"MISSIONSHIFT" AND THE WAY FORWARD

Mark Vanderwerf

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I. INTRODUCTION

Fifty years ago a polemical debate was raging between two contrasting theologies of mission. Leaders in the evangelical movement charged the conciliar movement (the World Council of Churches) with jettisoning the classical view of mission for a radical, new reinterpretation of the concepts of mission.[1]

We are now in the midst of another debate over theology of mission - this time *within* the evangelical movement. Ed Steztzer pulled together an assortment of missiologists, theologians, and practitioners last summer to address the confusion that has arisen over the meaning of the term "missional." One of the results of this "conversation" was a book Stezter edited and co-published with David Hesselgrave called *MissionShift.* The first of three themes the book addressed was the shifting conceptualization of "mission" among evangelicals. This "missionShift"[2] has led to confusion - among church members, among pastors, among church leaders and among missionaries. Hesselgrave illustrated this confusion in a recent blog article,

> Within two or three weeks of the book's release I revisited my former Friendship Bible Class in Rockford's First Evangelical Free Church on a Sunday morning and participated in a six-hour symposium on *MissionShift* issues held in Morning Star Baptist on the following day.

> [The Friendship Class] consisted of 25 or 30 seniors who are devoted to Christ and missions… it dawned on me that, while Friendship class laypersons readily understood and appreciated what the Apostle Paul wrote about Christian mission in Romans, they would find it very difficult to really appreciate much of what contributors wrote about mission in *MissionShift*.

> The Monday symposium involved 25-30 area pastors, missionaries and mission leaders of varying affiliations… It also occurred to me that, after five to six hours of deliberating *MissionShift* issues, professionals participating in the Monday symposium were probably left with as many questions as when they began.[3]

Hesselgrave concluded,

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[1] Arther Glasser and Donald McGavran survey the debate in *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

[2] In the rest of this article I'll use Stetzer's term "missionShift" to describe the changing understandings over the meaning of "mission" that is occurring among evangelicals and the confusion that has come as a result.

[3] David Hesselgrave, "Back to the Basics: Second Thoughts on our book *MissionShift",* online at: http://www.edstetzer.com/2011/01/monday-is-for-missiology-missi-1.html, accessed Feb. 22, 2011.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

> Although anecdotal, I believe this to be intensely relevant for evangelicals in this globalizing world of the third millennium. We have arrived at a point where we desperately need the aid of some rudimentary principles (let's call them "postulates") that enable us to cut through the underbrush, refocus mission and move forward.[4]

It is this issue, i.e., How should we understanding mission and missionary work? that I address in this article.

II. WHAT IS MISSION? THREE BASIC POSITIONS

As in most debates, there are a variety of positions about what constitutes mission. Padilla and Escobar suggest a continuum of 7 commonly held approaches.[5] Ferdinando delineated four approaches in his excellent survey.[6] I'm choosing to group the range of approaches held by evangelicals (not just scholars but ordinary church members as well) into three basic positions:

Position 1 Missions means: Missionaries obeying the Great Commission in unreached areas

Position 2 Missions means: Churches obeying the Great Commission in the world

Position 3 Mission means: Churches (and their members) doing a broad range of "ministries" in the world (some call this the *Missional Church* approach*)*

1. Position 1

Thirty years ago, if the average church member in an evangelical church was asked "What is missions?" in all likelihood, he or she would have answered, "Missions is obedience to the Great Commission." Harry Boer, in *Pentecost and Missions,* traces the roots of the evangelical
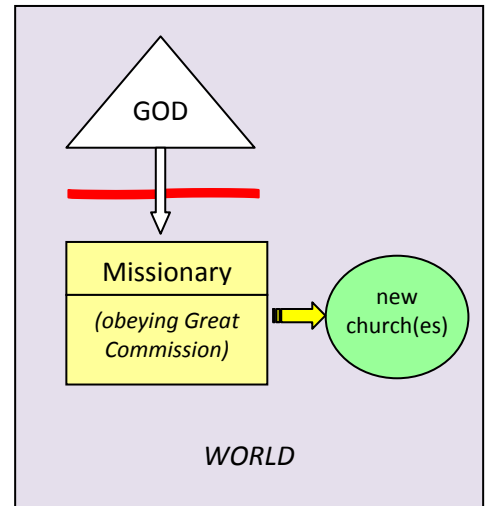
Position 1

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[4] Hesselgrave, 2011, Ibid.

