

**“Mission” and *Missio Dei*:  
Response to Charles Van Engen’s “‘Mission’ Defined and Described”<sup>1</sup>**

Enoch Wan

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## **I. BACKGROUND**

Ed Stetzer and David J. Hesselgrave co-edited the 2010 book *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*. They invited a total of fifteen missiologists, theologians, and practitioners to engage in conversation on the confusion that has arisen over the meaning and concepts of the terms "missional" and "contextualization" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the way forward. The design of the book was to have three grand essays (by three leading missiologists: Charles Van Engen, Paul Hiebert and Ralph Winter) for others to respond and it took two years to accomplish their goal. Below is the purpose statement of the book, in the words of David Hesselgrave<sup>2</sup>:

When Ed Stetzer and I agreed to co-edit the book *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, our aim was to produce a book that would be truly representative of evangelical mission thinking in America. To that end we invited contributions from fifteen leading evangelical scholars across the country-- primarily, but not solely, missiologists. I admit to a bias, but I think we succeeded. I don't know of any single volume that does what this one does. The three "grand essays" written by Charles Van Engen, Paul Hiebert and Ralph Winter along with response chapters by K. Eitel, E. Wan, D. Guder, A. Kostenberger, M. Pocock, D. Whiteman, N. Geisler, A. Willis Jr., S. Moreau, C. Little, M. Barnett, and J. M. Terry seem to me to be uniquely representative of the present state of evangelical missions/missiology in North America.

Ed Stetzer took advantage of modern media by using his website

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published as “CHAPTER 4 “Mission” and *Missio Dei*: Response to Charles Van Engen’s “‘Mission’ Defined and Described” by Enoch Wan in *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, Ed Stetzer and David Hesselgrave, eds..

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.edstetzer.com/2011/01/monday-is-for-missiology-missi-1.html> (accessed March 21, 2011).

<http://www.edstetzer.com/2011/01/monday-is-for-missiology-missi-1.html> to engage others in on-going conversations on topics generated from the book. An assortment of the responses can be found at the following links:

- <http://justinpeter.wordpress.com/2011/01/18/missionshift-mission-of-the-church>
- <http://lillimitchell.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/blog-conversation-on-missionshift-essay-1-and-responses/>
- <http://geoffsnook.blogspot.com/2011/01/missionshift-essay-1-and-geoff.html>
- <http://cachute.blogspot.com/2011/01/missionshift-discussion.html>
- <http://jeffandwendy.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/hesselgraves-and-stetzers-mission-shift-part-one/>
- <http://www.missiologist.com/?p=928>
- <http://friendsclass.blogspot.com/2011/01/missionshift-part-1.html>
- <http://pastorricky99.blogspot.com/2011/01/missionshift-blog-conversation.html>
- <http://missmartishouse.com/2011/01/17/missionshift/>
- <http://differentandbetter.com/2011/01/17/five-missional-pairings-connecting-key-ideas-that-shape-the-churchs-mission/>
- <http://mrclm.blogspot.com/2011/01/mission-shift-pt-1-stetzer-and.html>
- <http://bit.ly/h7eL53>
- <http://aaronallison.com/2011/01/17/missionshift-part-1/>
- <http://viewfromthecorner.typepad.com/blog/2011/01/mission-missional-missionshift.html.html>
- <http://tinyurl.com/missionshiftglenwoods1>
- <http://questquality.com/ministryinthemarketplace/?p=351>
- <http://transformission.com/the-trialogue-of-god-culture-and-contextualization-the-missionshift-conversations-part-1/>
- <http://lifeandafewotherdetails.blogspot.com/>
- <http://www.lancecrawford.com/?p=353>
- <http://futuristguy2.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/missionshift-and-paradigm-shifts-1/>
- <http://differentandbetter.com/2011/01/17/five-missional-pairings-connecting-key-ideas-that-shape-the-churchs-mission/>
- <http://seanpease.wordpress.com/2011/01/18/mission-shift-essay-one/>
- <http://pastormarty-reflections.blogspot.com/>
- <http://gfunkduke.blogspot.com/2011/01/missionshift-discussion-week-one.html>
- <http://tumblr.com/xlz1at8ueb>
- <http://cupandcross.com/index.php/paradoxes-in-missions-part-1/>
- <http://pastormarty-reflections.blogspot.com/2011/01/missionshift-part-deux.html>

## II. INTRODUCTION

I was invited to respond to the first grand essay “Mission Defined and Described” (Hesselgrave and Stetzer 2010:1-29) by Charles Van Engen and my response was published as “chapter 4” entitled, ““Mission” and *Missio Dei*: Response to Charles Van Engen’s ““Mission’ Defined and Described” (Hesselgrave and Stetzer 2010:41-50) in the book, *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium* (Hesselgrave and Stetzer 2010, hereafter referred to as “*MissionShift*.”

