

# ***Missio Dei* and the Corrosion of Christian Missions**



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## **Introduction**

This article argues that *missio Dei*, a theology of missions embraced much of evangelical Christendom today, is corroding the evangelical missionary enterprise from within. It first presents a brief – and, due to space constraints, somewhat simplistic – review of *Missio Dei* for the sake of the uninitiated, and then list a number of reasons for this dire assessment.

## **1. *Missio Dei* in a nutshell**

The concept of *Missio Dei* has led two lives. It was first embraced by the mainline churches. When it had virtually run its course there some theologically conservative missiologists embraced the basic idea, reconceptualized aspects of it, and saw it become the most popular theological basis for missions. This article focuses on the contemporary, “evangelical” model setting the tone today.

### **1.1. Christian Mission is the all-encompassing work of the Triune God**

*Missio Dei*’s fundamental idea is that Christian mission is rooted in the all-encompassing work of the Triune God. This led to a shift in focus from missions as something the church does to something which God does through various ways and means.

To say that the church is essentially missionary does not mean that mission is church-centered. It is *Missio Dei*. It is Trinitarian. It is mediating the love of God the Father who is the Parent of all people, whoever and wherever they may be (Bosch 1991:505).

### **1.2. God's mission flows from His loving and compassionate nature**

God's love is perceived as his defining characteristic. "God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people" (Bosch 1991:402, also 1980:240). "Love is the foundation of God's existence" (Costas 1989:74); "God's compassion and love for his creation is his paramount, even overwhelming, attribute" (Guder 1998:32; Kirk 1999:27).

### **1.3. God's mission encompasses all of human life**

One of Bosch's simpler formulations of *Missio Dei* is "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" (Bosch 1991:10). Bosch here enunciates the concept's wholistic embrace.

Wilbert Shenk notes that "the redemptive power of God is now being guided by a particular strategy in order to bring the divine purpose to completion by delivering the creation from the powers of decay and death" (Shenk 1996:84). Christopher Wright maintains that "the fact is that sin and evil constitute bad news in every area of life on this planet. The redemptive work of God through the cross of Christ is good news for every area of life on earth that has been touched by sin. Bluntly, we need a holistic gospel because the world is in a holistic mess" (Wright 2006:315).

### **1.4. The goal of God's mission: the restoration of creation**

The goal toward which God's all-embracing love drives him is "to make all things right". In other words, as creator of the world, God's purposes are not limited to the salvation of souls but extends to the re-establishment of a new "shalom". This restoration is perceived as taking place—at least in large part—in the current historical reality. Mission thus seeks to utilize historic processes as it seeks to transform the world into the kingdom of God.

We cannot separate God's redemptive activities in the evangelistic process from what Father, Son and Spirit are doing in the secular affairs of life... Communicating the good news of salvation with integrity in our respective life situations means relating that message to God's involvement in all the spheres of human life and to the totality of God's concern for the well-being of our planet and the universe (Costas 1989:84).

Christopher Wright, linking the Bible's eschatological vision of a restored creation with missionary activity states that:

The mission of God is ultimately to restore his whole creation to what it was intended to be—God's creation, ruled over by redeemed humanity, giving glory and praise to its creator. Our mission, in participation with that divine mission, and in anticipation of its final accomplishment, is to work with God in exposing the idols that continue to

blur the distinction, and to liberate men and women from the destructive delusions they foster (Wright 2006:165).

These destructive delusions include all the idols, evils, false hopes and enticements of Western culture, ranging from material prosperity to “New-age-ism, narcissism and hedonism” (2006:166).

### **1.5. The church is invited to be a participant with God in His mission**

The triune God's invites the church to participate in His mission of global restoration/transformation. The idea of the church as a participant along with many other means God is using in his project of establishing “shalom” is strongly affirmed: “The *Missio Dei* is God's activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate” (Bosch 1991:401).

Wright maintains that “fundamentally, our mission... means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation” (Wright 2006:23).

Scott Sunquist states eloquently that “*Missio Dei* must be understood as a foundational concept that launches the church from the place of worship and fellowship into the frontiers of God's reign. Living such a life, participating with God in such a movement, is costly and painful, and yet, in the end, it is glorious” (Sunquist 2013:xiii).

In short, the church's job is to participate in what God is already doing globally.

How can one disapprove of a wholistic theology of missions which has its roots in the love of the triune God who invites his people to join him in the restoration of all things? Yet it is precisely this model of mission which is corroding the enterprise today.

## **2. The problems with *missio Dei***

There are numerous problems with *Missio Dei*. Herewith a sampling.