[5] 1) Proclamation only, 2) Traditional evangelical, 3) Pragmatic evangelical, 4) Integral mission, 5) Pragmatic ecumenical, 6) Traditional ecumenical, 7) Liberation theology. Their helpful chart is reproduced in Davis, "What Is Mission? An Evangelical Perspective" online at: http://www.globalconnections.co.uk/OneStopCMS/Core/CrawlerResourceServer.aspx?resource=64086b9c466e4cb7908dcc0d72565061&mode=link&guid=cf595042f9794cad8222ced112524215 accessed: Feb 23, 2011.

[6] Keith Ferdinando, "Mission: A Problem of Definition," *Themelios,* 33.1 (May 2008)

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

missionary movement's foundations back to William Carey and his innovative adoption of the Great Commission(s), especially Matthew 28:18-20, as the basis for missions.[7] Rufus Anderson, writing 170 years ago, articulated this Position 1 like this:

A missionary is one called by God and sent by the church to do "missionary work," i.e.:

- the converting of lost men,

- organising them into churches,

- giving these churches a competent native ministry,

- all for the purpose of spreading of a scriptural self-propagating Christianity[8]

In this approach, every believer is called to be involved in world missions, whether by "going, giving or praying". Witness and service, i.e. showing the love of Christ to a hurting world, in our community is important, but it is not missions. The primary paradigm in Scripture for this approach to understanding missions and missionary work is the apostle Paul.

2. Position 2

This position is similar to Position 1 in that it roots "mission" in Jesus' Great Commission(s) (especially Matt. 28:18-20). World evangelization is the task of missions. The difference is that obedience to the Great Commission is the "job description" of every local church, not just missionaries. Every congregation of believers is responsible both for fulfilling the Great Commission in their local context and for sending out missionaries to unreached areas and peoples.

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[7] see Van Engen's summary of the foundational role of the "Great Commission" in evangelical thinking in *MissionShift* (Charles Van Engen, "Essay 1 - Mission Defined and Described," *MissionShift*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010)*,* 15-17.

[8] "Though they may not have intended it so, the goal of mission advocated by Venn and Anderson as a principle of mission administration became a virtual definition of mission that dominated mission theology and practice among almost all older denominations and mission agencies for a hundred years, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. VanEngen, 16.

Van Engen, in his *MissionShift* article, distinguishes between Carey's focus on world evangelism and Venn and Anderson's focus on church planting and places them into separate eras. I group these two emphases together. Both are based on the Great Commission. In practice, when missionaries who worked cross-culturally in the period between Carey and Anderson evangelized, they did organize those who believed into churches. The main difference in the two eras is the clearer articulation of the need to plan indigenous churches on the part of later missionaries.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

The actual task of missions remains the same, i.e. proclaiming the gospel to non-believers, grounding them in the faith, and gathering them together into churches.

Positions 1 and 2 held sway up until a period of "great ferment in Evangelical mission thinking" that began about 40 years ago. Today, Van Engen concludes,
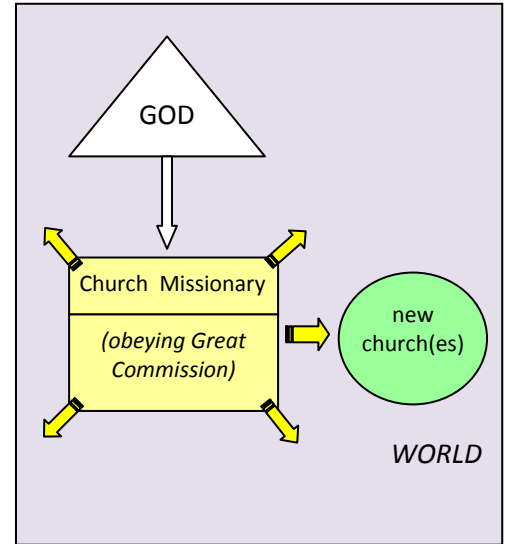
Position 2

