

**Explain the thinking behind mission as *missio Dei*.
Bosch says that in the light of this understanding, “The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and reconceived.” (1991, 519)
What new thinking is therefore necessary in order to do mission in the 21st century?**

This essay explores the concept and practice of *missio Dei*, now something of an umbrella term within missiology and generally understood to refer to the mission of God (however that is itself defined). The development of this concept was unquestionably one of the most significant theological advances of the twentieth-century, in that mission came to be regarded as the initiative of the Triune God, rather than His Church. Ever since the expression was coined, there has been ambiguity over the role of the Church or, more broadly, human involvement in mission. Such tensions remain unresolved, and the term *missio Dei* has come to stand for such different things as to have its usefulness as a terminology questioned.

In this essay we will consider David Bosch’s suggestion that, in the light of *missio Dei*, the church’s mission should be continually renewed and reconceived, and we will explore what this might look like. Structurally, we will proceed as follows: in Section I we introduce *missio Dei*, its origins and meaning. In Section II we explore the relationship between God’s mission and that of the Church (*missio ecclesiae*). And in Section III we allow our understanding of *missio Dei* to inform our judgement of how mission ought to be characterised in the 21st century. Section IV concludes with a summary of our discussion, suggesting that the church’s role in mission is best understood as a response to God’s initiative.

Section I – Introducing *Missio Dei*

There is some divergence between what *missio Dei* first stood for, and how it is (variously) understood today. We begin this section with a necessarily brief definition of *missio Dei*, followed by an explanation of the term’s genesis and subsequent development.

Defining *Missio Dei*

Simply translating the Latin phrase into the English “the mission of God” will not suffice, since we face a series of difficult questions, including (but not restricted to): which God? What is His mission? Who is a part of it? What is its purpose? And why does it exist? Predictably, there have been many different answers to these questions, despite the fact that there is something approaching a global adoption of the term,¹ which includes many evangelicals, liberals, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and some Pentecostals (Bosch 1991, 390-1).

¹ Though we may well suspect, along with Engelsviken, that this near-consensus may be “more one of terminology than theological substance” (2003, 486).

Some recent definitions of *missio Dei* appear either tautological or circular. For example, Lalsangkima Pachuau's entry on *missio Dei* in IVP's *Dictionary of Mission Theology* concludes that "Mission is wherever God is at work fulfilling his missionary purposes" (Corrie 2007, 234), which seems to take us no nearer an understanding of what is defined as God's mission. A further problem of defining *missio Dei* is that its usage has included more and more things – almost to the point of lacking in discrimination (and, therefore, meaning). As Engelsviken cautions us, *missio Dei* "has been used by missiology... as a comprehensive concept that includes almost everything the church is supposed to do, or, even more, what God is doing..." (2003, 484-5).

David Bosch's balanced definition of *missio Dei* is careful to make explicit mention of the Church – we will see below why this inclusion is of paramount importance:

"[*Missio Dei* is] God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate." (1991, 10)

A more explicitly Trinitarian definition is given by Tom Steffen and Lois McKinney Douglas (2008, 32), who define *missio Dei* as "the idea of God's nature and expression extended to and stamped upon the world. God the Father sends God the Son who sends God the Holy Spirit; all three send the church." This emphasis on the full involvement of the Trinity is echoed by Wilhelm Richebächer (2003b, 599) who pleads "for a more precisely defined formulation based on the original meaning and function, viz. that of *missio Dei Triunius*, for the sake of the invitation to believe and the dignity of all religions."

Missiologists of different traditions will continue to disagree on the precise definition of *missio Dei*, but the core components can be seen to include the following:

- (i) the original impetus of mission comes from God Himself. This makes mission a theocentric process rather than an ecclesiocentric one;
- (ii) the missionary impulse stems from and reflects God's intrinsic nature;
- (iii) this nature is Triune, and each element of the Trinity is missional;
- (iv) other agents (the Church, individuals, organisations) may have the privilege of participating in the *missio Dei*, but they are participants and not initiators.

