

Currents of Change: How Did Everything become Missions?

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The Church has reached a point in history where *missions* means anything it does in the world.

Missions is multifaceted. There's medical missions, relief missions, short-term missions (which includes a multitude of activities), missions to the elderly, orphan care missions, church planting missions, leadership development and educational missions, evangelistic missions, disaster relief missions, and construction missions just to mention a few examples. Missionaries can be teachers, church planters, farmers, seminary professors and engineers. We now live at a time when the Church does *missions* even if the gospel is never shared.

My assigned task is to attempt to answer the question: How did the Church get to this point? Everything did not become missions overnight. Our present reality has been a long journey. There is no single source that is the cause of such diversity. Rather, just as several tributaries flow together to create a river, there are at least five currents that brought us to the present situation.

Current #1: Problem of Language

While biblical concepts have been assigned to words such as *mission*, *missions*, and *missionary*, such are extrabiblical terms. Such words are not found in Hebrew or Greek, but derive from Latin. The earliest use has been connected to the Jesuits.

André Seumois notes that Ignatius of Loyola was using variations of *missions* in 1540.¹ The language of *mission* and *missions* is used in Ignatius' *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* which was first approved by the first General Congregation in 1558 with such terminology referring to being sent into the world "for the greater glory of God and the good of souls, whether among the faithful or unbelievers."² While God's glory may have been part of the motivation behind such kingdom endeavors, a great deal of Catholic missionary activities became closely connected with European military and colonial expansion. Christianization

1 André Seumois, *Théologie Missionnaire: Délimitation de la Fonction Missionnaire de L'Eglise* (Rome: Bureau de Presse O.M.I., 1973), 9.

2 John W. Padberg, ed., *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Transition of the Official Latin Texts* (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 281.

and civilization were often two goals of both Church and country. The sacred and secular often had an intimate union.

Whenever the Church lacks exegetical support for its theology, then extrabiblical nomenclature can result in concepts with a variety of meanings. Church culture and context become most important as a defining factor of mission. Given this relativistic understanding, David Bosch was correct when he noted in *Transforming Mission* that “mission remains undefinable; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections. The most we can hope for is to formulate some *approximations* of what mission is all about.”³ Years later, Michael W. Stroope described *mission* as a “broad river in which there is space for many usages and meanings” and is a term “quite elastic in its meaning.”⁴ Such fluidity exists partially due to meaning and activity being socially constructed in the moment (or across an epoch).

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The Latin (*mitto*) origin of *mission*, *missions*, and *missionaries* is not sufficient for the development of a proper biblical understanding of the Great Commission activities of the Church. Andreas J. Köstenberger, was correct when he wrote, “Any understanding of a *biblical* theology of mission must derive its contours from the biblical material itself rather than being submerged by extrabiblical definitions.”⁵ But what if *mission* is not found in the Bible?

While such terminology is common parlance and near and dear to our hearts, it has been part of the process that has resulted in everything becoming missions. If there is no biblical word for *mission*, *missions*, or *missionary* who is to say that my definition is more accurate than yours?⁶

3 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 9.

4 Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2017), 4.

5 Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Place of Mission in New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Determine the Significance of Mission within the Scope of the New Testament’s Message as a Whole,” *Missiology* 27 #3 (July 1999): 357.

6 Of course, some will say there is no biblical word *Trinity* either. However, a major difference is that the Church has a definitive understanding of the Trinity. Any definition that differs from this orthodox statement is considered heterodoxy. The Church has no equivalent standard for *missions* or *missionary*.

Current #2: Theological Shifts

Theological shifts in the 18th through 20th centuries moved the Church away from historic orthodox teachings regarding inspiration, theology proper, Christology, and personal and cosmic eschatology, just to name a few areas. The Bible was subjected to critical study with an anti-supernatural bias. Ethical monotheism was viewed as the result of societal evolution. Jesus became an example to follow, while the significance of His penal-substitutionary atonement and honor/shame removal act was relegated to the dustbin. Sin, judgement and hell were seen as psychological burdens and to be discarded as quickly as possible. The academy had created some of the greatest heretics who remained cloaked in ecclesial culture and language.

During this period, pluralism—and inclusivism—was growing in influence. For some, humanity became the center of mission. The Church, Jesus and God existed for the improvement of society. Missionary activities were to improve quality of life, but should “never violate the sanctity of human personality.”⁷ Religions became equals.

The publication of William Ernest Hocking’s *Re-Thinking Missions* revealed how humanism and liberal theology influenced missionary thought and practice in certain circles:

If the conception of hell changes, if attention is drawn away from the fear of God’s punitive justice in everlasting torment of the unsaved, to happier conceptions of destiny, if there is a shift of concern from other worldly issues to the problems of sin and suffering in the present life, these changes will immediately alter that view of the perils of the soul which gave to the original motive of Protestant missions much of its poignant urgency. Generally speaking, these changes have occurred.⁸

« For some, humanity became the center of mission. »

7 R. Pierce Beaver, “North American Thought on the Fundamental Principles of Missions During the Twentieth Century,” *Church History* 21 #4 (December 1952): 352.

8 William Ernest Hocking, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen’s Inquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1938), 19.

While many mission leaders spoke against liberal and neo-orthodox theologies, over time aspects of such theological systems began to trickle down from the academy and influenced local churches and mission agencies. Conversionistic missiology and the exclusivity of Christ were sometimes avoided for more palatable practices that encouraged more people to go, believing it was possible to witness through presence alone.