For the benefit of the readership of [www.GlobalMissiology.org](http://www.GlobalMissiology.org), extensive quotations from Chuck’s article are provided below. The thesis of Van Engen’s grand essays is as follows:

The purpose of this essay is to offer a brief historical overview of some ways in which the Christian church has defined “mission” down through the centuries and to demonstrate how the various definitions have influenced the thought and practice of the Christian Church’s ministries in the world. In this sense this essay addresses the PAST of what has traditionally been termed “missions” (Hesselgrave and Stetzer 2010:7).

Van Engen used the scenario of “Global Outreach Task Force” of a local church chaired by Gloria who engaged in a conversation with him on the words “mission” and “missionaries” – two of the most misunderstood words in the vocabulary of North American churches today” (Hesselgrave and Stetzer 2010:8).

Van Engen then went on to provide Gloria an extensive historical account on the shifting meaning of the word “mission” through out different periods of the church. Towards the end, Van Engen offered Gloria his suggestion, quoted extensively below:

A possible way forward in defining mission for the twenty-first century might involve an attempt to describe what a missional church would look like. I can suggest on way to go about that.

With the term missional, I emphasize the essential nature and vocation of the church as God's called and sent people. A missional ecclesiology is biblical, historical, contextual, praxeological (it can be translated into practice), and eschatological. With reference to the church, the term see the church as the instrument of God's mission in God's world. Following L. Newbigin and others, a church that is missional understands that God's mission calls and sends the church of Jesus Christ, locally and globally, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be a missionary church in its own society, in the cultures in which it finds itself, and globally among all peoples who do not yet confess Jesus as Lord. Mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation and to call people into a reconciled covenantal relationship with God. Mission means "sending," and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's action in human history, with God's people (now the church) being the primary agents of God's missionary action.

Thus, if a church is missional, it will be:

- *Contextual*: A missional church understands itself as part of a larger context of a lost and broken world so loved by God.
- *Intentional*: A missional church understands itself as existing for the purpose of "following Christ in mission."
- *Proclaiming*: A missional church understands itself as intentionally sent by God in mission to announce in word and deed the coming of the kingdom of God in Christ.
- *Reconciling*: A missional church understands itself to be a reconciling and healing presence in its contexts, locally and globally.
- *Sanctifying*: A missional church understands itself as a faith community gathered around the Word preached, thus personally living out its truth and serving as a purifying influence to society.
- *Unifying*: A missional church understands itself as an embracing, enfolding, gathering community of faith, anxious to receive persons into its fellowship.
- *Transforming*: A missional church is "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13), a transforming presence as the body of Christ in mission, called to be, embody, and live out in the world the following biblical concepts of mission, among others: *koinonia*, *kerygma*, *diakonia*, *maertyria*, prophet, priest, king, liberator, healer, sage.

Such a conception of a missional church would need to take into consideration the interrelationship of what Bosch calls the church's "mission intention" and the church's "mission dimension" (Hesselgrave and Stetzer 2010:24-25).

As a conclusion, Van Engen proposed to Gloria his long definition for the word "mission"

I've been working on that for about 40 years now. Thus far in my own search for a definition, I have arrived at the following tentative attempt: "God's mission works primarily through Jesus Christ's sending the people of God to intentionally cross barriers from church to nonchurch, faith to nonfaith, to proclaim by word and deed the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ through the Church's participation in God's mission of reconciling people to God, to themselves, to one another, and to the world and gathering them into the church, through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit, with a view to the transformation of the world, as a sign of the coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ." (Hesselgrave and Stetzer 2010:27)

My response to Charles Van Engen's essay is organized in the following order:

observation, evaluation, and suggestion. I shall endeavor to offer an alternative definition which is brief but more holistic, better reflects the Trinitarian impetus for mission that he had included.