There are two crucial areas, beyond these four components, which are disputed, and hence can be included only as adjuncts to this general definition. Firstly, is the issue of whether the Church has a privileged position and special relationship within the *missio Dei* (as is argued, for example, by Catholic theologian Anekwe Oborji²), but which some may regard as trying to

² Anekwe Oborji, a Nigerian Roman Catholic priest and theologian, states that "there is an intimate and inseparable relationship between the Holy Spirit and the missionary church" (2006, 35) and, moreover, that an understanding of *missio Dei* should regard the church "as an essential element in the mediation of the mystery, of

introduce the *missio ecclesiae* in, so to speak, via the back door. Secondly, is the issue of whether God's missionary purposes are specifically salvific, or whether His creational (and thereafter sustaining) purposes can be considered part of His *missio*. It is at these two points that theologians tend to diverge.

The Origins of *Missio Dei*

Richebächer's above call for a return to the original meaning directs us towards a discussion of how *missio Dei* arose.³ This is a question that must be answered by simultaneous reference to theology, history, politics and mission praxis. It is also important to note that there was a delay between when the sentiments of *missio Dei* first arose, and when the precise term was actually employed some twenty years later.

It is generally accepted that the twentieth-century concept of *missio Dei* can be traced to the work of German theologian Karl Barth who, in 1932, gave a paper at the Brandenburg Mission Conference stating that mission was not primarily the work of the Church, but of God Himself (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 290).⁴ This argument was also proposed by Karl Hartenstein in 1934, and it was a view that grew in popularity until, by the conclusion of the 1952 Willingen conference of the International Missionary Council, it was recognised that "the missionary obligation of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself" (conference statement quoted in Corrie 2007, 233). The phrase *missio Dei* was used in Hartenstein's post-conference report and was popularised by Georg Vicedom in an influential book of the same name, published in 1958.⁵

The emergence of *missio Dei* as a theological concept cannot, of course, be divorced from its historical context. There were profound political and social changes in the early to mid-twentieth century, including two world wars and the onset of decolonisation. Within global Christianity, there was the profound shock of the expulsion of missionaries from China in 1954. These and other factors combined to persuade leading Christian thinkers that mankind is steeped in failure; and that mission – especially the global salvation of humanity – must instead be subject to God's will and plans. This new longing for God's involvement built on recent theological innovations by German theologians, such as Barth, to produce a

the church as a sacrament of salvation, and [with a]... missionary mandate" (2006, 34). Such a high view of the Church is by no means restricted to Catholic theologians.

³ Whilst the term itself dates back as far as Augustine in the early 5th century, we are writing here with regard to its specific use within missiology.

⁴ Whilst Corrie (2007, 233), Bosch (1991, 389) and Richebächer (2003b, 590) agree with this date, John A. McIntosh dates the concept to a (different?) lecture on mission given by Barth in 1928 (in Moreau 2000, 632).

⁵ To step outside this somewhat Eurocentric history, Matthey notes that it is possible to trace a parallel or even prior theological movement in America, and that "the achievement of Willingen derived in great part from the preparatory work done in the USA on the simultaneity of God's action in the world and the church, and the search for a trinitarian basis of mission" (2003, 580).

Trinitarian-based notion of *missio Dei*. The effect of this new concept was to shift the basis of mission from ecclesiology and soteriology to the doctrine of the Trinity (Bosch 1991, 390).

Subsequent decades both broadened and deepened the concept, which was surrounded by a period of confusion in the 1960s: there were those such as Hoekendijk who saw the world as the primary focus of God's mission (perhaps even to the exclusion of the Church), and whose work was labelled "worldly theology" and denounced as an over-compensation to the historical emphasis on the church's role in mission. Similar fault-lines persist today concerning the locus of God's mission, with the added complication that some missiologists claim the *missio Dei* centres on Christ, whilst others argue that God's mission is universal – and hence opposite viewpoints are both held under the same label. Most missiologists link the purpose of God's mission to the establishment of the Kingdom of God here on earth, e.g. Kirk (1999, 29) sees the 'purpose' of God as bringing about a kingdom "free from the reign of all those forces which enslave humanity... [and where] God's Spirit is in control, where justice, peace and joy are experienced completely and permanently (Rom. 14:17)."