Evangelicals are still "searching for new, appropriate, creative and motivating definitions of mission… for a new, cohesive synthesis… A cohesive, consistent, focused, theologically deep, missiologically broad, and contextually appropriate Evangelical missiology has not yet emerged for this new century.
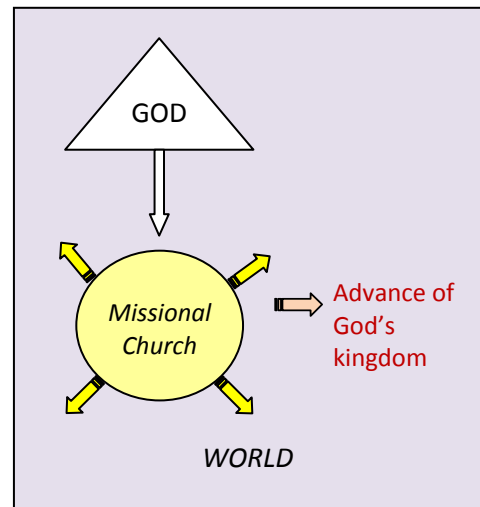
Position 3

3. Position 3

A third position is emerging, especially among younger evangelicals. This position is similar to Position 2 in that is sees the church as God's "agent" of mission, but conceptualizes that mission more broadly. Mission, in Position 3 includes "everything the church is called and sent into the world to do." The Church itself is missionary, sent on mission by God into the world to carry on the work of Christ. Sometimes this is referred to as the *Missional Church* approach.

        Evangelicals who hold this position typically turn to John 20:21 to support their understanding of mission. Just as the Father sent the Son into the world "on mission", so Jesus

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

sends the church out into the world "on mission." The primary paradigm in Scripture for this approach to understanding mission is Jesus and his incarnation.[9]

Mission is to be *incarnational* ("go and be" among people) rather than *attractional* ("come to our meeting and see"). The end result of mission is not just conversion, nor just growing a church larger nor just planting new churches, but transformation -- of individuals, communities and societies. Sometimes this is expressed as impacting the community for Christ, or "building the kingdom" or helping create "shalom".

Position 3 was initially articulated by theologians and missiologists. Bosch identified a form of this position as a major paradigm shift in theology of mission in his classic work *Transforming Mission*. The new understanding of mission inherent in Position 3 has begun to filter down to the "rank and file" of evangelical believers and congregations. Older believers who have spent their lives in evangelical churches usually hold to Position 1 or Position 2. They are also the main financial supporters of traditional missionary work. Younger leaders, and the more innovative churches they are starting and leading, lean toward Position 3. When they do promote "cross-cultural" missionary work, it is usually partnership based or rooted in short-term projects.[10]

III. DEFINING TERMS: CHURCH

One of the challenges creating confusion in our thinking and discussion about mission is our failure to carefully define key terms, especially the terms "church" and "mission." Clear thinking and discussion is difficult when discussion partners are not using these words in the same way. Consider our usage of the word "church" for example.

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[9] John Stott introduced Evangelicals to the theological foundations for this approach in his 1975 book *Christian Mission in the Modern World.* He writes, "Today I would express myself differently… The crucial form in which the Great Commission has been handed down to us (though it is the most neglected because it is the most costly) is the Johannine… Deliberately and precisely [Jesus] made his mission the model of ours, saying '*as* the Father sent me, *so* I send you." *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1975), 23.

[10] See Bruce Camp's helpful division of churches into "one of three categories: supporting, sending and synergistic" ("Paradigm Shifts in World Evangelization", *Mobilizer* 5.1 (Winter 1994), online at: http://www.crcna.org/site_uploads/uploads/igps/ParadigmShiftsinWorldEvangelization.pdf (viewed Feb 22, 2011). For a popular study contrasting generational differences in relation to mission work, see Fritz Kling's book, *The Meeting of the Waters* (Colorado Springs: David Cook, 2010).

