

THE SENSE AND THE NONSENSE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

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Abstract

For many centuries, the Church has been greatly involved in reaching the lost with the gospel of Jesus. This commitment to reach all nations of the earth stems from Christ's instruction to make disciples of all nations. The endeavor by the Church to reach out to the lost via different methods is generally referred to as Christian missions. This can equally be understood to mean the involvement of the Church to bring the lost to salvation in Jesus Christ. However, though the church has been greatly involved in this task of reconciliation, God has always been and is the author, and accomplisher of this mission.

Keywords: Mission, Missiology, Theology, Religion, Christianity

Introduction

In as much as Christian mission is the efforts of the Church, aimed at reconciling the lost to God through Jesus Christ,¹ opinions vary as to what should be referred to as the mission of the church. In this paper, what constitutes the foundation of Christian missions will be discussed under the sense of Christian missions. On the other hand, phenomenon's which have been propounded as mission without any direct bearing to soul winning will be discussed as the nonsense of Christian missions.

Aspects of Christian missions cannot be researched without elaborating certain frameworks. Considering this reflection, this paper will appraise three issues in Christian missions, which will inform the subsequent discourse of the writer. In the first place, the writer will

¹ Ezekiel A. Bamigboye, *History of Christian Missions* (Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso), 1.

examine the conceptual understanding of Christian missions; second, the Biblical basis for Christian missions; third, the nature of Christian missions; and lastly, misconceptions about Christian missions.

Conceptual Understanding of Christian Missions

A research on Christian missions, requires proper understanding of what it is. Timothy C. Tennent insists that “the word mission needs very careful definition if it is to continue as a useful word for the church.”² This is because mission (or missions) is an important theme in the history of the church. In view of this, the writer will examine some definitions pertaining to Christian missions as well as different dimensions uncovered in the practice of missions over time.

Avery T. Willis, Jr. draws a nuance between the words “mission” and “missions.” He maintains that both words do not mean the same thing. According to him, “mission” is the total redemptive purpose of God to establish His Kingdom.³ God is powerful. He can establish His rule on earth with or without the approval of man. Yet He is also loving. God loves man and His love for man is so great that He desires man to be part of the Kingdom He is establishing. Thus, God’s plan of establishing His kingdom is not complete without man’s redemption (cf. John 3:16). In line with this, John Stott and Ajith Fernando point out that God’s mission is considered as God’s redeeming action in the world which is different from God’s providential action.⁴

Lois K. Fuller, differing from Stott and Fernando observes that the word “mission” has come to mean “the totality of what God is doing in the world.”⁵ Everything God is doing be it providential intends to fulfill the purpose of redemption. Hence the acts of God cannot be separated

² Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Michigan: Kregel Academic, 2010), 53.

³ T. Avery Willis Jr., *Biblical Basis for Missions* (Tennessee: Convention Press, 1979), 11.

⁴ John Stott and Ajith Fernando, *Christian Missions in the Modern World* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 33.

⁵ Lois K. Fuller, *Going to Nations: An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Missions*, 3rd ed. (Nigeria: African Christian Textbooks, 2001), 120.

from His redemptive purpose. Furthermore, from an etymological standpoint, Fuller states that the word “mission” comes from the Latin word “*mittere*”, which means “sending.”⁶ Hence this connotes that in mission there is a *sender* and the *sent*. She adds that God’s main strategy to achieve His goal of redeeming man is by sending.⁷ It also suggests, in agreement with Scripture, that God is redeeming the world through men. He is sending men to men. This can be seen in the sending of Abraham (cf. Genesis 12:1-3), the sending of Moses (cf. Exodus 3:7-10), the sending of Israel (Exodus 4:22-23), the sending of Jesus (cf. John 3:16), the sending of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; Acts 1:8), and finally the sending of His disciples (cf. Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15).