Current #3: Value of Instant Gratification

The western drive for quick results emerged from a value system that facilitated immediate and quantifiable accomplishments. A roof could be added to a church's building faster than a church could be planted among an unreached people. Antibiotics could be distributed much more easily than the gospel could be shared in a different language.

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In his research on short-term missions, Edwin Zehner notes that by the early 21st century, immediate gratification was a growing value among evangelicals: "Yet overall by 2007, especially in North America, there had been a subtle shift to new rhetoric and expectations, including greater interest in practical action and more realistic notions of what short-term offerings can accomplish."⁹ If teams (short- or long-term) could do good activities in the name of Jesus and experience quick results, then why not develop and give more attention to methods and strategies to support such actions?

Current #4: Evangelism & Social Justice Debate

The evangelism and social justice debate had a long history in the 20th and 21st centuries. The tension was felt even as recent as Lasuanne III in Cape Town (2010) when during a plenary session, John Piper asked, "Could Lausanne say? Could the global Church say this: 'For Christ's sake, we Christians care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering.'?"¹⁰

9 Edwin Zehner, "On the Rhetoric of Short-term Mission Appeals, with Some Practical Suggestions for Team Leaders," in Robert J. Priest, ed., *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 188.

10 Bible Exposition: Ephesians 3 - John Piper (Part 2) - Cape Town 2010; [on-line] accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1a5V1O4M4rU>.

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The world has always been filled with areas of significant physical and spiritual need. Evangelicals have always been moved with the desire to take bandages and the gospel to the world. Such is the right way of the kingdom citizen.

However, faced with such global needs, the Church in the West does not naturally gravitate toward gospel proclamation, but drifts away from it and toward care for suffering. Our eyes and hearts are often more in tune with the immediate than the eternal. The Church must work diligently to be intentional about disciple-making.

John Stott was a leader in the area of global evangelization and also championed the Church's responsibility of social justice. However, the language used in a section in his influential book, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, creates an opportunity for the Church to neglect gospel proclamation due to the ubiquitous realities of suffering and social injustices. He writes:

To see need and to possess the remedy compels love to act, and whether the action will be evangelistic or social, or indeed political, depends on what we "see" and what we "have".

This does not mean that words and works, evangelism and social action, are such inseparable partners that all of us must engage in both all the time. Situations vary, and so do Christian callings. As for situations, there will be times when a person's eternal destiny is the most urgent consideration, for we must not forget that men without Christ are perishing. But there will certainly be other times when a person's material need is so pressing that he would not be able to hear the gospel if we shared it with him... . If our enemy is hungry, our biblical mandate is not to evangelize him but to feed him (Rom. 12:20)!¹¹

« Christians are called to maximize their talents, gifts, abilities and skills for the glory of God. »

11 John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 28.

Such language communicates there are *times* when eternal matters are not ultimate. In his noble attempt to draw attention to the truth that the pain of suffering can rightly hinder one from hearing the gospel, he opens a door for missions to avoid identifying with proclamation. I cannot help but think many people have taken such words and thoughts to an unhealthy direction—one not intended by Stott. Instead of the Church expecting the “other times” as *exceptional* when urgent relief is necessary to save a life, it has come to view these times as expected, the norm and has adjusted its mission strategy and methods to support a multitude of activities at the expense of disciple-making.

Current #5: Good Intentions + Technological Advancements

Christians are called to maximize their talents, gifts, abilities and skills for the glory of God. It is natural for the Church to leverage such blessings at home. However, the world is our parish. Kingdom citizens began to recognize that any good they could do at home is something that should be done abroad. Communication developments, diminished costs and speed of international travel, and the safety of spending time in other countries resulted in large numbers of western Christians going to serve the nations.


The Church in the West recognized intercultural engagement could become the practice of the many and not something exclusively for the few. By 2005, 1.6 million U. S. adult church members were participating in international short-term mission trips.¹² While many short-term teams do participate in evangelistic and church planting endeavors, a growing number go to serve in other areas. A. Scott Moreau found that a larger percentage of short-term workers, sent by U. S. agencies from 2001–2005, chose to participate in relief/development and education/training rather than primary activities of evangelism and discipleship.¹³

The Church is able to travel faster and farther than any generation. It is able to engage in a large amount of disciple-making and service in the name of Christ. Yet, the thought remains that whatever the Church does at home is considered evangelism or ministry and whatever is done “overseas” is considered missions. The regularity and quantity of Christians going into the world to do kingdom activities helped develop the understanding that all such international work is missionary activity.

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Conclusion

Missions has come to mean a multitude of things to different people. This unclear understanding of the term (including its derivatives) and concept developed over time as several currents of thought and practice converged. Kingdom citizens should glorify God by serving the nations with differing skills and advocating for social justice issues. The Church needs more people to go! Wise stewards work with urgency and desire to know what is working to bring about kingdom results; life is a vapor (James 4:14), and the day approaches.

Clarity and distinction are needed. He gave “some” not *all* to be... (Eph. 4:11–12). An identifiable difference clearly existed in Acts 6:1–7. There is a variety of service and activities (1 Cor. 12:5, 6). Without neglecting its Holy Spirit designed diversity, the Church must articulate the uniqueness of its apostolic work in both biblical terms and understanding as it labors to make disciples of all peoples. 

¹² Robert J. Priest, “Introduction,” in Robert J. Priest, ed., *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), ii.

¹³ A. Scott Moreau, “Short Term Missions in the Context of Missions, Inc.,” in Robert J. Priest, ed., *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing it Right* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 16.