

Missional Reorientation

God's Mission as the Intersection of Surprise and Constancy

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Introduction

Marko Glogović felt distinctly called by God to be a monk while in Zagreb in 1991 – a voice pierced his heart as he was sitting in church though he had previously had little interest in the church. This call eventually led him to study in Poland for seven years, the only Croat among 70 Polish monks – a challenging situation which caused him to pack his bags twice to go home. Some of the theology felt cold to him, lacking an experiential element, and he felt drawn to connect with other traditions such as the Baptists. But such connections were not encouraged by his superiors, and he was told that the Baptists were “too different”. His small prayer group longed for an experience with the Holy Spirit and prayed actively together during their free time. After a charismatic priest prayed for them, they had an encounter with the Holy Spirit, were filled with joy, and began to “know Jesus in another way.” Afterward, he felt that a fog had been lifted from his eyes, and he understood God’s deep love for him and God’s mission in a new way. He began to leave the walls of the monastery and actively serve the homeless, prostitutes, and drug addicts. He became concerned for unborn children and struggling single mothers – a passion which continues to shape his current ministry in which he provides resources, help, and a safe place for pregnant single women who wish to keep their babies. Father Marko’s story, a praying monk who actively seeks to be part of God’s mission, demonstrates both the power of the Holy Spirit to reorient our missional paradigm and God’s often surprising way of working out his mission in our contexts.

God’s mission through Jesus Christ is to actively reconcile, redeem, and transform humans, cultures, and creation until his reign is fully established – and he

invites his church to be an active part of his holistic mission.¹ God's mission has never changed, but the mystery has been unfolding since the beginning of time. The question of how the church participates in God's mission has been shaped, and reshaped again throughout the winding paths of history and context, and the church today has the benefit of learning from and understanding how God has moved in the past. This question of the church's participation cannot be separated from a particular context – context is a key element in the nature and activity of God's mission. As Bevans and Schroeder put it, “The urgency of mission is linked to the urgency of change, adaptation and translation – in other words, to context. By being faithful to each context, the church continues to be called forth by its Lord to share and continue his mission” (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 31).

When context rubs up against the gospel, it allows the Holy Spirit to force new missional pathways – creative, unexpected, yet still consistent with the constants of the gospel. Attention to context, however, can be a two-sided challenge. Sometimes the church becomes so imbedded in its own context, fixating on its own issues, that it creates a “nationalistic” church culture – a loyalty to a doctrine or denomination that supersedes loyalty to the kingdom of God. This is not a new issue, but in fact bears echoes of some of Israel's tendencies seen throughout Scripture.² For example, Christopher Wright suggests that one motivation for Jesus' cleansing of the temple is to highlight Israel's exclusivism and nationalism as opposed to being, as Jesus quotes, “a house of prayer for all nations” (Matthew 21:12,13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45,46). Although the temple was mandated to be holy and a place of worship, it “had become the symbol of an Israel at odds with the world, rather than an Israel for the nations” (Wright 1992, 239).

In the 21st century, we can be so intent on our doctrinal particularities that we forget to be surprised when the mission of God goes “out of bounds” according to our particular denominational praxis. Bevans and Schroeder summarize: “In other words, if to be church is to be in mission, to be in mission is to be responsive to the demands of the gospel in particular contexts, to be continually ‘re-inventing’ itself as it struggles with and approaches new situations, new peoples, new cultures, and new questions” (2004, 31).

And yet, how do we know if God's spirit is leading us into a surprising new pathway? How can we stay in the intersection of surprise and constancy so that

1 See “Missional Insights: Exploring the Foundations of Mission in the Southeastern European Context,” in *Kairos* 7, n. 1 (2013): 69-78 for a more thorough exploration of the holistic mission of God.

2 This two-sided challenge is what Andrew Walls calls the “indigenous principle and the pilgrim principle.” The gospel comes to us in our own particular social and cultural contexts, but God also seeks to transform us in ways that will necessarily put us at odds with some aspects of our cultural contexts” (2009, pp. 133-145).

we can allow his mission to be driven by the power and creativity of the Holy Spirit? This paper will explore this intersection first by gleaning missiological insights from Acts 10, then by applying the insights to a case study in Southern Serbia.