### **2.1. It mutes the idea that sinful man in his natural state is an object of God's wrath**

*Missio Dei* mutes the Bible's view of the natural man as an object of God's wrath (see, for instance, Mark 7:21-22; Luke 13:1-5; John 8:24; Rom. 1:18-2:5; 5:12-19; Eph. 2:13), particularly in evangelistic contexts. The idea of sin as personal, individual, and pertaining primarily to man's culpability before God, and not just separation from Him, is either de-emphasized or disregarded altogether. Instead, sin is presented as brokenness, or as a type of exile, or as enslavement to something which controls us and from which we need to be liberated. In other words, sin is not defined in terms of how it affects man's relationship with God, but in the way it affects people. It is defined by what we are saved from, not by whom we have offended.

## **2.2. Its presentation of God's love as his attribute par excellence is a half-truth**

As seen, the proponents of *Missio Dei* celebrate the love of God as his attribute par excellence. C.S. Song, former president of the World Alliance of Reform Churches, approvingly spells out the logical consequences:

Theology of compassion is the theology of love with no strings attached to it... it does not assume that God left Asia in the hands of pagan powers and did not come to it until missionaries of the West reached it. That would have left Asia without the God of Jesus for millions of years. Jesus' God could not have been such an irresponsible God (Song 1985:167).

The problem here is that *Missio Dei* makes no distinction between God's governing work and his saving work, as a result of which God's love is seen as operating outside the cross as well as through it. This is quite possible if one glosses over man's legal culpability before a holy God. However, there is hardly a verse in the New Testament which speaks of God's love that does not also speak of the cross (see, for example, John 3:16, Gal. 2:20; Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10). The all-embracing fountain of God's love which proponents of *Missio Dei* so celebrate is, in fact, mediated through the risen Christ, and thus only available to those who are in Christ, to those whose sins have been atoned for on the cross.

The gospel is not simply declaring that the kingdom of God has come but declaring that one can enter it through repentance of sin, faith in Christ's substitutionary atonement and resurrection from the dead, and the gift of the "new birth".

## **2.3. It downplays divine judgement and hell as motives for mission**

The subject index of Michael Goheen's 440 pages book *Introducing Christian Mission Today* makes no reference whatsoever to the subject of hell. For his part, Scott Sunquist holds that

there are some questions and issues that we cannot know the answer to in this life. Therefore it is best to set these issues aside for later times of private intellectual speculation and move on to what we do know. 1. We cannot know the actual state, condition, or place of hell. 2. We cannot know the actual state, condition or place of heaven. 3. We cannot know exactly who will be found in either place (although we may have some pretty good ideas). 4. We cannot know the fate of those who came before the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, nor can we be sure of the fate of those who have never heard of Jesus Christ (Sunquist 2013:335).

These are remarkable affirmations of ignorance for someone in the business of training evangelical missionaries—after all, substantial biblically-based answers to these questions can be found in any of the many evangelical systematic theologies in print. By relegating talk about heaven and hell to the realm of "private intellectual speculation" you basically

maintain that those subjects are as important as, say, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. You are also cutting the nerve of Christian missions.

#### **2.4. It distorts Christ's mission**

The evangelical version of *Missio Dei* places great emphasis on Christ's incarnation and suffering as a model for missions, a model by John Stott (see *The Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now*, and *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World*.) Protagonists of this model read much into John 20:21, where Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you".

But is John 20:21 a model for missions?

Not the way in which Jesus came into the world (i.e. incarnation), but the nature of Jesus' relationship with his sender (i.e. one of obedience and utter dependence), is presented in the Fourth Gospel as the model for the disciples' mission. Jesus' followers are called to imitate Jesus' selfless devotion in seeking his sender's glory, to submit to the sender's will, and to represent their sender accurately and know him intimately (Köstenberger 1998:217).

The German theologian Peter Beyerhaus (who has been ringing warning bells about *Missio Dei* since the 1970s) notes the danger of a missiology which focuses on the humanness of Jesus and His service to the social needs of this world. "His divinity... is largely obliterated... In what could be called an 'example Christology' it is emphasized that the Incarnate Christ has made Himself a servant and led a life of service in the needs of mankind" (Beyerhaus 2013:5). He goes on to state that:

We need to understand that the matchless incarnation of the eternal Word of God (John 1:14), His once for all sacrificial death, and His ascension to the throne of God set up a barrier against any imitatio Christi. For his atoning sacrifice on the cross to take away our guilt cannot be imitated... Indeed, it is inadmissible to change the message of 'Christ for us' to the slogan 'Let us act like Christ', thereby making the gospel a new law (2013:5).

