

Mission: A Problem of Definition

— Keith Ferdinando —

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Whatever We Want It To Mean?

It must by now be questionable whether the word “mission” retains any residual value for missiology. Humpty Dumpty’s approach to language—“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less”¹—perhaps reflects his creator’s diagnosis of a degenerative disease that afflicts some words, a sort of linguistic entropy or inflation. If so, this pathological condition seems to have caught up with “mission,” and perhaps with terminal effect. The opening sentences of Bosch’s *Transforming Mission* point this way: “Since the 1950s there has been a remarkable escalation in the use of the word ‘mission’ among Christians. This went hand in hand with a significant broadening of the concept, at least in certain circles.”² If words are defined by their use, then the variety and breadth with which “mission” is used suggest that Neill’s prophecy may have been fulfilled: “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.”³

However, perhaps ambiguity in the meaning of “mission” may not matter so much. What is important is not precise definition of the term, but informed and biblical reflection on the various dimensions of Christian activity and ministry to which it might refer. Substance is far more important than the words used to represent it. Nevertheless, it does still matter in that confusion over the meaning of words is likely to produce uncertainty about such questions of substance as well. In this case there is agreement about the central importance of mission—whatever it is—and the obligation under which it places churches and individual Christians. To quote Brunner’s well-known observation, “The Church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning. Where there is no mission, there is no church.”⁴ However, it is problematic to call people to engage in mission when the meaning of that engagement remains elusive. Similarly, if missiology is a branch of theological study, definition of the field of knowledge with

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 190. Quoted also by John Stott in his discussion of mission in *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), 12–13.

² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 1.

³ Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension: The Duff Lectures, 1958* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1959), 81.

⁴ Emile Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: SCM, 1931), 108.

which it should be concerned is essential for its practitioners, but in reality “the quest for an agreed definition of *missiology* remains elusive.”⁵

The dilemma may arise partly because the noun, mission, is not a biblical one, which makes it difficult to define on exegetical grounds. This is not necessarily a problem: incarnation and Trinity are not biblical words either, but there is wide consensus regarding their respective fields of meaning. In the case of mission, however, if there ever was such a consensus it has been largely eroded. Of course the noun has its roots in the notion of sending, and derives particularly from the New Testament use of the Greek verb ἀποστέλλω via the Latin *mitto*. Over recent centuries it has thus been understood to refer to the *sending* of the church into the world to make disciples of Jesus Christ—the human dimension of the mission of the triune God. And it can certainly be argued that the meaning of “mission” should be determined by analysing New Testament use of the verbs ἀποστέλλω and πέμπω.⁶ However, while such an approach might restore precision if accepted, in practice the meaning of a word is determined by its use rather than its origin, and for “mission” contemporary usage has moved beyond such exegetical origins as might once have married it to a particular biblical content.

Several factors have produced the present ambiguity. First, there has been the recognition that communicating the gospel is not the only thing Christians are sent into the world to do. Among evangelicals there is renewed recognition of the implications of the doctrine of creation, including the cultural mandate, coupled with revived awareness of the significance of social and economic issues for Christian discipleship. Second, increasingly widespread pluralist and inclusivist approaches to non-Christian religions imply that evangelism is not a necessary, perhaps not even a desirable, function of the church. Accordingly, the focus of mission is located elsewhere—in the physical care of the suffering, for example. McCahill is representative of this stance: “As my faith teaches, so I believe: Muslims are not lost; they have the same chance as do Christians to be saved by their goodness of life and concern for others. I seek out the physically lost.”⁷ A third factor is increasing secular use of the term as in organisational “mission statements.” Such a usage impacts the word’s meaning in general speech, and so in theology too where it is likely to be used in less specific ways than formerly. Finally, and highly significant in recent years, has been the impact of distinguished missiologist David Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*.

David Bosch

Transforming Mission is an immensely important scholarly work. However, the underlying argument tends towards agnosticism regarding the possibility of an agreed meaning for the word and concept of mission. This is explicit early in the book: “Ultimately, mission remains indefinable. . . . The most we can hope for is to formulate some approximations of what mission is all about.”⁸ Thus, first, he argues that the Bible itself does not offer a single mission theology but several, and he distinguishes the approaches of Jesus, Matthew, Luke-Acts, and Paul. Consequently he suggests that it is impossible to construct a single biblical theology of mission on which to base contemporary practice.

⁵ J. A. Scherer, quoted by Michael Raiter, “‘Sent for this purpose’: ‘Mission’ and ‘Missiology’ and Their Search for Meaning,” in R. J. Gibson, *Ripe for Harvest: Christian Mission in the New Testament and in our World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 138.

⁶ Which is the approach taken by Raiter, “‘Sent for this purpose.’”

⁷ Bob McCahill, *Dialogue of Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 96.

⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 9

Second, stressing the historical and cultural distance between the present era and that of the New Testament, Bosch argues that even if a single biblical mission theology could be identified, we still could not apply what was going on then to ourselves. Rather we must “prolong the logic of the ministry of Jesus and the early church in an imaginative and creative way to our own time and context,”⁹ and he implies that this is what has always happened. This leads to the heart of his argument, in which he draws on Kuhn’s thesis, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Bosch suggests that approaches to mission have varied from one epoch to another, reflecting the changing situation of the church and the prevailing worldview. Accordingly, at critical moments there have been elemental paradigm shifts in the practice of mission, and Bosch identifies six distinct mission paradigms, the most recent of which—“Mission in the Wake of the Enlightenment”—is ending. He suggests that we now face another paradigm shift, and discusses thirteen “Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm.”¹⁰

Bosch’s approach has been profoundly influential, but it moves towards a relativist and subjectivist approach to mission. This is essentially due to his pessimism regarding the possibility of a unified biblical theology of mission. However, while the diversity of the biblical testimony cannot be disputed, that need not entail scepticism about the basic unity of its witness, either with respect to mission or anything else. One could argue that the Bible offers a fundamentally coherent picture of the mission of a God who, from Adam’s first disobedience, pursues rebellious humanity to redeem a people, a purpose whose realisation is portrayed in John’s vision of “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). That mission he now carries out through his church as it makes disciples of Jesus Christ.

Further, Bosch’s hermeneutical approach allows great latitude to the human interpreter, prolonging “the logic of the ministry of Jesus and the early church.”¹¹ This hermeneutic alongside the emphasis on biblical diversity risks cutting mission free from any control by the biblical text and surrendering it to the creativity of interpreters. Thus Bosch moves towards an endorsement of the various paradigms he identifies—each of them an appropriate expression of mission for its time—his thesis making it difficult to bring a coherent biblical or theological critique to bear on them. To be fair, he seeks to retain a strong emphasis on the centrality of Christ and the cross: “The *Missio Dei* purifies the church. It sets it under the cross—the only place where it is ever safe.”¹² However, mission risks becoming whatever the church in any historical period understood it to be. Bosch’s thesis thus provides a theoretical justification for the loss of consensus with reference to “mission”; indeed it makes a virtue of ambiguity, for mission becomes a term constantly seeking a meaning. “Mission is never something self-evident, and nowhere—neither in the practice of mission nor in even our best theological reflections on mission, does it succeed in removing all confusions, misunderstandings, enigmas and temptations.”¹³

⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 181.

¹⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 367.

¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 181.

¹² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 519.

¹³ Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980), 9.

Four Approaches

At the risk of massive oversimplification, four principal contemporary understandings of mission may be identified. They can be visualised as concentric circles, ranging from approaches which are broad and inclusive, to those which are increasingly narrow in definition.

1. The *Missio Dei*

The broadest approach of all is that sometimes identified as *missio Dei*. In its literal sense the Latin expression simply draws attention to the fact that all Christian mission is God's: he alone initiates, empowers, directs, and blesses all true mission. Thus, insofar as human beings engage in mission, they do so as co-workers with God, as is explicit in Paul's commendation of Timothy: "We sent Timothy, who is our brother *and God's fellow-worker* in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith" (1 Thess 3:2).

However, as it is used in contemporary missiological debate, the term means rather more than this, identifying mission as everything God wills to do in the world, whether through the church or outside it. This in turn implies that non-Christians may be positively involved in God's mission without knowing it; they may, for example, unconsciously advance his purposes in the world through endeavour motivated by purely humanistic considerations. And this entails a potential marginalisation of the role of the church, which is not the unique human vehicle of the *missio Dei*. Approaches of this type are expressed in different ways. One such is the idea that the kingdom of God advances as people of any religion or none seek to do good in the world. Thus, the pursuit of justice, the furthering of human dignity, the reconciliation of hostile groups, the care of the environment, all reflect God's will for his creation and so all are part of his mission whoever the agents may be. Such an approach was evident at the ninth assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala in 1968, with its tendency to identify revolutionary social movements as the work of God in the world, and to "let the world set the agenda." It is seen similarly in liberation theology's rejection of a dichotomisation of history into "sacred" and "profane": "The historical destiny of humanity must be placed definitively in the salvific horizon."¹⁴ From an evangelical perspective, Sugden has argued that we should see "God at work in society beyond the church applying the effects of Christ's victory on the cross through social change."¹⁵ A contrasting but essentially similar approach emphasises the Spirit's mission within creation and not just within and through the church—even perhaps independently of Christ himself. Such a view found expression at the 1991 Canberra gathering of the World Council of Churches—"Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation"—and in *Gaudium et Spes*:

This social order requires constant improvement. It must be founded on truth, built on justice and animated by love; in freedom it should grow every day toward a more humane balance. An improvement in attitudes and abundant changes in society will have to take place if these objectives are to be gained.