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

1. <u>The term *church* is a flexible term in the New Testament</u>

In the New Testament the term church is used in a broad way. Grudem writes,

> In the New Testament the word "church" may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church.
>
> - A "house church" is called a "church" in Romans 16:5 ("greet also the church in their house"), 1 Corinthians 16:19 ("Aquila and Priscilla, together with the church in their house send you hearty greetings in the Lord").
> - The church in an entire city is also called "a church" (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; and 1 Thess. 1:1).
> - The church in a region is referred to as a "church" in Acts 9:31: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up" *cf.* 1 Cor 16:1, 19; 2 Cor 8:1 ("The churches of Galatia / Asia / Macedonia")
> - Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as "the church." Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25)
>
> The community … [or] group of God's people considered at any level from local to universal may rightly be called "a church." [11]

When missiologists declare, "The church is the God-ordained agent of his mission in the world"[12] what exactly are they referring to? All believers throughout the entire world? a denomination? a network of churches in a region? a small house church? or something else?

2. "Community" vs. "Group"

The usage of the term "church" in the New Testament is sometimes best conveyed by the English word "group" and sometimes (less often) by the English word "community." A community, in the broad sense can exist without face to face interaction. This implies is a social category of people who share similar social beliefs, values or characteristics but who do not necessarily interact with each other on a face to face basis. An example would be our usage of

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[11] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 857; J.D. Payne, in his book *Missional House Churches*, uses a simple convention that helps address this confusion. He tells his readers, "Throughout this book, when I use the word Church with an uppercase C, I am speaking of the universal body of Christ. a denomination, or the entire body of Christ on a particular continent (for example, North American Church). The word church with a lowercase c refers to the local expression of the body of Christ, a local church. At times, I refer to both the universal and the local church. If the distinction cannot be determined from the context. I use C/church when referring to both." Personally, I found this confusing at first, when once I got used to it I was surprised at how much clarity it added to his discussion.

[12] Andreas Kostenberg, "Twelve Theses on the Church's Mission in the Twenty-first Century," in Hesselgrave, David and Ed Stezter, ed. *MissionShift: Global Issues in the Third Millennium* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010), 66.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

the phrase the "Hispanic community." Paul's reference to the "church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria" (Acts 9:31) probably carries this meaning.

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Most of the occurrences of the term "church" in the New Testament refer to actual local churches - these are what social scientists refer to as "social groups." In a social group, members share common beliefs and values, interact in patterned relationships with other group members and possess a sense of solidarity and collective identity. Social scientists warn us that using social group terminology for larger collectivities (such "the Church" in the broader sense of the word) can be misleading because it, "unconsciously encourages us to view these collectivities as "entities to which interests and agency can be attributed".[13]

In essence, we are being warned against attributing "agency" to a "community" that is too large for "face to face" interaction. It appears to me that while the New Testament carefully avoids doing this, this is precisely what some missiologists, especially those espousing Position 3, are doing.

IV.   DEFINING TERMS: MISSION

A second term that needs careful definition is the word "mission". If we have different pre-understandings of what the word "mission" means, meaningful conversation becomes almost impossible. Timothy Tennent is right, "In formulating a missiology for the twenty-first century, the word *mission* needs very careful definition if it is to continue as a useful word for the church."[14]

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[13] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 8.
[14] Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Mission: A Trintarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 53.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

1. More attention needs to be given to the actual Scriptural text

At this point I would argue that we need to pay more attention to the way the *mission/sending* word group is used in Scripture. In a recent essay on the gospel, Carson began his probe by "looking at 'gospel' words, *euangelion* and its cognates." His larger aim, he wrote, was to study and show,

> (a) how the New Testament relates these gospel words to a wide swath of theological and pastoral themes and (b) how we would be wiser to stop talking so much about what "evangelicalism" is without deeper reflection on what the "evangel" is, what "the gospel" is.[15]

This is exactly the kind of groundwork that needs to be done in our attempt to understand "mission." We would be wise to stop talking so much about mission and missionary work without deeper reflection on the "mission/sending" concept in Scripture. What Carson observed about the term *gospel* is also true of the term *mission,* "I fear that some of the nonsense about what the gospel is today turns on not having worked through the way the word-group is actually used".[16]

