

Mission as Ontology: a question of theological grammar

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Following a series of discussions at Church Meetings, the local church of which I am a member determined that it should be doing more mission. Turning away from the introversion (and introspection) into which churches all too easily slip, we are now committed to be more involved, more open, more active within the local community. Now I must confess that I am not the best of church members. I am frequently absent. It's quite possible (indeed, probable) that I have missed crucial and formative aspects of these discussions and that my grasp of these conclusions is flawed and distorted. Nonetheless, one outcome of these discussions and commitments, some while ago, was my receiving of an e-mail from another member inviting me (rather strongly 'inviting' me) to participate in a community survey one Saturday morning. The general idea was that I and others would stand all morning in our local High Street with a clipboard and a questionnaire. And the underlying idea was that this was just one aspect of 'doing mission'.

Now I must also confess to being able to think of quite a number of things I would rather be doing on a Saturday morning (in fact, I can't readily think of very many things I'd rather not be doing). I must confess to inertia. I must confess to being easily embarrassed (not least by such well-meaning public ventures). All that follows, therefore, might be no more than a thin veneer of theological reflection disguising an underlying indolence, an elaborate attempt at self-justification which proves, in the end, to be a form of self-deception. But I have deep misgivings about this now common talk of 'doing' mission. I want to argue that it is grammatically flawed.

I could argue that the word 'mission' comes from the Latin verb *missio*, a word that generally signifies a sending away or a dispatching. I could similarly argue that this English (and Latin) word translates the Creek verb *pempw*, a word that also signifies a sending or a commissioning. Thus derived, the term 'mission' could be taken as signifying the 'being-sentness' of someone or something—and it is difficult to conceive of how one 'does' a 'being-sentness'; to 'be sent' is a passive verb and not an active verb; it is something done to someone rather than something someone does. It is plainly ungrammatical.

But I hope I am not linguistically naive. I teach a course in hermeneutics. I know that the signification of words cannot be determined simply by the derivation of words. I know that language is a living dynamic, that words are slippery, that words change their significance, that words only signify within a community of communication, that a community's use of words changes over a period of time. I realise, therefore, that the local church community of which I am a part—together with the wider community of the contemporary Church—uses this term 'mission' in a manner that admits the meaningfulness of talk of 'doing' mission; that, in common usage, a previously passive idea has taken on active connotations. I realise it but, in this particular instance, I cannot accept it. Any change in the use of a word implies a change of signification. Therefore any change in the use of a theological word

implies a change of theological signification; that is to say, to use the term 'mission' in a manner that admits the meaningfulness of talk of 'doing' mission is indicative of an underlying change of theology. My concern is not primarily with grammar but with theological grammar, with what our speaking signifies with respect to our understanding of God. Or, to put the matter the other way round: the proper grammar of theological terms (such as 'mission') derives from our understanding of the Triune God and, in this context of understanding, talk of 'doing' mission is profoundly ungrammatical simply because it is theologically flawed.

At the very beginning of his definitive study of Mission, David Bosch notes that '[u]ntil the sixteenth century the term was used exclusively with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, of the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son'.¹ Within the relatedness of the Trinity there is a sending and a being sent, though, as with all works of God with respect to creation (with respect to that which is other than God) these actions are distinctly appropriate to the persons of the Trinity: the Father sends but is not sent; the Son is sent and, at least instrumentally, also sends (assuming for the sake of argument that the Spirit is sent by the Father through the Son); the Spirit is sent but, it would appear, does not send (unless we conceive of the incarnation of the Son through the Spirit also as an instrumental form of sending). Elsewhere David Bosch speaks of mission as an 'attribute' of God,² and this may be a helpful beginning though, unless we are to render creation as necessary to God, we surely must insist on distinguishing mission as an 'economic' rather than an 'essential' attribute (in accordance with one convention of the Christian tradition). God is 'simple' and, in some respects, the entire tradition of attribution can be misconstrued and misappropriated: God is not divided. And God is 'a se', utterly sufficient in eternal Triune relatedness: divine mission like divine mercy is a form God's single and self-sufficient nature takes in relation to that which is other than God.³

There is, then, within God's Triune relatedness in relation to creation, a sending and a being sent, an active and a passive. The Son is sent into the world by the Father through the Spirit. This is his 'mission', his 'being-sentness'. There is that which the Son does which expresses this mission, which is the outcome and outworking of this mission, but the Son's mission is not constituted or defined by such expressions, outcomes, and outworkings. The Son's mission consists in his 'being-sentness': it is a passive rather than an active; it is that which is done to him rather than that which he does in coherence with that which is done to him; it is ontological rather than functional; it defines his being. Sometimes we rather loosely speak of the baptism of Jesus as the beginning of his mission. This simply cannot be the case. The baptism of Jesus may mark the beginning of his public ministry, it may mark the beginning of the public outworking of his mission (though even this could be disputed), but it does not mark the beginning of his mission: the mission of Jesus begins with the sending of the Son into the world by the Father and through the Spirit. Similarly the Spirit is sent into the world by the Father through the Son as witness to the Son—and whether we relate this sending of the Spirit to Pentecost or to the act of creation (itself an interesting and crucial debate but without prejudice to this present discussion) it is the 'being-sentness' of the Spirit that constitutes the Spirit's mission rather than that which the Spirit does in coherence with this 'being-sentness'. And the mission of the Church is similarly and derivatively constituted:

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (John 20 21).