God's Spirit, Who with a marvelous providence directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth, is not absent from this development.¹⁶

¹⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM, 1974), 153.

¹⁵ Chris Sugden quoted in Melvin Tinker, "Reversal or Betrayal? Evangelicals and Socio-political Involvement in the Twentieth Century," *The Churchman* 113.3 (1999): 266–267.

¹⁶ "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), chapter 2, section 26.

Thinking of mission in such terms tends towards a collapse of categories traditionally distinguished from one another. Belief in humanity as created in the *imago Dei* and in the notion of common grace has in the past provided sufficient basis for affirming that God is active outside the church, within the structures and organisation of human society for example, in order to preserve them from decay, to further justice and order, and thereby to facilitate the disciple-making mission of the church (cf. 1 Tim 2:2). All of this reflects his providential rule in history, but it is quite distinct from the sort of apostolic mission that is described in the Acts of the Apostles, whose purpose lies in calling men and women to become disciples of Jesus and members of God's people. Of course, in that the meaning of a word is defined by its use, and that words change in sense over time, the word mission might indeed be employed to denote this much broader area of God's activity. However, at the very least that would mean a drastic expansion of the meaning of mission, and a consequent loss of terminological precision. Thus, harking back to Neill, if *all* that God does in the world is indeed mission, a new terminology is required to categorise his specifically redemptive activity—assuming the notion of redemption is retained.

It is at this point that the more serious consequences of the notion of *missio Dei* emerge, when God's activity in bringing about the just society may be *equated* with redemption and the establishment of his kingdom. The issue is then not simply that of increasingly loose terminology, but of fundamental change in the concepts of salvation and the kingdom of God. However, this involves an understanding of God's kingdom substantially different from that which Jesus proclaimed. For him it was not primarily the reconstruction of human societies within history, but God's sovereign intervention to save and to judge, reconciling sinners and creating a new community: "It is the abstract idea of God being king, his sovereignty, his control of his world and its affairs. . . . We may seek it, pray for it, preach it, enter it, but men do not create or achieve it."¹⁷ Thus, "salvation does *not* exist in history beyond the church and . . . the kingdom of God comes *only* as Christ is acknowledged as king."¹⁸ There is indeed a distinction between history and salvation history, between world and church, between God's providential rule over the earth and his redemptive intervention within it: the notion of *missio Dei* as used by some collapses these pivotal distinctions, and thereby not only loses a word but also the very distinctiveness of God's work in Christ.

2. The Cultural Mandate

A second approach defines mission more narrowly: "the church's mission, then, encompasses everything that Jesus sends his people into the world to do."¹⁹ In contrast with the first approach, mission here is understood more restrictively as the *church's* action in the world, rather than all that *God* does in the world: "For God the Creator is constantly active in his world in providence, in common grace and in judgement, quite apart from the purposes for which he has sent his Son, his Spirit and his church into the world."²⁰ Nevertheless, it is still very comprehensive in scope and may come close to equating mission with what has traditionally been termed the "cultural mandate," which is rooted in the words of God in Genesis 1:26–28:

¹⁷ R. T. France, "The Church and the Kingdom of God: Some Hermeneutical Issues," in D. A. Carson, ed., *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: The Problem of Contextualisation* (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), 32, 41.

¹⁸ Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Sharing the Gospel through Social Involvement* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 74.

¹⁹ Andrew Kirk, "Missiology," in Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), 434.

²⁰ Stott, *Christian Mission*, 30.

“Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” . . . God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Significant is the idea that humans are *sent* into the world to fill it and rule over it as God’s image, exercising authority over his realm. “Men and women imitate God in their work of harnessing the powers of the created order, serving his creatures, and enabling the earth to bloom.”²¹ Thus, there is a certain notion of “mission”—“their mission on the planet”²²—which parallels Christ’s commission to his disciples: in Genesis human beings are sent to rule over the earth, and in the New Testament renewed human beings are sent to make disciples of its inhabitants. In this sense one might argue with Bosch that “the missionary task is as coherent, broad and deep as the need and exigencies of human life.”²³

Among evangelicals a major factor driving this understanding of mission has been a justified reaction against a dualistic—and very influential—approach to discipleship, which has tended to disparage the “secular” realm. In opposition to this there has been a recovery of the Reformed vision of glorifying God in all legitimate “callings,” and not just in supposedly “spiritual” roles. Such an approach is rooted in an affirmation of Christ’s Lordship over all creation and means that any notion of a division of work into “secular” and “spiritual” categories should be abandoned since all work may be carried out for God’s glory. This was Paul’s vision: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31), and it is expressed in the poetry of George Herbert: “who sweeps a room as for Thy laws makes that and the action fine.”²⁴