"It is misleading to contend that Jesus' ministry focused on serving... there is not a single example of Jesus going into a town with the stated purpose of healing or casting out demons" (DeYoung & Gilbert 2011:55, 56).

Jesus did not seek political office in order to advance his transformational agenda. He did not pursue political or social transformation in the current historical reality —to the great disappointment of the crowds. Nor did the apostles, as they preached the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Then why should we?

This doesn't mean that Jesus didn't care for the outcasts, the sick and the poor. Of course he did! But the purpose of his ministry was teaching people who he was, the nature of and standards for entry into the kingdom of God, the need for repentance and, toward the end

of his ministry, what he was seeking to accomplish through his impending death and resurrection. “The mission of Jesus is... the proclamation of the gospel through teaching, the corroboration of the gospel through signs and wonders, and the accomplishment of the gospel in death and resurrection” (*italics in original*, 2011:57). The purpose statements in the gospels make this clear: Jesus came to preach, to call sinners, and to give his life as a ransom for many (John 1:28; Mark 1:38, 2:17; 10:45).

Some proponents of *Missio Dei* place great emphasis on Christ’s suffering as a model for missions. The New Testament certainly teaches that we be willing to embrace suffering for Christ’s sake (1 Peter 2:21). However, *Missio Dei* blurs distinctions: while Christ’s suffering propitiates, and is the heart of the gospel, our suffering is “granted by God” (Phil. 1:29) as a means of disciplining the individual Christian, as an agent to purify the church, to soften hearts, and to increase faith so that the believer will become more Christ-like in the process (1 Peter 1:6–7).

The Bible does not present suffering as participation with God through Christ’s suffering as a ‘missionary method’ which helps effect the redemption and liberation of the world by means of the conversion of individuals and cultures (see Sunquist). It does not even present suffering as a gift of the Spirit given the church in order to minister effectively.

## 2.5. It distorts the role of the church in missions

As seen, *Missio Dei* holds that the church is “invited” to “participate” with God in His transformational activities. This may include developing better medical services, teaching in national schools, digging wells, militating for ecologically responsible legislation, promoting better agricultural methods, sponsoring projects for orphans, and involvement in dozens of other such worthwhile projects which have little or no church connection.

As Beyerhaus points out, “by this view, He [God] could just as well use other instruments for this goal, such as non-Christian religions and political-social movements whose members might be atheists!” (Beyerhaus 2013:6). And, indeed, the church often works with non-Christian agencies when carrying out of its “transformative” activities. But should the Christian church co-opt the world into “kingdom activities”?

Non-Christians do not do ‘kingdom work’. The phrase ‘kingdom work’ is confusing and non-biblical and should probably be jettisoned, but even if we grant its use we should at least be agreed that it cannot be applied to good things that non-Christians do. When a non-Christian does a good deed, it is most certainly good (at a certain level), and it is an instance of God’s common evil-restraining grace on all mankind (DeYoung & Gilbert 2011:112).

Fusing God’s mission and the church’s mission into one, by having the church shoulder the task of world transformation, the contemporary evangelical version of *Missio Dei*

opened the way to one of the current phenomenas of evangelical Christian mission: missionaries involved in various “churchless missionary activities”. D. A. Carson is scathing on the matter:

I know numerous groups that claim to be engaging in ‘wholistic’ ministry because they are helping the poor in Chicago or because they are digging wells in the Sahel, even though few, if any, of the workers have taken time to explain to anyone who Jesus is and what he has done to reconcile us to God. Their ministry isn’t holistic; it’s halfistic or quarteristic (Carson 2011).

Beyerhaus points out that when the church comes to be regarded in terms of her service to the world, its function becomes more important than its nature: “the church is seen and valued in another perspective. Here she is called to devote herself totally to service in the world, striving for economic, social and political change, so that in this way the kingdom of God might be made manifest step by step” (Beyerhaus 2013:6).

The church’s primary missionary task is not serving the world, good and praiseworthy as that is. It is primarily called to be witnesses to God’s grace in Christ, to be ambassadors of Christ who proclaim the good news of His atoning death and victorious resurrection which is available to all through repentance and faith (Acts 1:8; 5:42; 6:4,7; 22:15; 1 Cor. 9:16–23; Col. 1:28–29; 2 Tim. 4:1–2; 1 Peter 5:1) and the gathering of these “born again” ones into churches (Acts 14:21–23; 18:1–11). What good is a “wholistic ministry” is it doesn’t, in the first place, focus on seeing people become “whole” again in Christ? Yet even otherwise strongly evangelical proponents of *Missio Dei* are critical of the idea of placing a higher priority on evangelism than on social transformation:

The language of ‘priority’ implies that all else is ‘secondary’ at best... In other words, the language of priority and primacy quickly tends to imply singularity and exclusion... We are back to so exalting the New Testament evangelistic mandate that we think it absolves us from all other dimensions of God’s mission that the rest of the Bible requires of God’s people... The word priority suggests something that has to be your starting point... (Wright 2006:317, italics in original).