Ultimately, the usefulness of the term *missio Dei*, and its continuing relevance in missiology, surely depends on its being properly defined when being used. Missiologists must state their positions carefully. As long as such care is taken, it is possible for us to live with differences of interpretation, just as 'society,' 'power,' or 'justice' may each mean different things to different people.

Having considered the definition and origins of *missio Dei*, we turn to a more detailed look at the relationship between the *missio Dei* and the Church, and to Bosch's conclusion that the Church's mission must be constantly reformed.

Section II – *Missio Dei* and the Church

It is something of an over-simplification to portray the Church before Barth and before Willigen as regarding itself as the *origin* of mission (see diagram 1a below). A more nuanced interpretation might conclude that when the historical Church acted missionally, it did so out of intended obedience towards the will of God; that it believed it was spreading Christian values and furthering God's kingdom on earth; and that the community of believers were motivated to share the salvation that they themselves had received from God (diagram 1b). Thus to dismiss historic mission as ecclesiocentric may be unhelpful in that it fails to recognise that the Church was, in some ways, seeking to 'follow orders'.

The Church's historical understanding of mission tended to incorporate two key concepts: that it was sent into the world; and that it took a message (*evangel*) with it. An example from modern times would be William Carey, who as a Baptist pastor published his *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* in 1792. The first section of this famous work was a justification for mission, based on the continuing applicability of the Great Commission: Christians are sent out by Jesus' command "therefore go" (Matthew 28:19).⁶ In this first section, Carey also makes clear that the work of the missionary is "to introduce the gospel amongst them [the 'Heathens']."⁷ This example shows that a historical Christian understanding of mission was in some ways based on a concept of divine initiative, bearing God's message of salvation for humanity.

If it is not altogether true to say that the Church saw itself as initiating mission, where *has* the significant shift in missiological thinking occurred? The answer lies in two areas. Firstly, as we have discussed above, the development of a deeper Trinitarian theology meant that mission was seen as part of God's essence or nature, rather than just one of His actions; and that the Great Commission issued by Christ was prefigured by the Father sending Jesus, and followed by the Father and the Son sending the Spirit.⁸ And secondly, the shift has been in a changing understanding of the extent of God's mission *outside* of the Church (as well as the nature of the relationship between God and His Church working together missionally). Diagram 1c shows a generalisation of how mission may consequently be conceived today.

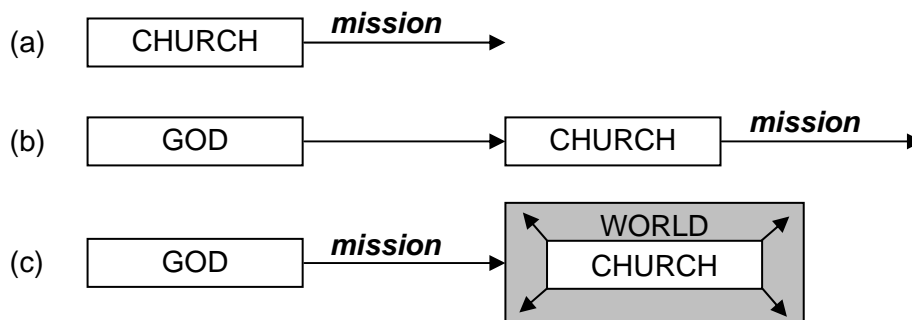


Diagram 1 – Three Perspectives on the Origin of Mission

There is something both humbling and liberating in recognising that God is origin, architect and controller of mission. If the Church is seen as a product of God's mission, a truer perspective is gained: the Christian Church exists because of God's sending His Son, Jesus

⁶ This and all subsequent biblical quotes are taken from the New International Version (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982).

⁷ Concluding sentence of Section I of Carey's *Enquiry* (page 13), available online from <http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/enquiry/anenquiry.pdf> [accessed 12 September 2008].