It is, nevertheless, a recent departure to define such engagement with the world as mission. As one example, Kirk sees mission not only in terms of the proclamation of good news, but also the pursuit of justice for the poor, of peace, and of care for the environment—reflecting the cultural mandate.²⁵ However, on this view there is no reason to confine it to those categories. The implication must be that mission would embrace all areas of human life and work—every realm in which God’s people live for the glory of their Creator by consciously exercising stewardship over his Creation—including commerce and government, industry and agriculture, service and education, and indeed with no legitimate sphere excluded. This in turn means that missiology as a theological discipline will embrace Christian life to its fullest extent as it is lived within the world God has made.

Such an understanding of mission suffers from the terminological problems of the first approach, if not from its theological weakness. A renewed accent on serving God in the whole of life is wholly desirable, a vital correction to forms of spirituality that lost sight of the doctrine of creation and its implications for discipleship. Nevertheless, the broadening of the term, mission, still entails a loss of verbal precision and one that is not required to secure the theological gains being pursued. Centuries before mission was used in anything like this comprehensive sense, the Protestant reformers reacted

²¹ Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 45.

²² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Truth with a Mission: Reading Scripture Missiologically* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2005), 12.

²³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

²⁴ George Herbert (1593–1633), “The Elixer.”

²⁵ Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999).

against similar dualistic approaches to Christian faith and life—expressed in medieval notions of church and priesthood—and insisted on the priesthood of all believers and the legitimacy of “secular” callings.

A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and everyone by means of his own work and office must benefit and serve every other that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.²⁶

What is happening, then, is an inflation of the concept of mission and, in consequence, of the discipline of missiology; indeed, the latter risks absorbing much of the theological agenda in rather totalitarian fashion.

3. Social Action

A third approach limits the missiological agenda more narrowly still to what is termed “social action,” along with proclamation and the making of disciples. Some might argue that there is little distinction here but, as the expression is used, “social action” does have a narrower compass than “everything” God sends his people to do. While social action is rarely given precise definition, it refers to the alleviation of human suffering and the elimination of injustice, exploitation, and deprivation. It is thus specifically remedial and transformative, in a way not necessarily true of all that Christians do to glorify God in his world.

Such action has invariably had a place in missionary activity over the centuries, and is implicit in the request addressed by James, Peter and John to Paul: “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Gal 2:10). Stott quotes Pierce Beaver who referred to the “social action” in which missionaries of earlier generations engaged:

Social action in mission can be traced from the time of the apostles. Concern was never limited to relief. The itinerating missionary carried with him a bag of medicines, new or better seeds and plants, and improved livestock. Nevius introduced the modern orchard industry into Shantung. The Basel missionaries revolutionized the economy of Ghana by introducing coffee and cocoa grown by families on their own land. James McKean transformed the life of Northern Thailand by eliminating its three major curses—smallpox, malaria and leprosy. . . . They fought fiercely for human rights in combating opium, foot-binding and exposure of girl babies in China. They waged war against widow-burning, infanticide, and temple prostitution in India.²⁷

Nevertheless, the issue is the extent to which social action is a necessary and integral dimension of mission. In the early part of the twentieth century, various factors produced a retreat from the social engagement that characterised evangelicalism through the nineteenth century, including evangelical reactions against liberalism and the “social gospel,” and a profound pessimism generated by the carnage of the First World War and dispensational theology. The later twentieth century, however, has seen renewed awareness of the social dimension of discipleship, as expressed in the Wheaton Declaration

²⁶ Martin Luther, quoted by Paul Helm, *The Callings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 57–58.

²⁷ R. Pierce Beaver, quoted by John Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1999), 7.

(1966) which urged “all evangelicals to stand openly and firmly for racial equality, human freedom, and all forms of social justice throughout the world.”²⁸ A few years later the expression of repentance for neglect of “socio-political involvement,” contained in the Lausanne Covenant, was a critical moment in evangelical thinking on the subject—“a watershed year in Western evangelicals’ interest in social concerns.”²⁹

Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.³⁰

Major contributory factors were an increased awareness of injustice and human pain fostered by the mass media; the challenge of radical analyses of poverty by theologians of liberation; and the critique of western evangelical missiology from some in the Two-Thirds World, notably Escobar and Padilla who both contributed forcefully at Lausanne. As a result there has been serious reflection regarding the relationship that should exist between social action and mission.

