



## Your Church and Mission: What, How, Why

We live in an exciting time when our churches are becoming increasingly aware of their missionary calling. Across the country, churches are exploring options for outreach, both within their own communities and further afield. We can praise God for what's happening and pray that all these discussions will result in action.

What I want to do is to go over a number of important issues with respect to mission and outreach. The idea is not necessarily for me to give you all the answers, but to at least get you thinking. First, we'll look at what mission is. Then, closely related to that, we'll consider the role of the local congregation in mission. Third, we'll briefly consider the question of how. Finally, we want to look at the why, the motivation for mission.

### The definition of mission

When we talk about mission it's important that we're all on the same page as to what exactly mission is. I believe this is a good scriptural definition: *Mission is the official sending of the church to go and make disciples by preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ in all nations through the power of the Holy Spirit.* We can see that it's scriptural by going back to some of the key passages, particularly to those passages where the Lord Jesus was sending out his disciples into the world after his resurrection. Let's briefly survey some of those passages.

### **Matthew 28:18-20**

Matthew 28:18-20 provides the most well-known version of what is often called the Great Commission:

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

In this passage, the Lord Jesus says very clearly that he wants to see the apostles going out and making obedient followers (disciples) in all the nations. Now it should be noted that "nations" does not refer in the first place to social-political states. The word in Greek refers to ethnicity rather than to political realities. We should be able to see this clearly in Canada where our country is made up of various ethnicities and even ethnic groups that refer to themselves as "nations." There is much more that can be said about Matthew 28, but we should move along to the next passage.

### **Luke 24:46-49**

In Luke 24:46-49, Luke records the Great Commission in this way:

*He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."*

This passage is unusual in that the only direct command appears in verse 49, “stay in the city.” The Lord Jesus commands the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the promise of the Father comes upon them – a reference to Pentecost. In this passage, the Holy Spirit is connected with the Great Commission. The disciples are sent out through the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 49 is basically telling the apostles, “Wait now and go later in the power of the Spirit.”

And when they do go, what are they to do? Verses 46 and 47 give the answer. In verse 46, the Lord Jesus speaks of what was written in the Old Testament about the necessity of the Christ suffering and then rising from the dead on the third day. In verse 47, he goes further and says that Scripture (again the Old Testament) had prophesied that repentance and the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations in his Name, starting with the city of Jerusalem, but eventually this would reach out to all the nations – which, like in Matthew, are to be understood as ethnicities. The Saviour’s words here lay out a picture of a divine-human effort in a limited sense. The divine Word prophesied that it would be accomplished and ultimately, under God’s sovereign power, so it will be. At the same time, the prophecy concerning the nations also lays a burden upon the hearts of the apostles, not merely to be witnesses in some passive, uninvolved sense, but to be active participants. Verse 48 indicates that not only have the disciples been witnesses in the past, they are going to be witnesses in the future as well.

This will involve preaching. What we have here is the preaching of the Word connected with a special office, the word of a herald bringing a message from a higher up. That official character is underlined in this passage with the addition of those three words, “*in his Name.*” So, from Luke’s gospel we can conclude that Christ, in fulfillment of the Old Testament, sent out his apostles in the power of the Spirit to witness to his suffering and resurrection and to preach officially repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations.

### **Acts 1:8**

That brings us to another form of the Great Commission. This one also comes down to us from the hand of Luke, but this time in the book of Acts. Acts 1:8 reads:

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

The key idea here is that the apostles will receive power from the Holy Spirit – notice again the accent on the work of the Spirit. As a result of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the apostles are to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus, starting in their immediate vicinity and working outward. As in Luke 24, the disciples are not so much sent out here as commissioned with a task. To be sure, there is a geographic locale attached which implies both a sending out and a going. However, the emphasis here is not on the sending and going. Rather, it is on the fact that Christ commissions his apostles to be witnesses. In the New Testament, a witness gives sound testimony to the truth of something and this sound testimony could stand up under legal scrutiny in a court of law. Witnesses speak about what they have seen and heard. So, the apostles were commissioned in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring a sober word of truth about Jesus Christ, a sober word that could convince a doubtful world that he is truly the Saviour.

If we go through the book of Acts, this is exactly the picture we see of the early Christian church. The church goes out from Jerusalem into the whole world and witnesses for Christ, giving sound testimony about him. When we look at the church in Acts, there are certainly acts of mercy and kindness, but the emphasis always fall on the verbal heralding of the good news of Christ. Going through the book, you can’t help but notice the numerous sermons and speeches. In fact, sermons and speeches make up twenty to thirty percent of the book. The verbal proclamation of the church is front and centre. It seems that the apostles and other early Christians understood very well what it was that Jesus Christ had commissioned them to do.