Acts 10: Peter's Surprising Reorientation

Although at times Acts has been treated as a manual for evangelism and church growth, the diverse and surprising ways in which the gospel spreads demonstrate that Luke purposed to show how the “good news of the kingdom” surmounted the barriers of religion, race, class, sex, and prejudice in its onward march “for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one” (John 11:52; Glasser 2003, 275). Using a missiological lens through which to view Acts, a central theme emerges: Luke uses the events to show a radical reinterpretation of the “who” of God’s people and what that means for life in the kingdom of God. Glasser notes, “Luke recorded what the Holy Spirit accomplished in transforming a messianic Jewish movement into a universal faith” (2003, 283).

Primarily, it surmounted such barriers at the initiative and direction of the Holy Spirit to which the early followers responded and obeyed. Acts is filled with stories of the Holy Spirit forbidding individuals to go certain places (16:6), supernatural healing and vision (5:12-16; 16:9), and specific instructions (8:26). F. F. Bruce points to that as part of Luke’s purpose – to show the dominant role of the Holy Spirit in the spread of the faith (1988: 12,13).

The radical events in Acts 10 come just after the extraordinary conversion of Paul, an event which provides a two-dimensional view of the quality of God’s grace – a man who had formerly killed people in the name of God was scooped up and reoriented by Jesus himself. Amidst all this, the author sums up the current situation of the church: “Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers” (9:31). After these events, the story shifts once more to Peter, through whom the Holy Spirit heals a few people, resulting in more mass conversions. Acts 9 concludes while poised on the edge of a paradigm-shifting cliff: Peter is staying in Joppa at the house of a tanner, which would be ritually unclean for him, and it is in this context that the Holy Spirit begins to make a new missional pathway.

Both Cornelius and Peter were prepared by visions for what the Holy Spirit wanted to do, although their visions had different purposes. Cornelius, having no religious barrier preventing association with Jews, was affirmed by God for his faith and given specific instructions. Acts is careful to show Cornelius’ search for God, illustrating the point that God was already at work in his life long before

Peter pointed him to Jesus.

Peter, on the other hand, who would have had the normal reticence of any orthodox Jew regarding entering an unclean Gentile's house, needed to be prepared in a different way. His vision of being instructed to eat "unclean" animals was significant on two levels: the message itself and the means of the message. The message was immediately relevant both to his personal situation (he was hungry) and to his cultural situation (the ceremonial food laws). It should be noted that the vision was initially abhorrent to Peter, and in fact violated his conscience (v. 14).

As the story unfolds, Peter continues to grasp deeper layers of meaning behind the vision. After his first initial puzzlement (10:17), the immediate arrival of the Gentile messengers coupled with the Holy Spirit's direct instruction led Peter to be open to offering hospitality to the Gentile messengers. He verbalizes this connection when he arrives in Caesarea, explaining that "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (v. 28,29). After hearing Cornelius' explanation, Peter draws out another layer of meaning: "God shows no partiality" (v. 34,35). Finally, when the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles in the same manner that it had fallen on the disciples (Acts 2), Peter realizes that there should be no barriers against Gentile baptism, and thus they should be fully accepted into the kingdom of God (v. 45-48). Peter's reorientation goes even deeper when he is able to retroactively interpret Jesus' words while giving an account of his actions to the Jerusalem Church in Acts 11: "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (11:16,17).

The missional significance of this story extends even beyond the Jewish realization of the expansiveness of God's plan for humanity. The ways in which the mission of God unfold in this story illustrate some important missional insights. First, as has been noted before, God's mission is actively working both inside, through, and outside the church. Who knows how long Cornelius was seeking and striving to obey God before his encounter with Peter? God was clearly at work in his life, and by extension, in his household, long before he received a clear picture of God's salvific redemption. Second, God speaks to us in ways that are both relevant to our personal situation (Peter's hunger), and meaningful in our cultural context (ceremonial food laws). Third, we should recognize that as humans participating in God's mission, no one at anytime has a complete grasp on the method and means of the Holy Spirit's initiative. Therefore, we should expect to be surprised, and expect to have our understanding of God's mission constantly deepened and expanded. Cornelius was surprised and even fearful when God broke into his immediate context. Peter was surprised that God was apparently trying to tempt him to break the Jewish culinary codes.