There are numerous approaches to the issue.³¹ What is particularly in focus here is the viewpoint which understands social action as a necessary partner in mission alongside disciple-making, both being required components in a “holistic” approach. Thus evangelism and social action have been represented as equivalent to the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird.³² Stott has been associated with this approach, to which he refers in *The Contemporary Christian*³³ and elsewhere, arguing that “the actual commission itself must be understood to include social as well as evangelistic responsibility.”³⁴ To support this approach he lays much weight on the Johannine form of the great commission—“the crucial form in which the Great Commission has been handed down to us”: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).³⁵ Thus, if believers are sent as Jesus was, that must entail doing all that he was sent to do: there is no “vague parallel” between the two, but Jesus’ mission is “the *model* of ours.” Nevertheless he also argues—somewhat at variance with the scissors and wings analogies—that evangelism should retain a primacy: “I think we should agree with the statement of the Lausanne Covenant that ‘in the church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary.’”³⁶ In this he distances himself from those who give to social action a place of importance equal with that of

²⁸ *Study Papers: Congress on the Church’s Worldwide Mission, April 9–16, 1966, Wheaton, Illinois* (Glen Ellyn, IL: Scripture Press Foundation, 1966), 24.

²⁹ Edward R. Dayton, quoted by David M. Doran, “The Task of the Great Commission: The Method of Discipleship,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 6 (2001): 6.

³⁰ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, *The Lausanne Covenant*, “Paragraph 5: Christian Social Responsibility.”

³¹ Cf. A. Scott Moreau, “Mission and Missions,” in A. Scott Moreau, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Baker and Paternoster, 2000), 637–638.

³² Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1982), 23.

³³ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 340.

³⁴ Stott, *Christian Mission*, 23.

³⁵ Stott, *Christian Mission*, 23.

³⁶ Stott, *Christian Mission*, 35.

evangelism: “sometimes referred to as the radical discipleship group . . . [it] considers social justice to be mission just as evangelism is, and does not give priority to either.”³⁷

4. Making Disciples of All Nations

The innermost of the four concentric circles emphasises the making of disciples as the essential, exclusive content of mission. Terminology is again important here. In view of some evangelistic strategies, seeing this approach simply in terms of evangelism risks serious distortion, as if what is in view is just the making of converts—the eliciting of decisions or commitments. The mandate of the great commission is that of making disciples, which in the context must surely indicate something closely parallel to Jesus’ own practice in the discipling of the twelve. Similarly, perceptions of Pauline mission sometimes risk seeing him as a peripatetic preacher moving quickly from place to place to make converts in evangelistic “missions,” whereas in reality he remained in places for extended periods wherever possible, establishing churches and discipling individuals, his aim being to communicate “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). His early exits were most frequently due to local persecution which made it impossible for him to stay, and which were in any case followed by the dispatch of apostolic envoys and letters to encourage the continued development of the churches. “The fact that Paul lived and worked in Corinth for two years and in Ephesus for over two years proves that the term “journey” does not offer a helpful analytical concept for a description of Paul’s missionary praxis.”³⁸ Consequently the preferred term here—rather than evangelism—would be discipling, or making disciples, which signifies the process not only of bringing people to faith but of fostering their spiritual growth in terms of relationship with God and his people, and of obedience in all areas of life: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19). Such an understanding of mission has been prevalent until recently, and is the presupposition of Schnabel’s study of New Testament mission, which he identifies as “the activity of a community . . . that is convinced of the truth claims of its faith, and that actively works to win other people to the content of faith and to the way of life of whose truth and necessity the members of that community are convinced.”³⁹

An approach such as this can moreover be misunderstood in other ways. First, it need in no way imply that Christian engagement with the world in general (the second circle) and social concern (the third circle), are invalid. It does not entail a return to Gnostic neglect of the world and its pain. Rather it is compatible with a biblically *holistic* discipleship—living to God’s glory and seeking his will in all of life. Among other things that will imply the pursuit of justice in the distribution of the fruits of the earth and of righteousness in the ordering of society, as well as the relief of the destitute and sustained efforts to bring about a transformation of their condition. The oppression of the poor is sin, and the church should never be the bastion of an evil *status quo* or the “opium of the people.” Thus, Dewi Hughes has rightly emphasised the imperative of Christian concern for the poor: “the God who has revealed himself in Jesus makes it very clear in his Word to those who welcome his revelation that our response to poverty is a crucial test of the reality of our faith. It is impossible to really know Jesus and be indifferent to the

³⁷ Moreau, “Mission and Missions,” 638.

³⁸ Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Volume Two, Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP and Apollos, 2004), 1445.

³⁹ Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Volume One, Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP and Apollos, 2004), 11.

plight of the poor.”⁴⁰ The point here is not to deny the importance of Christian social commitment, but to maintain distinctions in the interests of clarity, and to reserve the word mission for the discipling of the peoples. For those who respond to the gospel and are effectively disciplined, social engagement then becomes an integral part of their Christian life and obedience.