Now there are many other passages (both from the Old and New Testament) we could look at, but I have to move along. Given what we’ve surveyed, however, we can reach some conclusions. One thing we cannot escape is the command to preach in an official way, a way that can only be

connected with a special office. There is another aspect as well and it is not directly connected to a special office and that is the notion of witnessing. Both preaching and witnessing are inextricably tied to words - they are verbal forms of communication. The Lord was sending out the apostles to speak. The content of their speaking is captured with the word “*evangel*” – good news. All of the Great Commission passages either speak of or imply a going out. We also noted an emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit. Finally, the ones who are targeted by this command are identified as all the nations or something similar. Thus we come to the definition mentioned a few moments ago:

*Mission is the official sending of the church to go and make disciples by preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ in all nations through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

We looked at the biblical contours of mission and arrived at this definition: “*Mission is the official sending of the church to go and make disciples by preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ in all nations through the power of the Holy Spirit.*”

I now want to further comment briefly on three elements of this definition.

First, mission is the official sending of *the church*. Jesus Christ sent out his apostles, and we understand from elsewhere in Scripture that those apostles stood as representatives of the entire church. We can also see that in Matthew 28 when the Lord spoke of his presence “*to the very end of the age.*” Those words mean that Christ’s presence outlasted the lives of the apostles. Consequently, mission belongs with the church. Through the apostles, the church has been sent out by Jesus Christ.

Second, there is an *official* task tied into this Great Commission. In other words, it is closely connected to office. In our Reformed churches, there are special office bearers who are sent out to be missionary ministers. With their verbal preaching and witnessing, they are ambassadors and heralds of Jesus Christ. They are standing in for Christ. When unbelievers accept them, they are accepting Christ. When unbelievers reject them, they are rejecting Christ.

However, and this is the third point, that is not to say that believers who are not office bearers cannot be regarded as missionaries under certain conditions. We confess in Lord’s Day 12 that all believers have a general office which includes being a prophet, and that means confessing the name of Christ. All believers can and must witness to the good news of their Saviour! This is what we see happening in Acts 8:4. There the believers were scattered everywhere, spreading the good news of the word (literally: “*evangelizing the word*”). However, when it comes to what we call mission, we should keep things tied as closely as possible to the church. Thus, working under the call and supervision of a church, unordained believers can also legitimately claim the title of missionary.

### **Mission and evangelism?**

That brings us to briefly consider the question of whether there is any difference between mission and evangelism. Traditionally, many Reformed mission scholars have maintained such a distinction. One such scholar said that evangelism has to do with communicating the Christian faith in Western society, while mission has to do with communicating the gospel in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup> This distinction is certainly not based on any scriptural teaching; it’s just purely practical. However, with the advent of globalization, this formulation has lost any usefulness. The peoples and cultures of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean are now found in the West. In similar fashion, what used to be called Western society is now more and more distant from the Christian influences which formerly made it unique. Therefore, it is no longer viable to formulate a distinction between mission and evangelism based on the place where the gospel is being communicated. If we understand evangelism as the communication of the gospel (the *evangel*), then evangelism is what the church has been sent to do: “*preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ.*” In other words, the mission of the church is evangelism.

The distinction between mission and evangelism is not grounded in Scripture. The Bible makes no distinction between gospel outreach done in Jerusalem to Jews by Jews and gospel outreach done in Athens to Greeks by Jews. It is all one and the same gospel outreach. However, for practical purposes, a distinction could possibly be argued on the basis of office. Mission is concerned with the preaching and teaching of the gospel – this is normally done by those who are ordained to a preaching and teaching office. Evangelism is concerned with the gospel-outreach of the general membership of a local congregation. Yet, there clearly remains an area of overlap between these two areas and that makes it difficult to insist on a rigid separation or distinction.

### **The role of the local congregation in mission**

Now we come to a consideration of the role of the local congregation in mission. We already noted that mission is the responsibility of the church. When we say that, we don't mean that it is the responsibility of a federation of churches or of some broadly conceived "church." Rather, it is the responsibility of local congregations. Each church has received the Great Commission from Christ and the church as a whole and the individual members have to carefully consider what they are doing with that commission.

As we do this, there are three possibilities. We read of two of those possibilities in the beginning of Acts 13. There we read about the church at Antioch. In that church there were prophets and teachers. Through these people, God revealed that he wanted Barnabas and Saul to be sent out as missionaries. This was not the first time Saul and Barnabas had been sent. Saul (Paul) was sent out by the church at Jerusalem to Tarsus in Acts 9, though this may have been more of a measure to save his life than to have him preach the gospel. In Acts 11, the church at Jerusalem sent out Barnabas to Antioch. Acts 13 simply continues the pattern of a local church sending out men to be missionaries.