2. The Scriptural Word-group used for "Mission"

Some writers on mission argue that since the word "mission" does not occur in Scripture we are free to define it as we choose. That's not quite true. It is true that the word "mission" isn't in our English Bibles. But it's more complicated than that. As DuBose points out,

> We must not relate simply one English word to its linguistic counterpart in the Hebrew and Greek texts of the original Scriptures, we must relate two: *mission* and *sending*... The mood and mode of the action world of Scripture have called for verbs -- and the language of *sending* seems to say it best… We seem to say it best [in English] with "mission"*,* and the Bible seems to say it best with "sending." However, the paradox is in the difference in the thought patterns of the two separate worlds. There is no difference… with regard to the essential meaning of the missional idea. *Mission* means sending. We may, therefore, legitimately and meaningfully express what we mean by our favorite term *mission* through what the Bible means by its favorite term *sending.*[17]

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[15] D.A. Carson, "What is the Gospel - Revisited" in Storms, Sam and Justin Taylor, *For the Fame of God's Name.* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

[16] Carson, *ibid.*

[17] Francis Dubose, *God who Sends: A Fresh Quest for Biblical Mission* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983), 32, 36-37.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

Dubose outlines the basic biblical meaning of sending/missions like this,

> Sending (or mission) in Scripture always conveys a threefold idea: (1) A sender, (2) someone sent (or sometimes something impersonal), and (3) a purpose in view. In the vast majority of references in Scripture where "sending" is used a theological way, the sender is God himself and the purpose of the sending is related to God's providential, judgmental and saving work.[18]

3. <u>The Primary "Sent Ones" in Scripture are Individuals not "Collective Communities"</u>

What I find significant about the actual <u>usage</u> of "sending" terminology in Scripture is its very concrete nature. The key "sent ones" in Scripture are:

- <u>Moses</u> - called, prepared, and sent back to Egypt with a specific mission
- <u>Jesus</u> - chosen and sent into the world with a specific mission
- <u>The Spirit</u> - sent, on the day of Pentecost, with a specific mission
- <u>The 12</u> (11) apostles, chosen, called, prepared and sent out on a specific mission
- <u>Paul</u> - chosen before his birth, called, commissioned and sent out on a specific mission

All of the key "sent ones" in Scripture are individuals. In view of the actual Scriptural data, I think we need to consider why is there such a pervasive emphasis in the literature on mission being the task of the church" (Position 2-3), and why is there such an aversion to theologies of mission that emphasize the work of individuals such as Position 1 does, over against the "corporate nature of the church?" I'll examine the Great Commission texts in greater detail in my second article which appears later in this issue of Global Missiology.

I find it instructive that Chris Wright, in his two books on mission, tells the reader that he has given up using the term "mission" in the sense of "sending" and has decided it is more helpful to use it in the secular sense of "a long-term purpose or goal that is to be achieve through proximate objectives and planned actions."[19]

That makes sense, because this definition better "fits" the way the Bible speaks about the "callings and responsibilities" of the people of God (the subject of Wright's book). The problem is the confusion it creates. Wright is free to define his terms and use the word "mission" the way he does - but communication becomes difficult when he discusses "mission" with someone else

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[18] Dubose, *ibid,* 37, 41.

[19] Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 23.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

using the term "mission" to refer to the "sending" out of authorized individuals to accomplish a task on behalf of the sender, as Scripture does.

V. Reformulating a Theology of Mission - Another Option?

So what is the way forward? I believe there is a need to reformulate our theology of mission. In today's climate of "missionShift," we need a theology of mission that that is rooted in Scripture and comprehensive, yet at the same time simple, clear and easily understood. It is important that ordinary believers be able to connect what we are teaching with what they read in their Bibles.

Position 4

Developing such a theology of mission, one that is "consistent, focused, theologically deep, missiologically broad and contextually appropriate,"[20] is an important task. Ralph Winter's warning is still relevant,

> The future of the world hinges on what we make of this word "mission. Yet at this moment it is almost universally misunderstood—in both liberal and conservative circles. About the only people who still think of mission as having to do with preaching the gospel where Christ is not named with being a testimony to the very last tribe and nation and tongue on this earth, are the often confused people in the pew. In this matter their instincts outshine those of many eminent [theologians] and ecclesiastical statesmen.[21]

In an effort to contribute this effort of developing a theology of mission, I'm suggesting an option I'm calling *Position 4*. This proposal is a combination of *Position 1* and *Position 3*.