Second, distinguishing mission from social action does not mean that missionaries will not engage in the latter. Christian love and faithful discipleship may emphatically demand that missionaries—precisely as disciples—would respond to human need and injustice wherever they may encounter it, just as any Christian should do. The verbal communication of the gospel must necessarily be accompanied by a life that corroborates the message, which in certain circumstances means “social action.” Such an approach characterised those referred to by Pierce Beaver in the passage quoted above, men and women whose primary objective was the making of disciples but who responded to the needs and suffering which existed among those to whom they carried the gospel.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the provisos above, mission in the sense of proclamation and the making of disciples retains a distinctive and, it is argued here, primary place in the life of the church. The basis of such a position has often been articulated. First, there is a distinctive apostolic mission taking place in Acts which is an expression of explicit obedience to the great commission. Its focus is on winning people to the faith and to the way of life which that faith produces, and its method is proclamation of the word of Christ. It is also true that Acts portrays believers engaging in social action—caring for widows, for example—but that is a consequence of apostolic mission rather than its substance: it is one of the forms—albeit a vitally important form—which faithful discipleship takes among those who have responded to the gospel. Nevertheless, it does not have the same place as the making of disciples itself, and this relates to the obvious fact that Christian social engagement depends on the existence of Christians, and there would be none if disciples were not made. Howard Marshall makes the point in his review of Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*: “I am a quite unrepentant advocate of the priority of evangelism, since that is quite clearly central to the NT, and I cannot follow J. Stott in arguing that the Great Commission is about this [justice] as well as evangelism. . . . Where evangelical evangelism is at fault is when it confines its attention to certain sins and ignores others.”⁴¹ So, while Stott stresses the significance of the Johannine form of the great commission and understands it in “incarnational” terms as inclusive of “social action,” in its context the text is explicitly associated with the message to be communicated, one of forgiveness of sins, rather than with any sort of recapitulation of Jesus’ own unique and unrepeatable works: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:21–23).⁴² The disciples’ mission is centred on the proclamation of forgiveness, the provision of which was the focus of Jesus’ mission. “The mission of the Messianic community is that of extending to unbelievers the forgiveness of sins made possible through Jesus’ completed work.”⁴³ Accordingly, the

⁴⁰ Dewi Hughes, *God of the Poor: A Biblical Vision of God’s Present Rule* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1998), 1.

⁴¹ I. Howard Marshall, “Review of David Bosch: *Transforming Mission*,” *EQ* 67 (1995): 188–189.

⁴² See the discussion in Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel’s Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 212–217. It is not the purpose of the present discussion to engage in depth or breadth with the debate over “incarnational” mission and the various implications of the term.

⁴³ Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John,” *Missiology* 23 (1995): 449, quoted by Raiter, “Sent for this purpose,” 118.

initial phrase of the Johannine commission—*as the Father has sent me, I am sending you*—is about the continuity of the disciples’ mission with that of Jesus, rather than its identity with his: being sent as he was, they are to carry out their mission in obedience to and dependence on the Son, just as he, being similarly sent by the Father, came to carry out his mission in obedience to and dependence on him (John 4:34; 5:19; 7:16; 8:42, etc.).⁴⁴ Thus, to summarise, the Johannine form of the great commission and even, according to Köstenberger, Johannine missiology as a whole, cannot be read as teaching a mission of social action alongside proclamation:

The notion of the disciples’ mission as “service to humanity” founded on the model of Jesus’ mission appears, contrary to Stott’s assertions, to be inconsistent with the Fourth Gospel’s teaching on mission. A focus on human service and on human need, though often characteristic of contemporary mission practice, is not presented in the Fourth Gospel as the primary purpose of either Jesus’ or the disciples’ mission.⁴⁵

Second, if men and women are alienated from God and face eternal judgement, then communication of the message of reconciliation must have precedence over social action. Again, this is not to deny the necessity of social engagement. However, the thrust of the New Testament is that eternal realities have immeasurably greater significance than temporal ones. We may feed the hungry, heal the sick, release the oppressed, but if they remain alienated from God then their gain is *relatively* small, for the eternal reality has a significance that infinitely surpasses the circumstances of the present (cf. 2 Cor 4:17). Chester makes the same point in the context of a work in which he argues strenuously for Christian social involvement: “the greatest need of the poor, as it is for all people, is to be reconciled with God and escape his wrath.”⁴⁶ Of course, this argument makes fundamental assumptions about the seriousness of the human condition and the nature of the remedy. One major reason for a tendency to move away from a focus on mission as disciple-making and towards broader definitions has been a loss of belief in the eternal consequences of human lostness and in the uniqueness of Christ’s work as the means by which human beings are restored to the Father. Under those conditions the emphasis necessarily moves away from the spiritual and eternal and towards the physical and temporal. Nor is this to argue that all of those who favour seeing mission in terms of social action are necessarily reasoning in this way; however, it is to claim that the loss of those doctrinal certainties about sin and hell and Christ that fostered missionary endeavour in previous generations, has been a major factor at both popular and scholarly levels in changing definitions of mission.⁴⁷

