

The *Missio Dei* and the Kingdom Of God

The *Missio Dei* as observed by Bevans and Schroeder (2004:298) brings correction to this view by placing God not the church or denomination at the centre of mission. Bosch (1991: 390) observes the theocentric perspective of mission by stating:

In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that



the church. Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love towards people since God is a fountain of sending love.

Carlson (2007) states a missional church is an authentic community of faith that primarily directs its ministry focus outward toward the context in which it is located and to the broader world beyond. The church thus, is to be a light to the world, a testimony that Israel failed to be, the city on a hill promised by Isaiah. The church now manifests the kingdom to the nations. So "live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12). Therefore, the church becomes the missional agent through the *Missio Dei*- the mission of God as engaged in the world.

Within Evangelicalism, over the years the kingdom of God and its significance to the mission of God were brought into focus. Two differing opinions exist within evangelicalism first, that there is personal salvation now, but it is only limited to a conscious confession of Christ, and the leading advocate of this position was John Stott, the architect of the Lausanne Covenant and Ron Sider. Both Stott and Sider (1977:23) insist that "the kingdom of God in the New Testament is fundamentally a Christological concept, and such may exist only where Jesus Christ is consciously acknowledged as Lord". Stott and Sider (1977:23) further state that this righteous kingdom, however, influences and impacts the society it engages. Therefore, political liberation is not salvation. On focusing upon the Kingdom of God, to speak of salvation is to speak of a new life and a new community, a new world. The new community is the church, and the new world is spoken of only concerning the future. Sider and Parker (1985:105) argues that the salvation language as such cannot be used to refer to the imperfect emergence of justice and peace in society at large before the return of Christ, similarly to which Sider (1985:104) agrees that there is no New Testament claim that speaks of the kingdom of God apart from the conscious confession of Christ. Therefore, salvation is personal and only refers to a personal confession of Jesus Christ to receive salvation that Christ offers, thus enabling a person to live out the radical demand of this new kingdom. This understanding equates God's kingdom to the Church. This understanding is most prominent within Evangelicalism; prominence is given to belief rather than praxis.

The alternative view is that corporate salvation is not limited to the conscious confession of Christ as held by Vinay Samuels and Chris Sugden (1985). Samuel and Sugden (1985:211) argue that the salvation is not only experienced individually, but that experience in the kingdom goes far beyond the church, through which the promise and grace are brought into society. Samuel and Sugden (1981:52) maintain that God's kingdom is seen not only in the church but also "in God activity in the world beyond the church as just relationships that belong to the kingdom are established in society. The argument is made that one does not have to personally make a confession to Christ to experience the benefits of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom as it exists now Samuel and Sugden (1987:141) posits "it is not an individual spiritual entity. It is corporate and permeates with its influence all life" Although transformation is not salvation, in the sense of regeneration and justification, (*ibid*) people who do not confess Christ will also benefit from the transformation that the kingdom brings to society. Samuel and Sugden (1987:153) in responding to the Lausanne Covenant state that "the term redemption is appropriate for God's activity outside the church, when we see it not simply as the experience of regeneration,

forgiveness and new life, but in wider terms as God's activity in fulfilling his intention for the world".

The church's mission then is seen as a subset of a larger whole mission that is part of God's mission to the world and not the entirety of God's work in the world (Arthur, 2013). The shift to a theocentric understanding of missions began to gain attention through the work of Karl Barth. In 1932 Barth used the term God's *missio*, he broke from tradition by grounding mission first in God and not in the human endeavour of the church. Hartenstein using the same theology but changing the term to "*Missio Dei*". For Hartenstein, *Missio Dei* suggests that from eternity past the triune God has been on a mission (cited in Bevan and Schroeder 2004:291). The next step in the

crystallisation of the concept came in 1952 during the meeting of the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany. At this time, Vicedom (1965:5) states that the significance of the *Missio Dei* indicates that mission is not the "mission of the church our mission, but a work that belongs to God". Wright (2004:133) states this quite aptly "mission flows from the inner movement of God in personal relationships." In the aftermath of these thoughts, a shift in the church's thinking started to occur.