The problem, of course, is that the proclamation of the gospel can easily become something which is tagged on to various types of “transformational activities”, particularly when the church engages in these activities with people, governments and NGOs which do not share its basic world view. If evangelism is merely one of many aspects of mission, all of which are of equal importance, then the heart of missions has changed fundamentally. Indeed, if every good and positive thing falls under the rubric of *Missio Dei* then the concept itself is emptied of specific meaning and, as a result, can be marshalled to support anything and everything.



## 2.6. Its doctrinal imprecision leads to a host of problems

We have already seen how doctrines such as hell tend to be glossed over. Other classic doctrines are also given short shrift. For example, while *Missio Dei*'s interpretation of election as God choosing a means through which he wants to bless the world is, of course, biblical (e.g. God chose Abraham as a means through which he would bless the world), the narrower teaching of divine election unto salvation does not easily fit the model. It is impossible to integrate either the Calvinist teaching that Christ died "for a particular people", or the classic Arminian position that God's prevenient grace precedes regeneration, with *Missio Dei*'s ideas about the huge, fountain-like love of God which embraces all people equally and seeks everyone's wellbeing without differentiation. If the acceptance or rejection of God's indiscriminate love-overtures lies with mankind, then the only theological underpinning which fits the model is semi-pelagianism.

The idea that the church is invited to participate with what God is doing in the world is also fraught with danger for it undermines God's authority. God doesn't "invite" his people, he commands them. The Great Commission statements are the church's marching orders: "Go! Make disciples!" Much as major proponents of *Missio Dei* play down those "military style commands" commands they are, given by the One who establishes the parameters and stipulations within which his people are to live and serve, and then sovereignly gives them the necessary grace to carry out his commands.

*Missio Dei* also eliminates is the difference between God's salvific and common grace. This lack of distinction fudges the biblical idea that "all things work for the good of those who love him [God] and are called according to his purposes" (Rom. 8:28). Although God's common grace makes this world a liveable place for most of us, ultimately things only work out for good for those who meet the criteria of having been called by God and are living according to his purposes.

Yet another doctrinal problem with *Missio Dei* is that it is all about what God is doing without asking questions about what Satan might be doing. The reality of two kingdoms, a kingdom of light and a kingdom of darkness, which are at war until Christ's second coming, is much more reflective of New Testament teaching. Yes, God is the ruler of history, but His kingdom pertains to the spiritual realities which flow from Christ's redemptive work: the realignment of the wills of those who are regenerated by God's spirit and their formation into strongly counter-cultural communities, local churches whose values should be at odds with those of the world at large.

Nor does *Missio Dei* allow for the possibility that God may choose to use evil both to discipline the body of believers and as an instrument leading to the eternal salvation of some. Habakkuk's and Asaph's questions (Psalm 73) about the purposes of evil and why the wicked are allowed to prosper while the righteous suffer are almost impossible to answer in a theology of all-encompassing divine love.



Doctrinal imprecision allows for both wider ecumenical and inter-cultural engagement and cooperation, something which many of the model's protagonists celebrate (see for instance Sunquist 2013:165). The problem here is the failure to recognize that Christian unity and ministry must be based on Christian love and truth. Sacrificing fundamental New Testament teachings is sacrificing one of the church's main missionary obligations: proclamation.

### 6.7. Its goal of social transformation is flawed

There are several problems with *Missio Dei*'s approach to social transformation. Firstly, the biblical concept of justice is not necessarily that which we believe to be the right thing. "The minute one begins to define social justice, one runs into embarrassing intellectual difficulties. It becomes, most often, a term of art whose operational meaning is, 'we need a law against that'" (DeYoung & Gilbert 2011:176, 180). This kind of "mission" can easily degenerate into political lobbying for our favorite causes. There is nothing wrong with individual Christians lobbying for particular causes they feel strongly about, but nowhere does the New Testament tie that to the church's mission.

Secondly, social transformation presents a false hope as the end-goal of the missionary enterprise.