Third, mission may take place in the absence of social action, but never in the absence of discipling. The making of disciples is the *sine qua non* of authentically Christian mission; it is, after all, what Jesus explicitly commanded at the end of his earthly ministry, to which the New Testament bears abundant testimony. When confronted by physical need and suffering those involved in mission will necessarily seek to respond. However, there may be circumstances in which social action is not called for. Apart from the exhortation addressed to Paul by the Jerusalem leaders in Galatians 2:10, there is

⁴⁴ See Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Leicester and Downers Grove: Apollos and IVP, 2001), 221–222.

⁴⁵ Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples*, 215.

⁴⁶ Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, 65; cf. 52. Tim Chester’s book is excellent, but he would probably not agree with all that I am arguing here.

⁴⁷ See the discussion of this issue in Stan Guthrie, *Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 42–52.

little evidence that he engaged in social ministry among those to whom he took the gospel. Indeed, there is rather clearer evidence that on his initiative social action was directed *from* the new churches *towards* Jerusalem, the place of origin of the church's mission—"the relatively backward and poor Israel"⁴⁸—although there may also have been theological reasons for that.⁴⁹ It is indeed striking that the mission of the New Testament church, certainly within the Roman empire, generally moved from poorer to richer regions, a pattern about to repeat itself as churches of the Two-Thirds World engage in mission.⁵⁰ "The poor of the world are the great missionary force of the present stage in mission history."⁵¹ This may in turn suggest that emphasis on social action as an *integral* aspect of mission itself reflects an outmoded paradigm, according to which mission is carried out by rich Western churches among materially poorer peoples. In such circumstances the issue of Christian responsibility for those in material need necessarily imposes itself, as relatively rich missionaries encounter people living in comparative poverty. However, the question does not arise, or not in the same form, when mission takes place in the opposite direction. So, as Christians from comparatively poor Asian countries seek employment as domestic servants in prosperous parts of the Middle East, with the intention (at least in part) of sharing the gospel, social action is unlikely to be part of their missionary agenda—or at least not in the sense in which it is conceived by Western missiologists.⁵²

Fourth, the making of disciples of Jesus Christ constitutes in itself a major step towards social and economic change. The causes of poverty are complex and disputed, and it is beyond the scope of this discussion to debate them. A major contributory factor, however, is culture and, more specifically, the worldview that underlies it. The significance of culture for economic welfare has been increasingly recognised during the 1990s, and not only in a Christian context, although it is also the subject of hot debate.

A growing number of scholars, journalists, politicians, and development practitioners are focusing on the role of cultural values and attitudes as facilitators of, or obstacles to, progress. They are the intellectual heirs of Alexis de Tocqueville, who concluded that what made the American political system work was a culture congenial to democracy; Max Weber, who explained the rise of capitalism as essentially a cultural phenomenon rooted in religion; and Edward Banfield, who illuminated the cultural roots of poverty and authoritarianism in southern Italy, a case with universal application.⁵³

Thus fatalism, belief in the notion of limited good, the prevalence of corruption and of the attitudes which foster it, animistic thinking, and bondage to a fear of occult powers, may each contribute to a worldview which sustains poverty and injustice: "Physical poverty is rooted in a mindset of poverty, a set of ideas held corporately that produce certain behaviours"⁵⁴ or, more succinctly, "Underdevelopment is a

⁴⁸ Martin Goldsmith, *Get a Grip on Mission: the Challenge of a Changing World* (Leicester: IVP, 2006), 72.

⁴⁹ Raiter, "Sent for this purpose," 121–122.

⁵⁰ Martin Goldsmith, *Get a Grip on Mission*, 72.

⁵¹ Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 64.

⁵² Cf. Martin Goldsmith, *Get a Grip on Mission*, 77.

⁵³ Lawrence E. Harrison, "Introduction," in Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xxi.

⁵⁴ Darrow L. Miller, *Discipling Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures* (Seattle: YWAM Publishers, 1998), 67.