⁸ This is often explicitly linked with the Kingdom of God, e.g. Newbigin: "By obediently following where the Spirit leads, often in ways neither planned, known, nor understood, the church acts out the hope that it is given by the presence of the Spirit who is the living foretaste of the kingdom" (1995, 65).

and His actions throughout history. The Church is also sustained, guided and sanctified by God; in Bosch's words, "The *missio Dei* purifies the church" (1991, 519). It is worth reminding ourselves that the Church's goal is not self-replication or numerical growth. The Church is to be "a witness to the meaning and relevance of the kingdom... [to be] an emissary of the kingdom" (Kirk 1999, 36).

If the institution of the Church is understood as a missional act by God then it follows that God in His sovereignty may choose whatever instruments He deems appropriate to accomplish His aims. As the Bible repeatedly shows, God involves Himself in human history and human affairs, even at times doing so through foreign agents or powers (as testified, for example, by Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel), and not exclusively through a particular institution, nation or people. A theology that understands God as missionary only to His Church would therefore be very impoverished.

However, I contend that the Church – though certainly not the only agent or arena of God's mission – does have a special position or status within the *missio Dei*. The foundation of this contention is John 20:21, where Jesus commissions and empowers the Disciples: "Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.'" This commissioning affirms something unique and purposeful for followers of Jesus Christ. The Church's task is specific and divinely mandated. Consequently, the Church cannot be seen as just one of several different arenas where God is at work; its status is more privileged and its responsibility more elevated. That responsibility includes sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people of all nations; but it also includes recognising where God is at work through 'secular' or non-church forces and discerning where it must participate and encourage.

Section III – *Missio Dei* and 21st Century Mission

We have defined *missio Dei* and examined its usage, and have briefly discussed its relationship with the Church. Having recognised that God works in His own ways outside of the Church, and in light of the fact that human society is ever-changing, we can readily agree with Bosch that "the mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and reconceived" (1991, 519). This section explores what mission – and what missiology – is necessary for the 21st century, especially in light of our understanding of the ongoing *missio Dei*. We make some preliminary, general comments before considering specific characteristics necessary for 21st century mission.

When we consider contemporary and new forms of mission we immediately face something of a contradiction: if we are discussing how we should do mission; what issues the church

should address; and what missiology should turn its attention to, we are once again setting the agenda ourselves. Mission, instead of being God's, becomes a matter of our own choice and prioritisation. Whilst we may console ourselves with the fact that, even if we drift from one contemporary issue to another, God will already be present in the world at precisely those points, the preferred approach here is to focus more on the *characteristics* of mission in the 21st century, rather than starting with political or social issues to be engaged with. These qualities or features should then determine how mission should be conducted in a world increasingly characterised by globalisation, Western secularisation, technological advancements, continued urbanisation, 'hyper-consumerism,' postmodernity, and social and economic inequality.

It is worth starting with an affirmation of two fairly recent developments in missiology, in the hope that efforts will continue in the same direction. Firstly, there has been greater awareness of the need for *holistic mission*, whereby the Good News of Jesus Christ impacts each part of a person's life. One recent interpretation has been Goldsmith's definition of holistic as "spiritual + social + environmental" (2006, 183). Such a perspective overcomes the traditional (and unbiblical) division between 'spiritual' and 'material' aspects of human life, with the subsequent division into mission as evangelism and churchplanting versus mission as development, advocacy and human welfare. Holistic mission recognises the totality of God's interest in the restoration of humanity; the integrity of human personhood; and the biblical emphasis on the inseparability of 'spiritual' actions and 'material' ones as shown, for example, in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31–46).⁹ It is hoped that this trend towards holistic mission will continue, with more mission agencies and more missiological writing recognising its importance.

Secondly, the recent trend towards *contextualisation* is imperative. This is the understanding that the biblical message must be shared in a form appropriate for the culture it is being shared with, and whose worldview must be taken into account. Proper contextualisation is important if Christians are to avoid accusations of ongoing or neo-colonialism. It recognises the validity and value of other cultures, which are seen as worthy recipients of Christ. Not only is the message contextualised into that culture, but the form of church, its theology and hermeneutics – and even its missiology – should be permitted to develop according to its context (in accordance, of course, with biblical 'constants'). This trend towards a broadening of contextualisation beyond the initial communication of the gospel must continue, and later in this section we look at some of the implications of the southward shift in global Christianity,

⁹ As Green (2000, 263) explains in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel, this parable is not merely about material or physical works: "our relation to the kingdom and the King is at the heart of it." There is an inseparable relationship between what we believe and what we do.

and how different understandings of the Bible and of mission will impact mission in the twenty-first century.