The mission of the Church consists in its being sent by the Son in the power of the Spirit as witness to the Son within the world.⁴ The mission of the Church corresponds (at least in this respect) to the sending of the Spirit and is a response to the sending of the Son. It is not a continuation of the sending of the Son (and again loose talk of the Church as a simple continuation of the Incarnation is unhelpful and distorting at this point). The sending of the Church into the world is as witness to the Son, just as the Spirit also is sent into the world as witness to the Son (John 15 26f.). Neither the Church nor the Spirit *is* the Son. Neither the Church nor the Spirit is simply an extension of the Son's being sent into the world. But the sending of the Church and of the Spirit into the world are in relation to the Son's being sent into the world, as witness to the Son's being sent into the world. The existence of the Church as that which is sent into the world in the power of the Spirit is itself a sign and sacrament of the sending of the Son into the world: it is the means and promise of his presence and action through the Spirit.

Its sending is not a repetition, extension or continuation. His own sending does not cease as He sends its. It does not disappear in its sending. It remains it free and independent presupposition. Its sending is simply ordered on its own lower level in relation to His. The power with which it is invested is comparable with His, as is necessarily the case since He Himself gave it, but neither quantitatively nor qualitatively is it equal. He is sent to precede it on the way into the world. It is sent to follow on the same way. These are two things. But the two sendings are comparable because they have the same origin. The one God who sends Him as the Father also sends them through Him the Son. Again, they are comparable because they have the same goal. He and they are both sent into the world, which means very generally that they are directed to the world and exist for it.⁵

The mission of the Church, therefore, like the mission of the Son and the mission of the Spirit, consists in its 'being-sentness': it is a passive rather than an active; it is that which is done to the Church rather than that which the Church does in coherence with that which is done to it; it is ontological rather than functional; it defines the being of the Church. Again we sometimes loosely speak of the so-called 'Great Commission' as constitutive of the Church's mission—and again this simply cannot be the case. Christ calls his Church to make disciples, to baptise, to teach: such is the outworking and outcome of the Church's mission but the Church's mission is not constituted or defined by these outworkings and outcomes; the Church's mission is constituted simply and solely by its being sent into the world. Certainly the Church is sent into the world to 'do' things, but its failure to 'do' those things does not disestablish its 'being-sentness'. There is certainly a goal to the mission of the Church, the Church is sent into the world with purpose, but the Church's failure here and now to attain that goal does not undo its calling and 'being-sentness'. The mission of the Church certainly should issue in action but it is not constituted by such action; the witness of the Church is the consequence of its mission, the matter cannot be reversed.⁶ Consequently, though it is entirely appropriate to speak of the Church doing things that are coherent with its mission, outworking its mission, expressing its mission, it really is not appropriate to speak of the Church 'doing mission'; it is theologically ungrammatical.

While hoping that I am not linguistically naive I hope similarly that I am not ecclesiologically naive. It is not difficult to speculate concerning the origins of this language of 'doing

mission'. The International Congress on World Evangelisation, held in Lausanne in 1974, stands as a defining moment in evangelical identity and thinking. In response and reaction to a perceived disjunction (and even opposition) between evangelism and social action Lausanne affirms a more holistic understanding of the evangelistic task and calling.⁷ And one outcome and expression of this more holistic approach to evangelism (as witnessed by the titles of various modules in any number of theological seminaries) is the tendency to speak of mission where previously we would have spoken of evangelism. To 'do mission', it is assumed, is to act more holistically, with greater social and political responsibility, than merely to 'do evangelism'. To 'do mission', it is assumed, is to imply both evangelistic action and socio-political action. To 'do mission' is all embracing. To 'do mission' better expresses the wholeness of the Church's calling. But, for this writer at least, this is a form of political correctness that is simply theologically incorrect, unhelpful, confusing, and counter-productive.

But is all this no more than theological pedantry? Why make such a fuss about the use of a word (we all know what we mean after all)? Surely a more holistic approach to evangelism and social action should be affirmed and encouraged rather than disputed by a pompous and pernickety grammarian?