State of Mind.”⁵⁵ This is not to deny the significance of other causal elements, including unjust structures of trade. However, poverty arises not only from factors external to the poor and over which they have no control, but also from powerful but debilitating beliefs that shape their societies. Consequently, measures to alleviate poverty are frequently unlikely to yield lasting success if they do not address critical cultural issues. However, by its nature the gospel should produce radical worldview change that will positively impact society as truth replaces falsehood through the renewing of minds (Rom 12:2). Escobar makes the point in discussing the social impact of South American Pentecostalism: “They [Pentecostals] do not have a social agenda but an intense spiritual agenda, and it is through that agenda that they have been able to have a social impact.”⁵⁶ He quotes Martin’s verdict on Pentecostalism:

Above all it renews the innermost cell of the family and protects the woman from the ravages of male desertion and violence. A new faith is able to implant new disciplines, reorder priorities, counter corruption and destructive machismo, and reverse the injurious and indifferent hierarchies of the outside world.⁵⁷

Mangalwadi makes a similar point in reflecting on Carey’s approach to social ills in India:

Carey struggled against specific social evils, just as his friends in England were continuing their struggles against evils. But Carey’s confidence was not in his social protest or social action, but in the gospel. This is the very opposite of those Christians who put their hope for change in their “social action.” . . . [Carey] believed that if we disciple nations, we will increasingly see God’s will being done here on earth.⁵⁸

Social change occurs through those who have been transformed by the gospel—through transformed communities of God’s people who become salt and light in their societies. It is fruit rather than substance of mission. Communication of the gospel in its richness is the most significant “social action” that missionaries can undertake.

Conclusion

Does the issue of definition really matter? One can, after all, adopt a broad definition of mission while retaining a place for evangelism as one dimension of it—perhaps the most important dimension. This is the approach many would take, including Bosch, for whom evangelism remains one element of the emerging mission paradigm.⁵⁹ Certainly the extent of Christian engagement with the world is not limited to disciple-making but includes involvement in every area of life—all for the glory of God. The problem, however, is that if the making of disciples is subsumed under a category of mission which is much broader and far more inclusive, its absolute importance risks being compromised. Stott makes something of an allusion to this concern: “The main fear of my critics seems to be that

⁵⁵ The title of another book by Lawrence Harrison, *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind* (Lanham, Maryland: Madison Books), 2000.

⁵⁶ Samuel Escobar, “The Global Scenario at the Turn of the Century,” in William Taylor, ed., *Global Missiology for 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 42.

⁵⁷ David Martin, quoted by Samuel Escobar, “The Global Scenario at the Turn of the Century,” 42.

⁵⁸ Vishal Mangalwadi, quoted by Miller, *Discipling the Nations*, 180–181.

⁵⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 409.

missionaries will be sidetracked.”⁶⁰ However, the issue is rather that churches in general would lose sight of the primary importance of making disciples and see such activity as simply one of many things that they are called to do. This is the more so in that the media constantly broadcast harrowing images of the human victims of crisis—refugees, victims of conflict, drought, and disease—which seize the imagination and rightly demand a compassionate response. However, the eternal lostness of those who are without God and without hope cannot be visualised in this way, nor be so readily *felt*, although in reality their state is *infinitely*—and that in a literal sense—more serious. There is a danger of the marginalisation of disciple-making if its distinct and unique nature is not specifically recognised and singled out as *the great work* of the people of God—the work that they alone can do. Nor is fear of such marginalisation merely the reflection of an obsessive paranoia, as history bears out:

One generation of Mennonites cherished the gospel and believed that the entailment of the gospel lay in certain social and political commitments. The next generation assumed the gospel and emphasized the social and political commitments. The present generation identifies itself with the social and political commitments, while the gospel is variously confessed or disowned, it no longer lies at the heart of the belief system of some who call themselves Mennonites.⁶¹

Mennonites are not alone in theological drift. There is a tendency for mission in the disciple-making sense to be eclipsed, even swallowed up, by other concerns, and that tendency is enhanced if it is seen as simply one “missional” responsibility among many others. Of course, a simple return to a narrower definition of mission is not on its own likely to halt such a process; indeed, the inflation of the concept is probably more a symptom than a cause of what is already going on for other and more profound theological reasons. However that may be, if the concept and centrality of mission after the manner of the apostles is to be retained, its distinct identity must be secured through a vocabulary, specific words, that names it. This is what is being lost in the present confusion of definition. The appropriate response may be loudly to reaffirm a disciple-making definition of mission; perhaps more realistically it may be to accept the irreversibility of the process of “lexical entropy” and to develop new expressions—*apostolic mission* perhaps—to assert the church’s primordial and unconditional responsibility to make disciples. The importance of the issue can scarcely be overstated. The great theme of Scripture is God’s redemptive mission to call a people for his own glory among whom he will dwell; and those he calls are in their turn to engage in mission as his co-workers by making disciples of Jesus Christ. Definitional ambiguities must not be allowed to obscure the absolute centrality of that vital task.⁶²



⁶⁰ Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 342.

⁶¹ D. A. Carson, quoting a Mennonite leader, in Tinker, “Reversal or Betrayal?” 271.

⁶² While they would not agree with all of it, I express my gratitude to Ailish Eves and Gordon Molyneux for reading and commenting on this article. I have benefited much from their wisdom and friendship.