The trends towards holistic mission and contextualisation have something in common: they appreciate interconnectedness and complexity, and recognise that mission today needs to be done thoughtfully and sensitively. As Bevans has said (quoting the late Pope John Paul II), contemporary mission “needs to be understood as a ‘single but complex reality’” (2003, 53). In responding to this complexity, and in a rapidly changing world, it is suggested here that future mission practice should be characterised by the following five features:

(a) The centrality of mission

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, twenty-first century Christians must recognise the *centrality* of mission. It is both unfortunate and ironic that Christians have tended to reduce the sending impulse to one or two biblical verses, when the entire Bible is itself a product of God’s missional activity. Instead of perceiving mission as an optional church activity, or one of several ‘projects’ a church might engage in, mission should be seen as defining the church. As was famously stated by Emil Brunner, “a church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.”

This centrality must be expressed in various ways. Christopher Wright’s recent book *The Mission of God* comprehensively argues that God’s missional nature is demonstrated throughout the Bible and that mission is “a major key that unlocks the whole grand narrative of the canon of Scripture” (2006, 17). More than that, even, mission is “not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about... [it is] ‘what it’s all about’” (2006, 22). This means that not only must our understanding of God (theology) be founded on seeing God as the source of mission; our reading of the Bible (hermeneutics) must be founded on seeing mission as its *principal* theme.

As well as being central to our theology and understanding of the Bible, the centrality of mission must inform our ecclesiology too: do our church structures sufficiently recognise the importance of mission? Does the existence of specialist mission agencies demonstrate the inadequacy of those church structures? There are, of course, many ways in which churches and mission agencies complement each other; however the specialisation and professionalization of mission agencies has in some ways allowed local churches to ‘pass on’ responsibility for mission to these professionals and to become disengaged themselves. If each church recognised the centrality of mission – a ‘metanarrative’ that includes and explains the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – it would make each decision and take each action in consideration of its impact on mission, asking whether or not it contributed

towards God's mission. Participation in God's mission is for every church and every Christian, not a specialist subset within churches or para-church groups! The centrality of mission is affirmed by Samuel Escobar, who says it "gives a focus and direction to all the other functions [of the church]" and who therefore concludes that "the church exists for mission and that a church that is only inward looking is not truly the church" (2003, 13).

It is easy to see how this centrality relates to the concept of *missio Dei*: by recognising the primary importance of mission, we are acknowledging that it has its origins in God, and that it reflects His fundamental nature. By making it central to our lives as Christians, we are no longer seeing it as an option for human agency, but rather as a divine narrative, to which the Church must testify, and in which Christians have the privilege of participating.

(b) Vulnerability

I propose that vulnerability should be a defining characteristic of mission in the twenty-first century. By vulnerability I mean exposing oneself (normally deliberately) to risks and uncertainty, including the possibility of hardship, injury, and attack.¹⁰ Whilst not wishing to encourage recklessness, or the intentional seeking of martyrdom, I believe it is crucial that Christians recognise that an important aspect of mission is allowing ourselves to be in situations where we are not in control, and where we effectively put ourselves in the hands of others, whether or not we know their intentions to be good.

In the Western (post-)industrial countries, living standards have risen at an astonishing rate ever since the industrial revolution. Such material rewards have been part of God's blessing for humanity, being produced using natural resources, and human ingenuity, which are both gifts from Him. Leaving aside for the moment questions about the environmental impact of such industry, one other impact has been to enable today's missionary to be somewhat cocooned from vulnerability, uncertainty or risk, through comprehensive insurance and healthcare cover, cheap international travel and freight, email and readily accessible information on the Internet, evacuation plans in the event of political turmoil, and so on. It is even possible for the missionary to hedge their finances to avoid currency exchange volatility that would affect donations from their supporters.