### **III. OBSERVATION**

Van Engen is to be credited for having achieved the stated purpose by providing "a historical overview" of how the term "mission" has been defined, and he has successfully demonstrated how variations of this definition have impacted the thought and practice of the Christian Church.

#### **Purpose and Presentation**

The format of the presentation is quite creative and realistic. It begins with his meeting with the Global Outreach Task Force of a local congregation on a Sunday afternoon and closes with his attempt to answer Gloria's question: "So, how do you define mission?" By using this device the author avoids the typical dry and boring historical narration, and provides a sense of realism in dealing with the questions, including details of place, personnel, and process.

#### **Definition and Description**

The entire essay chronicles the changes in the understanding and practice of “mission,” drawing from the author’s 40 years of experience in teaching, research, and publication. It describes the shift of emphasis in the conception and implementation of “mission” throughout the centuries. The author’s review of varying definitions of the term “mission” by mission statesmen, scholars, and mission leaders is clear and to the point. The diachronic description of the practice of “mission” by various groups of different periods is both interesting and helpful.

### **Emphasis on the Institutional Dimension of Mission**

In his essay, however, Van Engen has a tendency to focus more on the institutional dimension of “mission” at the expense of the individual dimension. The author is very conscious of the difference in these two dimensions, as indicated by the illustrative samples below:

- the reference to H. Venn’s “more institutionalized perspective” (p. 12);
- the extensive quote of J. Scherer’s comments on “church-centrism” (p. 15);
- the reference to D. McGavran versus the World Council of Churches in terms of “the departure from a church-centric view” (p. 18).

## **IV. EVALUATION**

An evaluation is provided in light of the author’s awareness of two dimensions of Christian mission, that is, “individual” and “institutional.”

### **Over-correction of Evangelical Emphasis on Individual/Spiritual Salvation**

In the review on W. Carey and the Student Volunteer Movement of section #4, the author observes that for about 150 years, up until the 1960’s...Protestants who used the “Great Commission”...assumed the following: That salvation is individualistic...personal relationship with Jesus Christ...new individual converts (pp. 10–11).

This is the only portion in the entire essay that deals with the individualistic aspect of “mission.” The rest of the paper deals with the institutional aspect of “mission.” This institutional focus of “mission” is clearly shown in the last section (“Defining ‘Missional’ and ‘Mission’: A Suggestion”) where the definition of “mission” is being narrowed down to become “missional church.” (pp. 22–24).

### **Theological Understanding of “Mission”**

It is good and proper that the author begins with word studies (Greek and English) and continues with exegetical work on key texts (e.g., Matt 28:18–20; Luke 4:43; John 20:21). Yet the author does not unpack the theological significance of these passages for his readers. Instead of being true to the texts that are trinitarian—and despite the fact that the author does cite some key trinitarian texts (Matt 28:18–20; Luke 4:43; John 20:21)—the author limits the theological understanding of “mission” to “The Sender is Jesus Christ, whose authority defines...Christian mission” (p. 7).

Thus the richness of the theological foundation of “mission” being trinitarian has been reduced to merely being Christocentric. This runs counter to the contemporary trend in missiological and theological literature that is richly trinitarian in orientation. Significantly, trinitarian missiological studies have entered into the mainstream of theology as evidenced by contemporary theologians such as C. LaCugna, D. Coffey, E. Jüngel, E. Johnson, J. Bracken, J. Moltmann, L. Boff, L. Newbigin, R. Jensen, and Y. J. Lee. This trend has also impacted the theology of Christian missions, stimulating it towards a new trinitarian orientation.

I have provided a brief bibliography of these recent publications at the end of this chapter. Hopefully, the works I have selected are sufficient to show a trend towards trinitarian orientation in missiological and theological studies. Yet Van Engen, though citing many Scripture references

to the Trinity, unnecessarily limits the theological understanding of “mission” to “The Sender [who] is Jesus Christ, whose authority defines...Christian mission.”

## V. SUGGESTION

One of the most outstanding features of this essay is the author’s repeated references to *missio dei* (pp. 12, 14, 15, 20, 21, 25) in key places.