Can you think of what the two possibilities are there in that chapter? We can be senders. We can be those who stay behind and send out men into the great harvest of our Lord wherever that might be. We can be those who support these men and encourage them with prayer and through other means. To clarify, this does not mean that every single local church has to be a sending church in the sense that we understand it in our Canadian Reformed churches. When we say "senders," that includes those we would call "supporters."

The second possibility is that we can be goers. We can be those sent out into the harvest near or far. We can be missionaries. Here a word of caution needs to be spoken. There is a popular idea floating about that all Christians are missionaries. Though it is well-intentioned, this is not a helpful notion. There are at least three reasons why. First of all, the Great Commission was not given to individual Christians, but to the church. The idea that all Christians are missionaries is built on Western individualism and not on a church-centred theology of mission. Second, we see this reflected not only in the connection of official preaching with the Great Commission, but also in the mention of baptism. The administration of the sacraments belongs to the church, not to individuals. Finally, and in a more practical vein, there are some serious concerns about what has been called the amateurization of mission in the last two decades. Especially because of short-term missions, many believers think that anyone can be a missionary and training is irrelevant and unnecessary.

The result is that many of the significant problems faced by Christian mission around the globe are not being solved or are not even being recognized as problems. For these reasons, it is best that goers, wherever possible, not only be ordained men under the supervision of a local church, but also that they be well trained – even more so than the regular ministers in our federation.

So, the two possibilities given in Acts 13 are that we can be either senders or goers. However, there is a third possibility. This can only be a possibility if you are not a Christian. That possibility is to do nothing. To be disobedient. Few of us might go out for the sake of the gospel; those of us who do not must send and support such people who do and we must do so in a manner worthy of God. Listen to the words of John the Apostle in 3 John 5-8:

*Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.*

We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth. In this passage, John is writing to Gaius and he mentions here men who were missionaries. To do well, Gaius and his fellow believers were “to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God.” The implication is that to do otherwise is to act in a way that has nothing to do with God. In other words, we can be senders, goers, or disobedient. But the third possibility is not a Christian option. We see that in what John writes about a man named Diotrephes,

*I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.*

In what follows, John describes this as evil behaviour. Therefore, disobedience to the Great Commission cannot be an option for any congregation of Jesus Christ. Either we’re going to be senders or goers. That is the task of the local congregation (as a corporate body), both here and elsewhere in the world.

We saw that local congregations have a definite calling: to be either senders or goers.

## **How?**

That brings us to the more concrete question of how. How should all this function on the ground, in practice? Let me try and give some suggestions.

As we consider this, it’s helpful to introduce a threefold distinction. Ralph Winter, David Hesselgrave and other missiologists have spoken of three different kinds of mission. Among other things, these three represent different levels of difficulty in communicating the gospel. This threefold distinction works with the idea of the distance between cultures, what we call cultural distance.

The distinction is between M-1, M-2, and M-3 missions. M stands for Missions, naturally. In M-3 missions, we’re faced with the greatest possible cultural distance between the ones doing mission and the target group. We would place the work of our missionaries in Brazil in this category. The Canadian Reformed missionaries living and working in Brazil have various backgrounds. But none of them grew up speaking Portuguese. The Brazilian culture was initially foreign to them. However, they did not necessarily need to travel to Brazil to find this cultural distance. There are many cities in North America with cultural enclaves where mission would also have to be placed in this category. In these M-3 situations, mission is the most challenging, especially in the initial stages. In this sort of work, it is imperative that those doing the work are trained in working cross-culturally. That means not only learning another language, but also being diligent about learning another culture. This is not something that can be done casually or on a part-time basis.

In M-2 missions, there is less cultural distance. This would be the category where our mission among the native people in Fort Babine fit. With this category, there is a smaller amount of cultural distance to overcome. Oftentimes a common language can be used to communicate. Certain aspects of culture are shared. We have this with the native people in most areas of Canada. In Fort Babine, they have accepted certain parts of the broader Canadian culture and incorporated them into their own culture. Over the years, aspects of their traditional Babine culture have been lost or changed because of contact with the newcomers in the land. So when we communicated the gospel in Fort Babine, it was definitely easier than doing so in Brazil, at least on a superficial level. Even if the culture in Fort Babine is significantly different, we were close enough to our home culture (physically and culturally) that we never fully experienced what is known as culture shock or culture stress.

The last category is M-1. With this one, no cultural barrier needs to be surpassed. Both the missionary and the target group share mostly the same culture.