These are understandable measures taken to minimise disruption, increase financial support and ease the 'burden' on missionaries. Is it possible, however, that we are giving ourselves protective buffers which not only separate and differentiate us from the people we serve, but

¹⁰ A greater exposure to risk and loss of control has a twofold implication: that we must be able to wholeheartedly trust in God's plans; and that we must develop a deeper theology of 'failure' when exposure to risk does not result in what we had anticipated. Examples here might include what is to be thought of 'Business as Mission' enterprises that fail financially.

which go against biblical missionary models and may undermine our mission? Is it possible that easing missionaries' burden somehow reduces the cross the Bible encourages them to carry? (Luke 14:27). Paul, an obvious missionary example, argued strongly that persevering through difficulties produces character and hope (e.g. Romans 5:3-5) and allows God's power to be shown (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Further, with so many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world facing persecution, should Western Christians be so insulated from hardship?

The relation of vulnerability to mission can be seen once we return to our concept of *missio Dei*: God's mission, the reaching out of God to humanity, with the Father sending the Son. This sending saw a perfect being enter an imperfect and fallen world – one that was broken, unjust and violent. As the song goes, echoing the great Servant Songs of Isaiah:

Hallelujah, my Father,
For giving us Your Son;
Sending Him into the world,
To be given up for men.
Knowing we would bruise Him
And smite Him from the earth.

(Words and lyrics by Tim Cullen ©1975 Celebration/Kingsway's Thankyou Music.)

The mission of God involved laying aside divine privilege and control, with Jesus being exposed to human capriciousness and injustice. Whilst the nature of His mission was unique and specific to Him, surely we have something to learn from the vulnerability with which He accomplished it.¹¹

(c) Global Mission

It is a fact to be greatly celebrated that Christian mission now goes 'from everywhere to everywhere' or if not quite, then at least it is more varied, inclusive and cross-national than during the long centuries of Christendom. This is partly because of growing numbers of believers in the global South: as Philip Jenkins explains, "the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America" (2002, 2). Jenkins calculates that "Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom [in the twenty-first century]... but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American" (ibid.). It stands to reason that, if more Christians are from the global South, then more missionaries will be.

¹¹ This call for vulnerability has a concomitant call for simplicity in Christian and missionary living. Simpler living would counter the over-exploitation of the earth's resources and help limit environmental degradation, a highly significant issue for the 21st century.

Or does it? The assumption underlying this statement is that Christians in different parts of the world have similar resources and opportunities to serve as missionaries overseas, and this is patently not so. My contention, here, therefore, is that the Christian Church must find more ways of encouraging and facilitating (and, yes, financing) mission from parts of the world that have been – and continue to be – historically underrepresented, or even excluded.

The reasons for this are compelling: by stimulating mission from different parts of the world, we are helping others participate in international mission and thereby fulfil the Great Commission. (Or, from another perspective, we are no longer preventing their full involvement.) But there is much more: we are enriching the Church, the Body of Christ, by allowing ourselves to learn from other cultures and worldviews.¹² When, for example, a British church employs a Kenyan pastor, it is ending the historical pattern of Western missionary dominance; it is affirming the equality of different peoples and rejecting imperialist assumptions about the direction of mission; and it enables learning and sharing about God through different cultures. By encouraging mission from the global South, we are opening ourselves to a greater portion of God's work in the world.¹³ Bauckham characterises this as a movement from the particular to the universal, which he identifies as a specific 'dimension' of mission (2003, 11 et seq.).

This internationalisation of mission (and implied reversal of what has been referred to as the 'Americanisation' of mission) will have many consequences. For example, Escobar (2003, 20-1) notes that "Indians, Brazilians, Koreans or Filipinos engaging in mission today bring a new set of questions about Christian mission, the way it will be supported, the lifestyle of the missionaries, the methods they will use, the mission fields to which they will go" and we can go further and say they will undoubtedly bring different answers too.¹⁴ We Christians in the West must have the humility to recognise that we have merely, at best, a partial answer to the question 'how should mission be in the 21st century?' And we must no longer use the fact of greater *material* resources to allow us to continue setting the global missionary agenda, which is after all a *spiritual* question.