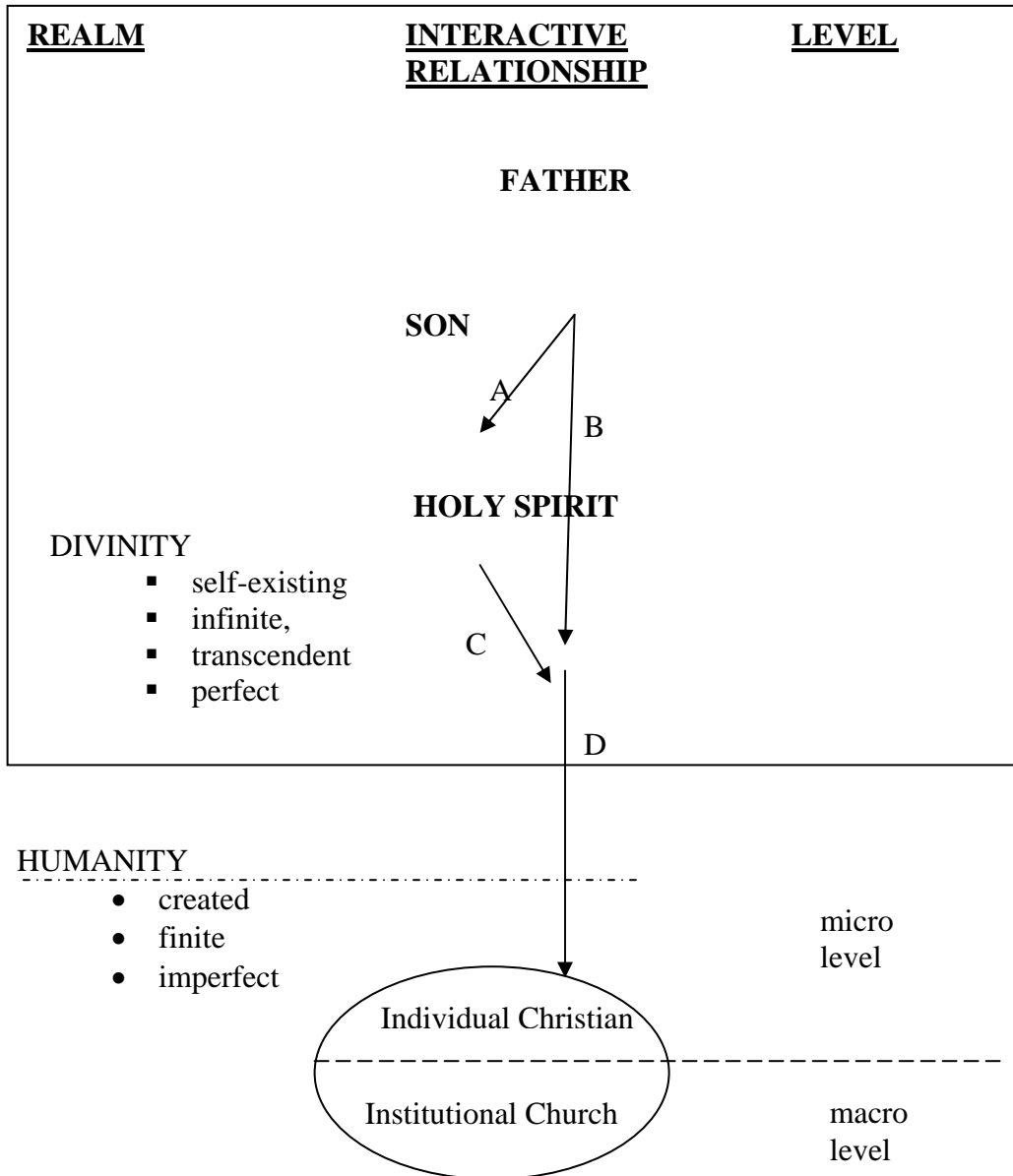
### ***Missio Dei* of the Trinity and Christian Missions at Two Levels**

In light of these multiple references, this reviewer would like to use Figure 1 to explain “The Interactive Relationship within the Trinity and Beyond”. Figure 1 shows the two realms (divinity and humanity with dotted line in between) converging by the interaction of the Trinity, the interactive pattern of the triune God (*missio dei*) at two levels: the personal, individual Christian; and the institutional church.