Many church leaders are doing their people a disservice by leading them to hope too much for the betterment of society 'in this present evil age', which still languishes in bondage and futility. Mission statements like "Transform the City and the World" and "Change the City, Change the World" express a commendable desire, but simply go too far beyond what the Bible tells us we should expect to see in the world during this age, before Jesus returns (DeYoung & Gilbert 2011:130).

Major aspects of *Missio Dei*—everything to do with social transformation—simply don't work in the increasingly large sections of the world where Christians are persecuted, where hope for a better life is firmly wedded to Christ's second coming, where Christians recognize that things will, in fact, go from bad to worse. As Beyerhaus points out, in *Missio Dei*

the 'eschatological realism' of the Bible is being overlooked, i.e. the prophecies about concrete events to be expected to happen at the end of times: the maturation of evil, the empire of the Antichrist, the end of this world and the Last Judgement. If all this is changed into this-worldly programs, then the church is deprived of her chief missionary task of proclaiming the Gospel to those who are far from Christ (Beyerhaus 2013:7).

Thirdly, the socio-political agendas of the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists are very different (almost polar opposite) of each other. Which one is right? Typically, *Missio Dei* proponents tend to support issues which have a distinctly

“progressive/Christian left” flavor. Somehow their exegesis and wholistic views lead to politically correct positions (from a western, progressive point of view) on the issues of the day. Furthermore, history has shown time and again that a Christian influence that has a tangential relationship to the Church does not generally maintain itself as an ongoing Christian witness. It is, in fact, remarkable how rapidly formerly “wholistic” Christian missionary enterprises such as medical, educational and developmental institutions drift from the Christian fold.

The political agitation which the proponents of *Missio Dei* advocate is very different from the “good works” which missionaries have always sought to do, as well as from the missionary movement we read about in the book of Acts which, more than any other Bible book, paints a picture of the early church’s actual missionary enterprise:

“If you are looking for a picture of the early church giving itself to creation care, plans for societal renewal, and strategies to serve the community in Jesus’ name, you won’t find them in Acts. But if you are looking for preaching, teaching and the centrality of the Word, this is your book” (DeYoung & Gilbert 2011:49).

They also appointed deacons so that the apostles could devote themselves to the word of God and prayer and, later, elders to “direct the affairs of the church well” (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:17).

## **2.9. It uses questionable exegesis to build a hermeneutic to undergird its vision of mission**

Long ago McGavran warned presciently against a “new hermeneutic” which would undermine the traditional missionary enterprise: “in which ‘a mere reiteration of the words of Holy Scripture would be a betrayal of the gospel’ (Glasser & McGavran 1983:98). Since then several “missional hermeneutics” have evolved, of which the most popular is one which presents Old Testament events as paradigmatic (as opposes to merely illustrative) for Christian missions (See, for instance, Wright 2006).

The problem with basing a Christian theology largely on Old Testament paradigms is that it leads to distortions because it does not do justice to the fact that the Bible is a progressive revelation leading inexorably to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the New Covenant which that ushered into being.

Bosch dismisses the idea of careful grammatico-contextual exegesis as “mere proof-texting”. According to him the traditional, systematic and exegetical approach to Scripture is perceived as woefully inadequate. He maintains that the contribution of “such elaborate exegesis... towards establishing the validity of the missionary mandate is minimal” (Bosch 1993:439). If he were to be believed then “if we discover in the Bible nothing but ‘eternal, immutable truths’, the missionary dimension will be quickly dissipated” (:439, 444).

It is, in fact, *Missio Dei* which engages in “mere proof-texting” by presenting certain Old Testament events as paradigmatic while other teachings and events (like Noah’s Flood, the extermination of the Canaanites, etc.) are pointedly ignored or reinterpreted in ways that the New Testament writers could not have imagined.

### **The conclusion...**

*Missio Dei* has proven to be hugely popular in the post-modern missionary enterprise. Little wonder: strong social and environmental concerns combined with theologically fuzziness (Borthwick EMQ 2003:438), a suspicion of “one narrative explains all” mindsets, the virtue of tolerance “which often belies an implicit theological pluralism” (Borthwick EMQ 2003:440), and the fact that relationships matter more than propositional truths have combined to create great receptivity for it.

However, *Missio Dei*’s doctrinal imprecision, its desire to re-engage ecumenically with non-evangelicals, the fact that it has little use for the notion of hell, the idea that God’s mission is not necessarily mediated through the church but that, at the same time, “the church must... take the world’s agenda seriously” (Potter 1981:73-74), and a hyper-emphasis of the love of God divorced from the cross, means it has no firm anchor. Little wonder the missionary enterprise is corroding from within.

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