When the gospel is communicated, unbelievers will understand it or at least have the potential to understand, if the Spirit grants that understanding. They may not accept it and believe it, but at least they can superficially understand what is being said by the missionary. In such a situation, we can say that meaningful communication of the gospel has taken place. We have two missionaries in our churches who fall into this category. One of them is Rev. Dong – I'm sure you're familiar with him and the work he is doing. Another Canadian Reformed missionary (Rev. Edwer Dethan) is a native Indonesian. He was sent out by the church in Smithville to work in his home country of Indonesia on the island of Timor. Being a native of Timor, he speaks the language fluently (both Indonesian and local dialect(s)) and knows the culture intimately. For these two missionaries, communicating the gospel will still have its challenges, but most of these will be overtly spiritual. Rather than having to learn another culture (including language), they have been able to get busy right away with gospel proclamation.

While we cannot say that it is biblically mandated, M-1 missions are the wisest and most effective use of our limited resources. Where opportunities arise to do M-3 missions, it's best to call a man who can give himself to this full time. Often the same is true for M-2 missions – at times, these opportunities can look deceptively easy. We can be misled into thinking that we truly know a people group and that we as a community or as individuals are competent to bring the gospel to them – meanwhile, there are significant cultural barriers and misunderstandings which prevent an effective communication of the gospel. After some initial enthusiasm, this often creates frustration and disillusionment. If a congregation is looking to expand its outreach in the local area, it's best to focus on M-1 opportunities. Where there are situations that are M-2 and M-3 for us, perhaps God will bring people our way for whom those situations are M-1. We can certainly pray for that!

I want to also tie in a brief comment here on the concept of partnerships. C. J. Haak in The Netherlands has written a bit on this subject under the rubric of what we call ecumenics. This is a popular subject today in Christian mission. Sometimes churches in foreign countries will request our assistance for theological training or in other ways. This presents rich opportunities for partnership. We can share the blessings of our Reformed heritage. However, let me also encourage you to flip it around. There may be a grand opportunity here for them to share with us their knowledge and expertise as well. Perhaps we might send a man to them. Perhaps they might be able to send a man for some time to us to work among their ethnic group in our region. With some creativity, there are different ways that can be worked out. Regardless, with a partnership, it's important that the flow works both ways. On both sides, God has given gifts and we can and should share those gifts with one another wherever possible.

You need to carefully consider your options and the opportunities that God has placed before you. Let me add a word of caution as you do that. It is possible to get so bogged down in discussions about how and where to work that nothing gets done – paralysis by analysis. We're exceptionally good at that in the Canadian Reformed Churches. It is also possible to spread yourself too thin. You want to do everything and the result is that many things are being done, but none of them are being done well. I would suggest you grab hold of one opportunity and do it with excellence and passion.

## Why?

Though I am going to be brief on the question of why we should do mission, it's not because it is unimportant. In fact, nothing could be more so. John Piper summed it up best when he wrote these words at the beginning of his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*:

*Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of*

*God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions.*

We long to see God worshipped. We earnestly desire to see his name glorified above all. We care about missions because we care about God, we love him, and we want to see him made much of. That is the first and highest reason we want to do mission.

Closely connected with that is the love we have for those around us. Our hearts break for the lost. When we see our unbelieving neighbours, we become sorrowful when we consider their eternal destination. Love compels us to do something, to be God's instruments for bringing the gospel to those who are dead in darkness.

When we consider our motivation for mission, it all boils down to those two things: love for God and love for our neighbour. We want to see God exalted and we long to see our neighbours saved. Whatever your congregation decides to do in the area of outreach, I want to encourage you to keep that two-fold motivation clear in your mind.

## **Conclusion**

We believe the Scriptures teach that true churches have three marks: faithful preaching, administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline. In years gone by, there have been those who argued for the addition of a fourth mark. Some of those say the fourth mark should be mission. Such calls are well-intentioned, but misguided. We confess that there are not only marks of the true church, but also several characteristics – these are things that belong to the essence of the church. So in the Nicene Creed, we confess one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Apostolic refers to the teaching of the apostles, but there is more to it. An apostle is literally one who is sent out. The apostolic church is a missionary church. When we consider mission, it is not a matter of true or false church. It is a matter of whether this particular church is a church at all. Mission belongs to the essence of the church.

There is a real sense in which we can say that mission is just part of who we are as a church. Sending and supporting and going are natural outcomes of being the body of Christ. It is something the Holy Spirit leads us to do because we are united to Christ. The evidence is there that the Spirit is indeed leading us in that direction. Let me conclude with that short verse from 1 Thessalonians 5:19, *“Do not quench the Spirit.”*

Wes Bredenhof

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## Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 9.