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EDITORIAL ESSAY

Charles R. Taber

Mission, Missions, Missionary

the **WORDS** *we use*



An odd thing is happening in America today. Just about the time many Christians are becoming confused and even embarrassed by the word *mission*, the secular world is taking it up enthusiastically. Every two-bit organization has a “mission statement” that spells out what the organization is for and what it hopes to accomplish. But many Christians are shrinking from that word as if it were a bad word.

Where did the word come from, and how has it been used and misused? *Mission* is derived from the Latin noun *missio*, which is in turn derived from the Latin verb *mittere* ‘to send’. When Jerome in the fourth century translated the Greek New Testament into Latin, he used *mittere* to translate both of the Greek verbs for sending, *pempo* and *apostello*, which are used almost interchangeably in the New Testament. They are used of the Father sending the Son (especially in the Gospel of John), of the Father and/or the Son sending the Holy Spirit (e.g., John 14:26), and of Jesus sending the disciples (e.g., Matt 10:5; Luke 10:1). A disciple who was sent by Jesus became an *apostolos* ‘a sent one’. His status was *apostole*. Both of these words are used by Paul, for instance, in Rom 1:1, 5. Jerome did not translate these nouns, but merely transliterated them—that is, he spelled the Greek words with Roman letters—and that is what has been done in most other European languages ever since, including English (*apostle*, *apostolate*).

But the Latin noun *missio* was used by theologians only with respect to the “sending” of the Son by the Father for a number of centuries. It began to be used of the sending of human beings with the gospel by Jesuits in the sixteenth century. It was first used, as a matter of fact, of their being sent to northern Europe to reconvert to Catholicism people who had become Protestants! But it was soon also applied to the “sending” of evangelizers to new places and peoples, who were then called “missionaries” or “missioners.” Protestants took up the terms without quibble when they finally got involved in world evangelization.

Back then, Western Europe was considered to be Christian by definition: the church was “established” both in culture and with the state, and people became “Christians” by virtue of being born and then baptized as infants. The “Christian” countries as a whole constituted “Christendom,” and the rest of the world was “heathen” or “pagan.” So “missionaries” went from “Christian” countries to “heathen” countries, and their work was “mission” or “missions.”

But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two processes were going on at the same time. In the West—“Christendom”—more and more people were abandoning the church and the Christian faith. Meanwhile, in the non-Western world—“heathendom”—more and more people were becoming Christians, and churches were

planted and thriving. Today in most African countries south of the Sahara, a greater percentage of the population is Christian than in the United States. So the old “Christendom/heathendom” dichotomy is no longer valid, if it ever really was. Now we recognize that the world everywhere is basically pagan, but that the church is present almost everywhere in the midst of the pagan world.

In this century, several significant developments are taking place—some good, some bad. First, missiologists have begun to emphasize, against the arrogant tendency to think of mission as the *church’s* game, that the initiative after all belongs to God, that God has launched a project to redeem and restore humankind and the creation, spoiled by the fall, to his rule. So they talk about the *Missio Dei* ‘the mission of God’. Thus they have begun to use the singular *mission* to refer to God’s overarching project, and the plural *missions* to refer to the many specific activities and programs Christians and churches are involved in as they participate in God’s mission. Second, they also have begun to talk about “mission from six continents to six continents” and to eliminate the terminology of “older churches” and “younger churches,” which had made the non-Western churches sound like minor children. Unfortunately, these advances in consciousness have not always trickled down to the congregations in the West, and many continue to think in terms of the old Christendom worldview.

Two very unfortunate developments are also taking place. First, there is a growing pluralism, both intellectual and sentimental, which insists that religion is everyone’s private business, chosen by private opinion, that every religion is as good as every other religion, and that everyone is already saved. Mission and missions are, of course, superfluous. This idea has reinforced the caricature, already current in some circles, that missionaries are cultural vandals and imperialists; it also has reinforced a growing self-centeredness and isolationism on the part of American churches. Thus the embarrassment about mission I mentioned at the beginning.

So how should we think and talk about mission at the end of the twentieth century? Should we abandon the enterprise? Should we keep the enterprise, as is or redesigned, under other labels? Should we keep the terms but, like the world, apply them to anything and everything? I think it would be foolish to go to any extreme. Mission has often been done badly, as has everything else churches do, but we remain under orders to preach the gospel to everyone.

And, as Stephen Neill once remarked, if everything is mission, nothing is mission.

I suggest that, biblically and practically, the church—both universal and local—stands in three permanent relationships, each entailing distinct responsibilities, tasks, and activities.

First, the church is related to God, Creator and Father. To God, the church owes worship, ultimate allegiance, ultimate love, and obedience. That is what gives the church its unique identity; whatever else the group does, if it does not focus much of its attention and energy on worship, it is not the church as God designed it. Worship, when we do it, is addressed to GOD, not to each other and not to the world.

Second, the church has internal relationships, both within congregations and between congregations, across the entire globe. These relationships constitute mutual responsibilities, spiritual and material, as Paul never tired of emphasizing (e.g., 2 Cor 8–9; Rom 15:25–29). God’s gifts of all kinds—abilities and skills, money, spiritual resources, etc.—are given to the church (singular, universal), but they are initially very unevenly distributed. Some individual Christians, and some congregations, have lots of spiritual resources but no money; some have money but are weak spiritually. God’s plan is that the resources flow from where they are initially to where they are needed. This is the *sharing* (Greek *koinonia*) that is the proper internal style of the church (see also Acts 2:42–47, where closely related words are used of sharing communion and sharing money). Sharing, in this in-house sense, is addressed to our BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST.

Finally, the church finds itself, by God’s design and Jesus’ sending, *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:13–23; 20:21–23). This means that we have been sent into the world with the gospel of the kingdom of God, just as Jesus was sent. This is what I think should properly be called *mission* ‘sending’. Mission, then, comprises all those activities in which the church engages when it intentionally addresses THE WORLD on behalf of the kingdom of God. It involves (a) discerning what God has in mind for the world, both in general and specifically where we happen to be; (b) discerning what resources God has given us for the work; and (c) applying the resources to the task. The New Testament proposes at least the following things as proper components of mission in this comprehensive sense:

1. Praying that God's kingdom come and that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 6:1)
2. Living, individually and corporately, in such a way that people may see in us what the kingdom of God is like *There is nothing so persuasive as a concrete demonstration: of love rather than conflict and competition, of self-giving rather than self-assertiveness, of unity rather than dividedness (John 17:23).*
3. Proclaiming clearly, relevantly, and persuasively the good news of God's kingdom and inviting people to enter into that kingdom
4. Working to heal the hurts and sufferings of the world caused by sin and rebellion against God's rule
5. As we have opportunity, addressing a prophetic word to the world's powers, challenging their abuses of power and their corruption, which inflict so much damage on "the least of these my brethren" (Matt 25:31-46), with whom Jesus so unambiguously identified himself

6. Suffering, as need be, from the world's rejection and opposition because we are followers of Jesus and people of God's kingdom

The church has through the centuries done both wonderful things and awful things in the name of mission. It has been sometimes extraordinarily right, and sometimes spectacularly wrong. Much of the time it has been mediocre, in mission as in everything else. But as in all of our Christian experience, we have to do with a God of grace and mercy, a God more ready to forgive us than we are to receive forgiveness. So let us boldly engage in the mission of God to the world, knowing that the power and the grace are his and not our own (Acts 1:8; 1 Tim 2:1-7; 2 Pet 3:8-9).

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