Fourth, although we need to be open to surprise and ready to have our paradigm reoriented, the ways in which God works will always retain a core of consistency with who he is and his purposes for his creation. God's message was shocking and revelatory to Peter – and yet, not only was it in line with how the mystery of God had been unfolding, it also allowed him to go back and re-interpretively deepen his prior understanding of Jesus' actions and teachings. The Gentile mission was always foreshadowed and referenced in God's covenant relationship with Israel (i.e., Gen. 12:1-3; Isaiah 49), but the way in which it was inaugurated in Acts was completely initiated and directed by the Spirit.³

Fifth, God is constantly multitasking in mission, a concept which missiologists refer to as “mission-in-reverse.” Essentially, participation in God's mission necessitates a “mutuality” of learning by both parties. Anthony Gittens describes mission-in-reverse as “an experience of risk-taking in the spirit of Jesus. It constitutes a direct challenge to personal self-sufficiency, to one's expertise, and to one's certainties” (1993, 22). This can be extraordinarily difficult for the missionary, as it is easier to believe and abide by the fact that we are setting the itinerary, methods, and the timetable for our ministries. When ministry is seen through an incarnational lens (rather than believing that the “minister” carries the full weight of God's truth and the “receiver” has nothing to offer), it has two primary effects: It allows us to remain aware of our human frailty and the fact that it is God's mission, and it allows people to walk in the method of Jesus who although “he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). In other words, participation in God's mission requires us to immerse ourselves in the world of the other. As Peter stepped into the world of the Gentiles and found his paradigm irreversibly altered, we also find God's mission to be simultaneously transforming us just as it is transforming those to whom we are ministering.⁴ Without this risky willingness and “our own, ongoing conversion, our teaching of mission will lack both credibility and grace” (Gittens, 23).

Leskovac: A Case Study of God's Mission in Southeastern Europe

At ten to twelve million, the Roma make up Europe's largest minority, and yet their poverty and educational levels remain far below the national average in each

3 To show all the connections in Acts in which the early church re-interprets God's purposes and methods according to the Jewish scriptures is beyond the scope of this paper. However, one significant connection can be found when James quotes and explains Amos 9:11,12 in Acts 15:12-21.

4 This concept is not just in the New Testament. One can see it emerging in such examples as Jonah's process of participation in God's prophetic message to the people of Nineveh.

respective country in which they live. In most contexts, prejudice and discrimination are still the reigning attitudes toward the Roma, resulting from a long history of clashing cultural values combined with the complicated matrices of poverty. In the last few decades, however, there have been many movements of God among Roma communities in Europe – in Western Europe, most notably in France through Pastor Clement Le Cossec's involvement in the rapidly growing 'Gypsy Evangelical Church' established in the 1950's.

Although many examples can be cited in Eastern Europe, the Roma churches in Leskovac will be used as an example of the Holy Spirit's radical reorientation of a church resulting in a significant impact throughout Serbia and spilling into Croatia. In 1976, Mio Stanković was pastoring a small church in Leskovac, a city surrounded by three Roma villages of 8,000 to 10,000 people. For most of his life, he had paid little attention to the Roma people around him. After he prayed for a Roma woman who had asked for prayer, she was healed from her sickness (Harvey, 2009). This began a shift in the church – a shift which Mio referred to as “a mission within a mission” which was to radically alter the story of the church (Stanković). In 1979, Roma began trickling into the church after word of healings spread, and the church began to respond to them – providing education, medical aid, counseling, and spiritual sustenance (Harvey 2009). Eventually, the church divided its worship services into one for Roma and another for Serbs in 1986 – a split due only to different preferences in worship style, according to Selim Olivić (2012). Olivić, who in 1986 led the worship services for the Roma, related how there was love between the two ethnic groups. This was the beginning of the first known established Roma fellowship in Yugoslavia.

During the late 1980's, there were about 30 Roma and 10 to 15 Serbs when an outbreak of healings and miracles caused Roma to flood into the church. Olivić became a pastor of the Roma church in 1992 (whilst remaining an elder in the Serbian church). In the mid 1990's, people began streaming in and asking for prayer, and they went from holding one service to three in a day. Olivić remembered, “We saw how God was blessing people; people were hungry for God. Every meeting was something special from God” (2012). In the late 90's, the church promoted a church planting project, planting seven churches in Serbia. Before the church split in 2004, it had grown to around 1,000 people. Despite the church split, both churches have become a mission base of sorts, one planting seven churches throughout Serbia, and the other planting five churches. In addition, both have a desire to extend their influence into Roma communities in Croatia, and to minister to Serbian and Croatian communities as well.