¹² One recent parallel from Biblical studies is how exegesis of the Gospels has been enriched by Kenneth Bailey's recounting of how Christians in the Middle East have traditionally interpreted them – see, for example, his excellent *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (London: IVP, 2008).

¹³ Martin Goldsmith gives a number of helpful examples of mission flowing from the South-South and the South-North, such as Nigerian missionaries in Chad, and Korean missionaries in Mongolia, Myanmar and the UK. Indeed, as Goldsmith notes, "There are now more long-term Christian missionaries from South Korea than from all of Europe, including Britain" (2006, 70). Likewise, Wright (2006, 43) reports that, after the USA, the country sending the highest number of cross-cultural missionaries is India.

¹⁴ It is interesting to wonder whether, in the same way that liberation theologians lay new emphasis on certain biblical books (e.g. Exodus) when analysing the church's role in society, the opening up of global mission will see missiologists from the global South drawing on other books (Revelation?) in defining the church's mission, in contrast to – or, rather, alongside – the Western church's traditional inspiration from the Gospels and from Acts.

In terms of *missio Dei*, we are allowing ourselves to see more of God's plan. In our definition above, we noted that God initiates mission, and that He invites us to participate in that mission. By shifting from an Occidental model of mission, more believers will have the privilege of sharing in God's mission and broader, more international participation will surely see the Church reflecting more of the breadth of God's own missional activity: the whole world is His mission field.

(d) Community and Unity

This section is intimately linked to the fact that mission has its origin in God, and that God is three-in-one. One of the defining characteristics of the theological concept of *missio Dei* is its understanding of God's mission as being Trinitarian. For twenty-first century mission, this has two important implications: that mission should be located within community; and that such community testifies towards unity.

Firstly, then, is our belief that mission should wherever possible be communitarian, that is, situated within community and based on Christians together sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, in both word and deed. Whilst a solitary missionary may communicate the Gospel individually, where there is a team, family or church presence there is a fuller expression since part of what we wish to communicate is that God is relational – both with us and within Himself – and that the Christian faith is, by definition, one of fellowship.

Secondly, there must be unity and harmony within such teams, families or churches that are witnessing to Christ.¹⁵ In terms of *missio Dei*, this reflects the unity of the Triune God, as well as demonstrating the New Testament principle of *koinonia*, or intimate and mutual fellowship. It is frequently stated that one of the biggest obstacles to people coming to faith is when they see division and in-fighting amongst Christians. Yet the reverse must surely be true – that when Christians come together in faith, love and mutual submission that this is a powerful witness to the God whom we serve. Thus, international mission teams with members from different countries, cultures and generations are able to speak powerfully about changes effected by God's kingdom. If, in the twenty-first century, Christian denominations started to work together in global mission, I believe the impact would be extraordinarily powerful.¹⁶ In terms of issues where the Church may be involved in the 21st century, I passionately believe

¹⁵ Such unity should not be mistaken for homogeneity or uniformity. Not only does homogenisation repress the diversity with which humanity is blessed but it arguably militates against God's wishes: as Tiplady tentatively suggests, the coming of God's Spirit at Pentecost can be seen as a judgment on homogeneity, rejecting a return to one world language and rejecting a single locus of worship in Jerusalem (2003, 50-1).

¹⁶ It is interesting to wonder whether, with the advent of books such as Brian McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), we are seeing the beginning of a shift towards closer relationships between different Christian traditions, especially with many younger Western Christians (including missionaries) regarding themselves as 'post-denominational'. And if we try to extrapolate from recent trends in Church growth, we must anticipate a growing Pentecostal involvement, which might well stimulate a new "missiological pneumatology," as Matthey speculates (2003, 585).

that the Holy Spirit is guiding Christians to join His work in reconciling previously antagonistic peoples and ethnicities – and that unity and reconciliation within the world Church would be a powerful example to be followed.