Thus, the theology of mission moved from believing that the church is in possession of a mission, to God being a missionary Father, and the church participating in His mission. It is not that Jesus gave the church a mission, but rather Jesus invites the church to join the Father's pre-existing outreach. Bosch (1991:332) claims that when one focuses on church planting as a primary means of mission, the church ceased to point to "God or to the future, it points to itself".

An Evangelical Construct of the *Missio Dei*

While there are plenty of resources dealing with the *mission Dei* from an ecumenical perspective. Many scholars (Schroeder, 2004; Stetzer and Putman 2006; Mering, 2008) believe it has run its course because it has lost its biblical grounding. However, there are a number of Evangelical theologians who are embracing the *Missio Dei* by re-conceptualising aspects of it (Wright, 2006; 2010, Chester 2002, Hazzelgrave, 2010; McKnight, 2010; Flett, 2010; Pickett, 2017) within Evangelical theology.

The theoretical model (Fig. 1) of Wright (2012) will be used to give clarity and build a framework for understanding what "holistic mission" looks like. The *Missio Dei* in Wright's model encompasses three overarching themes: Building the Church (using evangelism and teaching), Serving Society (by means of justice and compassion) and Caring for creation. The unique aspect of Wright's model is its Christological emphasis in the *Missio Dei* that is consistent with evangelical teaching.

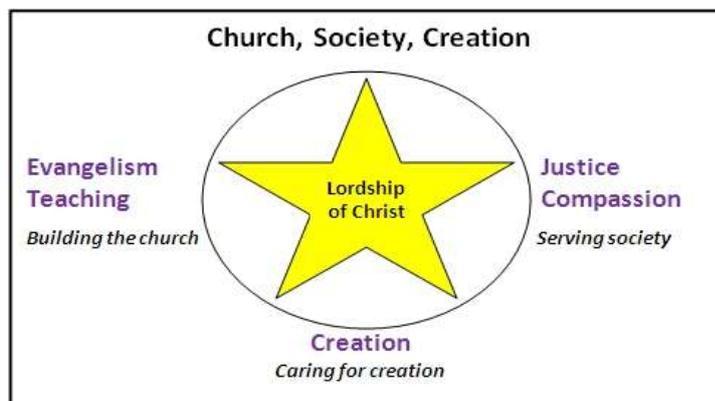


Figure 1. Model for Holistic Mission_(Wright, 2012)



Thus, the transactional nature of the gospel is critically brought into focus by asking “What is the Gospel?” Stearns (2009:17) rightfully observes that “in our evangelistic efforts to make the gospel accessible and simple, “we seem to have boiled it down to a kind of fire insurance that one can buy”. McKnight, (2011:28-33) argues that Evangelicals have developed a “salvation culture” not a “gospel culture”, thus reducing the gospel to a message of personal salvation that is not consistent with Scripture. McKnight (2011:43) states that the soterian centred gospel of the Plan of Salvation and Method of Persuasion are given so much weight that they crush the story of Jesus.

Therefore, for McKnight (2011:51) salvation is the intended result of the gospel story of Jesus. McKnight (2005: xiii) defines the gospel “as the work of God to restore humans to union with God and communion with others, in the context of community, for the good of others in the world”. However, Newbigin (1995:76) argues that the very God-centered nature of mission implies the church as an important role player. Thus, the

purpose of the church is to support the *Missio Dei*, and the church on mission exists to serve the community through the Lordship of Christ.

Conclusion

This *Missio Dei* is praxis orientated taking into consideration the the context of the lived social realities of the people. God’s mission, to which people are invited, is far broader than creating individual disciples. The *Missio Dei* is therefore liberation, from spiritual and social oppression. To teach God’s mission only with a soterian focus, is to negate the function of whole gospel. i.e. to transform the people and the world in which we live. The mission of the Triune interpersonal, God is to reconcile everything in heaven and on the earth and this must necessarily then encompass the formation of communities of believers who will live out the reality of God’s kingdom. People are not merely saved but are saved into an extensive community (Acts 2: 42-47). Consequently what is required is a deep missional engagement with the whole of humanity.

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