Missiological Reflections

There are some startling similarities between the events of the Acts 10 story and that which happened in Leskovac. For example, both missional reorientations began with interactions between two people – Cornelius and Peter, and Mio and the Roma woman.⁵ Both involved the supernatural breaking into the natural – in Acts 10, it was with visions; in Leskovac, it was miracles and other healings. With this in mind, it is important to analyze the shared missional principles between the two stories and reflect on the meaning for God's mission.

Barriers in Mission

God's mission eradicates barriers between people. One of the magnificent constants of the gospel is that it acts as the final demolisher of barriers between people. Paul asserts in Ephesians that not only did Christ bring those who were far away close, but he himself is the peace between groups, and through his death and resurrection, he broke the dividing walls between Jews and Gentiles (2:13,14). Jesus is the grand leveler of barriers between people – any barrier related to ethnicity, culture, gender, doctrine, or denomination. Paul declares in Galatians that in Christ Jesus, we are all one (3:27-29).

However, although God himself freely travels across all barriers, our participation in God's mission is often inhibited by our limited view. Sometimes we hit the barrier squarely in the face, and it prevents us from effectively sharing the good news with people. This is when the Holy Spirit can direct a radical reorientation which changes our understanding of God's mission and frees us to participate in it through new and surprising ways.

Both Peter and Mio were faced with barriers in mission, barriers they perhaps could not readily see. Sometimes barriers are so ingrained in our cultural perceptions that it is difficult for us to perceive them. In this way, we are dependent on the Holy Spirit to reveal our limitations, and sometimes his wisdom comes by listening to the global community of God which can often pinpoint our cultural blind spots and barriers. Peter's barrier was ingrained deeply in his religio-cultural worldview, and he was shocked and even offended at what God suggested to him in the vision. Eventually, he was able to accept that the gospel made table fellowship possible between Gentiles and Jews, and that the Gentiles could be baptized as full sons and daughters into the family of God. Mio's barrier was erected out of the historical situation between Serbs and Roma – two radically different cultures that are, in many towns, still largely separated from each

5 Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain her name.

other and often view each other through stereotypes and generalizations.⁶ This historical barrier can prevent a church from seeing a nearby Roma village as a mission field.

It is precisely these barriers which allow us to be surprised at God's mission. The Holy Spirit can surprise us with both the revelation of the barrier, and the falsity of the barrier in relation to Jesus. When the Holy Spirit initiated a change of perception, both Mio and Peter were open to be obedient and to change their perceptions. Mio's interaction with the Roma woman and the eventual "mission within a mission" began a chain of events which reshaped his own involvement in God's mission.

Mission-in-Reverse

God's surprising reorientations necessarily create a mission-in-reverse effect as part of the multi-tasking nature of God. It is all too easy for people to feel superior in regards to methods and doctrinal positions, especially if they minister from a position of power—a state that Jayakumar Christian calls a "god-complex" (1999, 121). This position of power can be economic, political, religious, or cultural. In Peter's case, this was a state of "religious power" – the religio-cultural relationship between Jews and Gentiles. However, when God reorients our paradigms, we see Him and his mission more clearly, and this spotlights our limited ways of thinking and the areas in which we have unintentionally made ourselves "god".

Peter's transformation deepened through his experience and allowed him to more fully grasp Jesus' teachings. As F. F. Bruce suggests, "The abolition of Jewish ceremonial barriers was pressed home in the vision with special reference to food-laws, but Peter soon grasped that its range was much wider. And perhaps, as he thought about the vision, he remembered hearing similar words on an earlier occasion, though he did not then understand their import" (1988, 206).⁷

As the people of the Leskovac church opened their doors to the Roma in the late 1970's, relationships opened their minds to see their Roma neighbors in a new light. Mio worked to bring Roma people into leadership, ordaining Roma pastors and commissioning Roma elders and deacons. Although he had previously "not paid attention" to the Roma around him, he now recognized them as co-workers and brothers and sisters. Pastor Šerif Bakić points to Mio's critical role in establishing the first Roma church in all of Yugoslavia: "Because of Mio Stanković, he had a great love for the Roma people...When the Roma began co-

6 Although I'm highlighting the Serbian context, this historic divide is evident between all Southeastern European countries and the Roma.

7 Bruce points to Mark 7 where Jesus teaches that nothing outside a person can defile – rather it is those things that come out of a person which defile.

ming to the church, they felt something different. Mio hugged them and it was unusual... Roma began to hear about that in the villages and cities. They came to see the church” (2012).