(e) A Loud, ‘Bold Humility’?

Finally, we return to the fact that *missio Dei* is, over all else, the doctrine that mission starts with God. Indeed, as Wright says, “The only concept of mission into which God fits is the one of which he is the beginning, the center and the end” (2006, 534).

When we recall that mission is God’s project and not ours – that all our endeavours and efforts are, at best, an imitation of what God has already started – then surely this must lead us into humility. Bosch (1991, 489) suggests that such humility should be a “bold humility – or a humble boldness” since we are empowered from above. I would like to add that this should be a *loud*, bold humility in that it should be declarative and openly point to our Father, the source of all mission. As such, mission in the twenty-first century should always be done in His name: not just evangelism but also social action, environmental protection, advocacy and promotion of human rights, and so on, should all be openly attributed to God’s cause. As Jesus attributed His works to the Father, so must we: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19).

This may have profound implications on, for example, how mission is conducted in ‘restricted access’ countries, but is necessary so that people “may see [our] good deeds and praise [our] Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). If we are to make known the God we serve,¹⁷ it follows that Christians must urgently develop apologetics for the 21st century, as we seek to convince the world not just of the truth of the Gospel, but of even our right to proclaim it.

Section IV – Conclusion

We have seen that *missio Dei* is one of the most important theological developments of the last century and that, despite differences in how it is understood and employed today, there is a broad consensus that it is right to attribute the missionary initiative to God, who is Triune. We have seen that others – both within and without the Church – may be privileged to participate in God’s ongoing mission to redeem and restore the world; and I have suggested that among such participants the Church has a unique position. It is invited to respond to God’s ongoing mission and, just as the Son was obedient in being sent by the Father, so must we respond with obedience and act in accordance with God’s mission to the world.

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham (2003, 100) notes that Scripture often associates mission with making God’s name known. We must not lose sight of this declarative imperative, no matter what form our mission may take.

Instead of listing the most current or most predictable issues facing missionaries and missiologists today, we have focused mostly on how mission ought to be characterised in the twenty-first century, especially in the light of how we understand *missio Dei*. We were encouraged by recent trends towards contextualisation and holistic mission, and by greater global participation in mission.¹⁸ And we called for all churches to recognise the central importance of mission, which should be characterised by an acceptance of vulnerability; by different types of Christians living and working in Spirit-led unity; and by a form of “bold humility” that is recognisably and declaratively Christian.

These characteristics, and this understanding that mission begins with God, must inform all Christians as we seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ afresh for a new generation – one which is more globalised than any other in history. This will see us well positioned to tackle pressing social issues such as poverty and rising inequality, oppression, the impact of migration, reconciliation, continued urbanisation, environmental degradation and Western social fragmentation. This is a long list of problems, to which the Christian must necessarily add the massive number of people who have yet to hear (or respond to) the Gospel. But we should take comfort from the fact that, in all these areas, and in each part of the world, God is already active to bind up the broken-hearted, release the oppressed, and draw the people of the world back to Him, as His Kingdom comes on earth. As missionary practitioners in the twenty-first century, we must maintain a double focus: that mission originates in our Father, and that we must respond in obedience to His missionary will for humanity.¹⁹

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¹⁸ Whilst this essay has focused more on characteristics of mission, missiologists must also consider effective *strategies* for mission in the 21st century. This may involve questioning the concept of ‘from everywhere to everywhere’: there is a lot to be said of every culture sharing with, and witnessing to, every other culture, but mission strategists may wonder whether certain cultures are more effective at witnessing to certain other cultures, and whether mission agencies need to take this into account more strongly (though not to excess or the point of ‘national specialisation’). Paul spoke of his ability to be “all things to all men” (1 Corinthians 9:22); we now need to ask whether this should be true of individuals or of the global Church as a whole.

¹⁹ The obvious danger being that, in attributing mission to God, we excuse ourselves the need to participate, or deny our own responsibilities as a Church. The mission is His, the purpose is His, and the glory shall be His, but we are called to participate in the *missio Dei*. A corrective to the historical over-emphasis on the Church’s role in mission should not overreach and deny its place.

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