While it is true that both local churches and apostolic type missionaries who bring the gospel to unreached areas and peoples play an important role in God's great redemptive mission - I'm suggesting that we reserve missions/sending terminology for "apostolic type" work and avoid using it for the multiple ministries local churches and individual believers in those

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[20] This expression is used by several of the contributors in the *MissionShift* book.

[21] Ralph Winters, "The Meaning of 'Mission': Understanding This Term Is Crucial to Completion of the Missionary Task," *Mission Frontiers Bulletin* 20.33-34 (March-April 1998):15, cited by Hesselgrave, David, "Conclusion: A Scientific Postscript - Grist for the Missiological Mills of the Future" in *MissionShift* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010).

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

churches carry out in the world. This, I is consistent with the way "missions/sending" language is used in the New Testament.

Bishop Stephen Neill warned us 50 years ago about the problem of broadening the way we use the term "mission,"

> Neill called his ecumenical colleagues in the World Council of Churches to account for irrationality and illogical thinking. He warned that they were in danger of "casting their net too wide thereby making mission enquiries almost meaningless"… He said, "When everything is mission, nothing is mission." Now that statement is more than a choice bit of missiological doggerel. It is just good, plain common sense. And Neill followed it with another statement that makes for good missiology as well as good sense. He wrote, *"If everything that the Church does is to be classed as 'mission,' we shall have to find another term for the Church's particular responsibility for 'the heathen,' those who have never yet heard the Name of Christ* [italic mine][22]

Whether we agree with Neill's criticism or not,[23] his conclusion is absolutely correct. If we chose broaden "mission" to include the outreach of local churches, then we do need another term to describe apostolic type missionary work.

E. The Importance of Local Churches for the Advance of the Gospel

It is helpful to consider local churches in three dimensions of relationship. Believers in local churches, individually and corporately, relate

- Upwardly: to God
- Inwardly: to each other
- Outwardly: with those who are not believers

The emphasis of the New Testament epistles is not on the outward dimension of church dynamics but on the inward and upward dimensions. This is especially obvious when the New Testament metaphors of the church are examined.

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[22] Hesselgrave, 2011, *ibid.* Hesselgrave quotes from Neill's 1958 book, *Creative Tension*: *The Duff Lectures.*

[23] Wright rejects his criticism out of hand, saying, "[I] dislike the old knock-down line that sought to ring-fence the word "mission" for specifically cross-cultural sending of missionaries for evangelism: "If everything is mission, then nothing is mission." It would seem more biblical to say, "If everything is mission…everything is mission." Wright rejects his criticism out of hand, saying, "[I] dislike the old knock-down line that sought to ring-fence the word "mission" for specifically cross-cultural sending of missionaries for evangelism: "If everything is mission, then nothing is mission." It would seem more biblical to say, "If everything is mission…everything is mission." Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 26.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

1. The Focus of Metaphors of the Church

      In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul comments, "we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building." Notice the distinction being made in this verse:

God at work	Result of God's "work"
God is working, in that work he has his "fellow-workers," his "servants," "ministers."	The result of God's activity, working through his "fellow-workers" - the church at Corinth, i.e. *God's field*, *God's building*.

Differing Orientations of Biblical Metaphors for Church and Missionary

Three Metaphors of the Church in 1 Corinthians 3

      In this passage, Paul using two metaphors - that of a field and a building. He describes two "fellow-worker with God" roles - "he who plants" and "he who waters." Both of these roles, he says are "assigned" by the Lord (vs 5). Paul describe his role as an apostolic worker in this way, "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master building I laid a foundation. which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:10-11).