Despite the rapid influx of Roma into the church, it must be noted that missiological issues remain. Why did the Serbian membership hardly grow amidst all the supernatural miracles that were attracting hundreds of Roma? The reasons are not clear without careful research, but perhaps this, too, can be related to deeper layers of mission relevance. Even as Mio's reorientation led to a change in mission and paradigm for his church, the effects of this are still unfolding. The pastors in Leskovac estimate that 1,000 out of the 8,000 to 10,000 Roma are now believers. This has had a transformational effect on social structures, community and family relationships – decreasing community and domestic violence, leading to higher education levels, developing more positive relationships with the Serbian authorities, and becoming a witness to the surrounding community. Pastor Bakić notes,

Serbian could see the change in the Roma... Roma started to read the Bible and grow up spiritually. The government in Leskovac loves us because we have such a positive influence. They [Serbs] know our witness. We also think of the Serbian people, not just the Roma people...the Roma can forgive and work with all people. The Serbians are not going to receive you... you must first give an example... to see Jesus in us (2012).

God's mission was initiated by a Serbian man, and it continues through the Roma back to the Serbs. God's purposes are not just *for* the Roma people, but also for other nations to be able to see what he can do and be blessed by it. Such is the unfolding, multi-tasking mission of God.

Driven by the Holy Spirit in Specific Contexts

God's mission is driven by the Holy Spirit, but often this takes different forms depending on context. We are people of context – each of us is born in a particular family, in a particular culture. God's story with the world is ongoing, and different contexts reveal Christ more deeply – therefore, God works through and beyond our contexts. Although it is important to study and learn about how the Holy Spirit has driven mission in a particular context, mission is not a “cut-and-paste” endeavor. In other words, because one context has seen great miracles of healing which expand the mission of God, another context might not see them. The relational implications of the gospel free us from depending on formulas or quick-answers, and challenge us instead to move into the risky territory of dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide mission in and beyond our immediate context.

This is why Acts is not a “how-to” model of mission. Rather, it is the story

of how God's mission moved through barriers and into specific contexts during the unique time of the first century. It was previously noted how the Holy Spirit spoke to Peter in his specific and personal context – through his hunger and through his religio-cultural belief system. And yet, even as he spoke through the context, he also shifted and reoriented Peter's perception of the context. Mio was moved by the obvious work of God in a Roma woman's life and her subsequent return to church with her son. God used this interaction to awaken him to the Roma people around his church. The Holy Spirit drove the mission powerfully through healings and other miracles. Father Marko was reoriented through a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit – this led to a whole new way of being involved in the mission of God. The Holy Spirit continues to drive his mission of compassion through the slowly changing lives of women and the preservation of new life.

Every culture struggles with its own ethnocentrism – although it is clear from Scripture that “God is no respecter of persons,” ethnocentrism is our natural bent in which we live. Despite everything that had happened to Peter, and despite the prophet's word that God's election of Israel was of grace, not partiality, this was a revolutionary revelation for Peter (Bruce 1988, 225). Hindsight renders things as deceptively simple, and it is always easier to look into someone else's context and point to another's prejudices.

Conclusion

As individuals and churches strive to participate in God's mission, we should be expectantly mindful and alert to the Holy Spirit's surprising reorientations. Recognizing the activity of the Spirit can be specific to a context – but tools of discernment rarely seem to change. Is it consistent with how God has been working throughout the Scriptures and in the church's history? Is there a community prayerfully discerning meaning and direction? How is context playing a role? In what ways is the new direction consistent with context, and in what ways does it supersede context? Is it in alignment with the shape of the kingdom of God?

Peter's reorientation did not end with the Gentile Pentecost. Rather, he had to go back and convince the Jews of what he had experienced and seen. Opposition from established believers can be expected, especially if they did not experience the same vision and if ethnic or religious barriers are deeply rooted in a particular context. But Peter's retelling of the story did convince them, and they decided to celebrate the surprising new direction God's mission had taken.

In the cases of both Peter and Mio, obstacles and barriers to mission turned out to be the “missiological door” that God used to further his purposes. Both

Peter and Mio were challenged to step across an ethnic border – and as a result, a new phase of God's mission was ushered in. As Bosch puts it, "Transforming mission means both that mission is to be understood as an activity that transforms reality and that there is a constant need for mission itself to be transformed" (1991, 511). This is the driving role of the Holy Spirit as he interacts with us in our specific contexts – to surprise us with the magnificence of God's mission even as he comforts us with the assurance that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

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