Well, in the first place (and perhaps most superficially) I find myself embarrassed by any embarrassment with the term 'evangelism' and if this recent speaking of 'doing mission' in any respect implies an unease with the language of 'doing evangelism' it should be repudiated. I have no wish to defend the crass or the arrogant, the simplistic or the belittling, but I hope I will never be ashamed of the gospel and never be reluctant to retell the gospel story. The retelling of this story is a necessary and irreducible consequence of the Church's mission.

But neither evangelism nor any other action or activity of the Church constitutes the Church's mission. The Church's mission is constituted simply and solely by its being sent into the world: it is a matter of identity before ever it is a matter of activity. And it is in this far more profound respect that I maintain this language of 'doing mission' to be confusing and counter-productive. To put the matter simply, to express something I am called to be (a matter of identity) as if it were merely something I am called to do (a matter of function), far from promoting a more holistic understanding of the Church's mission actually militates against it. As soon as I begin to identify mission as something I 'do' I have effectively compartmentalised my life; I have implied the separation of all those other things I am and I do as other than mission (or, at least, as lesser expressions of that mission). As soon as the Church identifies some activities as 'doing mission' it has similarly implied that all other activities occur irrespective of mission (or, at least, are lesser expressions of that mission). And as soon as a local church identifies some activities as 'doing mission' it too has relegated all other activities and aspects of life as other than mission; it has yet again accorded precedence to institutionally organised activities and implicitly belittled the day-to-day life and identity of its members.

The Church's mission is constituted by its being sent into the world. It is a matter of identity before it is a matter of function. It is a matter of 'being' in the world rather than 'doing' within churches. We are a missionary people.⁸ The outworking of that 'being sent into the world' is every bit as much a matter of integrity in the workplace, of fidelity to

friends and family, of neighbourliness, as it is a matter of institutionally organised activities. Indeed, our being the Church does not consist in a series of (increasingly encroaching) institutionally organised activities, it does not consist in our 'doing' anything: our being the Church is simply a matter of identity through Baptism and the Lord's Supper as a worshipping people, as a people being formed and transformed by the story we indwell, as a people whose very existence within the world is a witness to Christ.

We call this new creation, church. It is constituted by word and sacrament as the story we tell, the story we embody, must not only be told but enacted. In the telling we are challenged to be a people capable of hearing God's good news such that we can be a witness to others. In the enactment, in Baptism and Eucharist, we are made part of a common history which requires continuous celebration to be rightly remembered. It is through Baptism and Eucharist that our lives are engrafted onto the life of the one what makes our unity possible. Through this telling and enactment we, like Israel, become peculiarly a people who live by our remembering the history of God's redemption of the world.⁹

It is not that the Church is called to 'do mission', it is rather that the Church is constituted as the Church by virtue of its mission, by virtue of its being sent into the world. It is a matter of identity. The mere existence of the Church as this 'being-sent' community is a sign and a sacrament, a witness and a means of grace.¹⁰

Several years ago, while I was pastor of a church in Lewisham, our then local Member of Parliament came to visit me. I had written to him and, following the advice of a friend, had avoided any lobbying tone and had simply assured him of support and prayer. At the end of a surprisingly long conversation he asked me what I considered to be the deepest pastoral need that I encountered. I am sure he expected me to say something about social deprivation, unemployment, or family breakdown. My reply was that the most profound pastoral problem, a problem underlying quite a lot of other pastoral problems, was Christians who didn't really know their own identity. Our identity is that of those sent into the world in the power of the Spirit. My contention is that talk of 'doing mission' compounds this crisis of identity.

...mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus... wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.

- 1 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), p. 1.
- 2 'In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.' David J. Bosch, , p. 390.
- 3 In this respect I must disagree with Andrew Kirk when he states that '...God is in himself mission through and through. Sending and being sent are integral to his nature...'. Divine sending implies that which is other than God as the indirect object of this sending. Therefore, to conceive of divine sending as 'integral' to the divine nature is to imply that that which is other than God shares God's eternity. J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: DLT, 1999), p. 29. 'If the church sees itself to be sent in the same framework as the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, then it also sees itself in the

framework of God's history with the world and discovers its place and function within this history.' Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1977), p. 11.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, trans. C. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), p. 768.

Here again I find myself in radical disagreement with Andrew Kirk when he asserts that '[m]ission is quite simply, though profoundly, what the Christian community is sent to do...' J. Andrew Kirk, p. 24.

7 For an outline and discussion of these deliberations and their outcomes see David J. Bosch, pp. 405ff.

8 'The Christian faith... is intrinsically missionary... The entire Christian existence is to be characterized as missionary existence...' David J. Bosch, pp. 8f.

9 Stanley M. Hauerwas, 'The Church as God's New Language' in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1988), 47-65, p. 53.

10 David J. Bosch, p. 11 et *passim*

11 David J. Bosch, p. 519.