      A contrast is made in this section between the apostolic worker and the local church. The apostolic worker (*sent one*) works, plants and builds. The work in view is preaching and teaching the gospel, the seed planted is the gospel, the foundation of the building is the gospel. Christ sent me, Paul says earlier in 1 Corinthians, to preach the gospel to you in Corinth (1:17), i.e. Jesus and him crucified (2:2). The church in Corinth was the result of the work of those God the Father sent (Jesus, the Spirit (emphasized in 1 Cor 2), and Paul the missionary). Notice how the metaphors used to represent the Church are applied. The progression is not:

      God -> Paul sent into mission -> the local church in Corinth sent into mission

      The field remains a field -- it should grow. The building remains a building -- it should become a firm, solid building that doesn't crumble when tested.[24] The emphasis of each of these metaphors, as far as the local church is concerned, is one the inward, and to a less degree outward dimension of relationship.[25]

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[24] It may be that Paul is linking the building metaphor with the temple metaphor that appears in the following verses. The way this metaphor is applied is again internal to the church, as a temple, the church is to be holy, because God dwells there.

[25] To use the language of *Missional Church* writers, if there is a missional dimension here for the church in Corinth, it is primarily "attractional."

        Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

The *Body* Metaphor of the Church

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 Paul develops the body metaphor of the Church. In many discussions of the "mission of the church the body metaphor is set forth as the primary metaphor Paul uses to describe Jesus' Church. I find this odd, since Paul uses this metaphor only uses it sparingly (1 Cor 12, Eph 4:1-16 and in passing in Rom. 12:5 and Col.1:18, 24). Notice that the point of the metaphor in these verses is not outreach in the world (mission), nor being "Christ's hands and feet in the world" but internal growth (what Paul calls the "building up of the body of Christ" in Ephesians 4:13). Believers are to "all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"… the whole body growing "so that it builds itself up to love" (Eph 4:13, 32)

Other Metaphors of the Church

Other metaphors of the church appear in Scripture. The bride metaphor emphasizes the Church's relationship to Christ and the importance of purity. In the metaphor of the church as a flock the focus is both of the Church's relationship to Jesus and her need for the feeding, care and protection shepherds provides. Although not often discussed, the metaphor of the church as God's family[26] is by far and away the most used metaphor in the New Testament. Here the emphasis is on relationships between believers and between them and God. Grudem summarizes the focus of the key metaphors of the church in the New Testament this way,

> The fact that the church is like a family should increase our love and fellowship with one another. The thought that the church is like the bride of Christ should stimulate us to strive for greater purity and holiness, and also greater love for Christ and submission to him. The image of the church as branches in a vine should cause us to rest in him more fully. The idea of an agricultural crop should encourage us to continue growing in the Christian life and obtaining for ourselves and others the proper spiritual nutrients to grow. The picture of the church as God's new temple should increase our awareness of God's very presence dwelling in our midst as we meet. The concept of the church as a priesthood should help us to see more clearly the delight God has in the sacrifices of praise and good deeds that we offer to him (see Heb. 13:15–16). The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ should increase our interdependence on one another and our appreciation of the diversity of gifts within the body.[27]

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[26] i.e. God as father, Jesus as elder brother, believers as brothers and sisters and the Church as the household of God.

[27] Grudem, *ibid,* 859.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

Metaphors of the Church and the Outward Dimension of Church Dynamics

Notice which dimensions of church dynamics are in focus in these metaphors. If the church is "the agent of God's mission in the world today" you would expect the metaphors that "help us understand the nature of the church" would at least mention this. But they don't. It's certainly true that most of these metaphors can be extended and applied to "mission" in an unbelieving world. But Scripture doesn't do this.

2. The Importance of Local Churches in God's Redemptive Mission

There is much in Scripture about how the people of God in the Old Testament and believers and local churches in the New Testament are to relate to the "outside world". *Missional Church* writers and scholars like Chris Wright have done an excellent job describing how God's people are to do this. What I would label the "callings and responsibilities" of God's people he calls the "mission" of God's people.