Van Engen cites trinitarian texts; but unnecessarily reduces *missio dei* to being Christocentric only, and “mission” is reduced to becoming the “missional church” at the institutional level. In addition to the needed emphasis on the individual career missionary, there is also a personal dimension of Christian mission for all believers. For example, while the apostle Paul was a key figure in the spread of the gospel (obeying the Great Commission) in the book of Acts, his conversion, calling, and commission had much to do with the “little mission” that God had entrusted to a relatively unknown figure of the Bible, Ananias (Acts 9). Yes, the “missional church” in Antioch (Acts 13) was prominent in carrying the Great Commission; but it had much to do with individual leaders (e.g., Simeon, Lucius of Cyrene, Mana'an, Barnabas, Saul) and with the sending of Barnabas and Saul by the church. There is no dichotomy between the individual and institutional dimensions of the “Christian mission” (see the dotted line in Figure 1). It is



therefore not correct to leave out the “individual” aspect and focus exclusively on the institutional “missional church” as Van Engen does.



**Figure 1**

**The Interactive Relationship within the Trinity and Beyond**

NOTE: references cited in Van Engen’s essay:

- A – Luke 4:43;
- B – John 14:16;
- C – John 16:17;
- D – John 20:21; Acts 13:2

Figure 1 can help correct the unbalanced treatment in Van Engen's essay and rectify its reductionistic tendency. Figure 1 clearly portrays the complexity of divine and human realms converging plus the dynamic interaction of the triune God with personal human beings and the institutional Christian church. Figure 1 also shows the more holistic understanding of Christian mission to be inclusive of individual Christians (at the micro level) and institutional church (at the macro level as marked by dotted line). From the point of this reviewer, it is apparent that Van Engen's institutional focus is an over correction of the individualistic characteristic of Christianity and mission in the Western tradition. In this case, it is not a matter of "either-or" but "both-and" at two levels.<sup>3</sup>

### **Definition of "Mission"**

The title of the article is "Mission Defined and Described," yet the entire piece has the "missional church" as the only focus. "Mission" is broader in scope than the "missional church." The Christian mission cannot be accomplished apart from individuals obedient to the Great Commission. The personal dimension of "mission" somehow escaped Van Engen's attention. He does a good job describing mission historically, but fails to define "mission" holistically and realistically.

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<sup>3</sup> For early works by Enoch Wan on "the Trinitarian paradigm" and "both-and" approach in Missiology, see the following publications:

Wan, E. "Missionary pneumatology: towards an understanding of spiritual dynamics in missions from a trinitarian perspective." Paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society meeting, Jackson, MS. November 21–23, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Theological contribution of Sino-theology to global Christian community." *Chinese Around the World*. July 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Christ for the Chinese: A Contextual Reflection." *Chinese Around the World*. November 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Practical contextualization: A case study of evangelizing contemporary Chinese." *Chinese Around the World*. March 2000:18-24.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Theological contribution of Sino-theology to global Christian community." *Chinese Around the World*. July 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Sino-Spirituality: A Case Study of Trinitarian Paradigm". *Global Missiology*. Oct. 2003.

Towards the end of the article, after providing a diachronic review of the description and definition of “mission,” Van Engen makes the following observation: “A cohesive, consistent, focused, theologically-deep, missiologically broad and contextually appropriate evangelical missiology has not yet emerged for this new century.” Then, at the conclusion, in his response to Gloria’s quest for a definition of “mission,” Van Engen proposes one that is eight-lines long but which does not measure up to the criteria he himself provides. I propose the following definition as an alternative, believing it to be closer to the above criteria and more true to the title of “Mission Defined”:

“Mission” is the Christian (individual) and the church (institutional) continuing on and carrying out the *missio dei* of the triune God at both individual and institutional levels, spiritually (saving souls) and socially (ushering in *shalom*), for redemption, reconciliation and transformation.

This definition is a better alternative for several reasons. First, it is shorter in length but more comprehensive in scope. Second, it is holistic and balanced instead of being reductionistic. Third, it is enriched by the trinitarian orientation rather than impoverished by being merely Christo-centric in emphasis. Fourth, it truly reflects the essence of the key texts Van Engen cites. Fifth, it includes spiritual and social aspects of Christian mission in general and particularly in the missions of redemption, reconciliation, and transformation. This proposed alternative definition is hopefully more “cohesive, consistent, focused, theologically-deep, missiologically broad and contextually appropriate.” It is hoped that this definition can lead to the emergence of an “evangelical missiology...for this new century.”

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