The carrying out of these callings and responsibilities by the people of God is crucial for the advance of the gospel in the world. Köestenberg is right when he notes,

> The way the kingdom of God is extended in this world today is through regenerate believers acting out their Christian faith in their God-assigned spheres of life: the church, their families, their work-places, the societies in which they live.[28]

James Engels said the same thing years ago,

> It is time to refocus our thinking so the building of a healthy church becomes a central part of evangelistic strategy… I am convinced that this is the stuff out of which world evangelization is made. The building of a church that will function as salt and light in the world must be the key to world evangelization…The message of the gospel is not an abstraction. Christ becomes known in the best sense as He is incarnated in His Church and people.[29]

When churches are revitalized and followers of Jesus are healthy witness to those "outside" the local church comes naturally. Boer develops this theme in depth, arguing that such witness is not a result of obedience to Jesus' Great Commission(s), but of the ministry of the

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[28] Kostenberg, *ibid.*

[29] Engel, James. "Great Commission or Great Commotion." *Christianity Today* (April 20, 1984), 52-53.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

Spirit in their midst.[30] Michael Green, whose doctoral research was on evangelism in the early church, describes the witness of the early church in a similar way,

> The early church made evangelism their number one priority… [they] had a deep compassion for men without Christ… evangelism was a natural, spontaneous "chattering" of good news. It was engaged in continuously by all types of Christians as a matter of course and of privilege…the Gospel was frequently argued about in the philosophical schools, discussed in the streets, talked over in the laundry… the maximum impact was made by the changed lives and quality of community among the Christians… There does not seem to have been anything remarkable in the strategy and tactics of the early Christian mission. Indeed, it is doubtful if they had one. I do not believe they set out with any blueprint. They had an unquenchable conviction that Jesus was the key to life and death, happiness and purpose, and they simply could not keep quiet about him. The Spirit of Jesus within them drove them into mission. The tandem relationship between the Spirit bearing witness to Jesus and the believers bearing that witness was understood among them and the initiatives in evangelism which we read of in Acts are consistently laid at the door of the Lord the Spirit himself: effective mission does not spring from human blueprints.[31]

This kind of witness and a corresponding care for the needy are the main way the Gospel spreads. Rodney Stark's analysis of the rise of Christianity in the first 250 years after Pentecost comes to the same conclusion.

But this sort of witness by local churches and believers is not the same thing as the "apostolic task" of bringing the gospel to new areas or peoples and laying the foundations for new churches. In Scripture, "mission/sending" language is not used for the regular witness of every healthy believer nor for the ministries of local congregations in the world, but for apostolic type missionary work carried out by individuals.

F. Apostolic Type Missionary Work and the Advance of the Gospel

When I refer to "apostolic type missionary work" I'm speaking of the task of bringing the gospel to areas and peoples without Christ, leading people to faith in Christ, and laying the foundations of new churches - what is in view in Position 1.

In the past, at least among evangelicals, when the term mission was used, this was the activity in view. There was a common "shared understanding" that the term "missions" referred

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[30] Boer, Harry, *Pentecost and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

[31] Michael Green, "Methods and Strategy in the Evangelism of the Early Church," in J.D. Douglas. ed. *Let the Earth Hear His Vocie: International Congress of World Evangelism, Lansanne, Switzerland* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications: 1975), 159-166.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

to this activity. A "missionary" was a person sent out to do this type of work across cultural or geographical boundaries, in contexts where Christ was not known. Today this "shared understanding" over terminology is gone. An increasing number of evangelicals use the word "mission" in the broad sense of referring to a whole host of activities done in Christ's name. Chris Wright, for example, in his two recent, biblically grounded books on "mission", uses the term "mission" to refer to, "All that God is doing in his great purpose for the whole of creation and all that he calls us to do in cooperation with that purpose".[32]

When we begin to apply "sending" language (i.e. "mission") to everything "the whole Church" does in the whole world, the sharp focus of Scripture on the centrality of <u>the apostolic task</u> (i.e. what the Son was sent to accomplish, what the Spirit was sent to empower, the foundational work that the 12 and Paul were called, prepared, and sent to do) is blurred.

Yes, the holy living and witness of both individual believers and of local churches is the primary way the gospel spreads and advances in the world (the point made by proponents of Position 3) but this sort of witness is built on earlier "apostolic" sendings that Scripture so clearly emphasizes in its use of "missional" language.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this article I'm proposing an approach to theology of mission that I've called Position 4. I've introduced that position here and in my second article, also found in this issue of *Global Missiology,* I will examine Position 4 in greater detail.

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[32] Wright, Ibid. 25.

Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

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Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011

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Mark Vanderwerf - March 23, 2011