Willis, Jr. proceeds in his stance on a nuance between the terms “mission” and “missions” by stating that “missions” is “the activity of God’s people, the Church, to proclaim and to demonstrate the kingdom of God to the world.”⁸ It concerns His redeemed people and what he sends them into the world to do.⁹ Therefore, when the church obeys God’s sending command to live and preach the Kingdom of God to those who have not believed in Christ, it is referred to as “missions”. The pluralisation of the term presupposes the fact that the Church proclaims and demonstrates the kingdom in more than one way. Fuller again concurs with Willis, Jr. by asserting that “missions” is the “specific part that the Church does” in taking the gospel of Christ to the unreached.¹⁰ Likewise Fisher Humphreys and Philips Wise, both affirm that “missions”, is the work which Jesus Christ, as the Lord of the Church has assigned (commissioned) His people to do.¹¹

Finally, through the consultation of various scholars the overall meaning of mission or missions undeniably stands out. Mission is of God, by God and for God. In missions God desires to redeem the lost. The Church exists because of missions and for missions. The Church is

⁶ Ibid, 120.

⁷ Ibid, 120.

⁸ Avery T. Willis. *The Biblical Basis of Missions*, 11.

⁹ Ibid, 36

¹⁰ Lois K. Fuller, *Going to Nations: An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Missions*, 13.

¹¹ Fisher Humphreys, Philips Wise, *A Dictionary of Doctrinal Terms*. (USA: Broadman Press, 1983), 73.

God's instrument to fulfil his redemptive purpose. Hence the message of missions is the Good News, that is, what God did for man in Christ. Also, the goal of missions is to persuade people through proclamation and demonstration to become disciples of Jesus Christ. The writer will now proceed to discuss the motive for missions otherwise denoted to as the biblical rationale for missions; for the justification for missions can be found in no other place but the Bible.

Biblical Basis of Christian Missions

The Bible is a missionary book. Paul A. Beals posits that the Bible declares in its entirety God's purpose of making His person and work known throughout humankind by His people – Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament.¹² In the same accord, Ann Dunagan states that missions is a central theme in the Bible.¹³ Hence, patterns for Christian missions definitely can be traced in Scripture in both Testaments. These patterns will be used to establish a basis or justification for missions in relation to the Bible.

Zarwulugbo Liberty in his book "*Growing Missionaries Biblically: A Fresh Look at Missions in an African Context*" defines the biblical basis of Christian missions as "an anatomy of God's redemptive-historical progression throughout the Bible. He claims that the rationale for Christian missions today is rooted in the Bible. The writer will therefore investigate the biblical basis of missions by considering evidences first in the Old Testament and then in the New Testament.

To establish a biblical basis for missions in the Old Testament, it is necessary to trace instances of the actualization of God's redemptive purpose towards establishing His kingdom. The biblical basis of mission in the Old Testament commences in the book of Genesis when God, in creating everything that exists, created Adam and Eve and placed them in a garden called Eden with specific instructions to obey (cf. Genesis 1;

¹² Paul A. Beals, *A People for His Name: A Church-Based Missions Strategy* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1995), 37.

¹³ Ann Dunagan. *The Mission-Minded Child: Raising a New Generation to Fulfill God's Purpose* (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2007), 39.

2:15-17). Yet they disobeyed God (cf. Genesis 3:1-13) and were placed under His curse (cf. Genesis 3:14-19). Zane Pratt, David Sills and Jeff Walters point out that this disobedience was treason which resulted to every person born in the line of Adam and Eve to be guilty before God deserving condemnation and hell.¹⁴ Still, God promised to redeem the whole human race through the Seed of the woman (cf. Genesis 3:15). In addition, he made the first redemptive sacrifice in the Bible by killing an innocent animal to cover the shame of the guilty.

To actualize His promise to save man, God sets his plan in motion through the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 saying “all nations will be blessed through you.” Walter C. Kaiser states that this is the earliest statement of the fact that it is God’s purpose and plan to see the message of His grace and blessing come to every person on planet earth.¹⁵ He claims that though Genesis 3:15 is the primary basis for the universality of God’s redemption plan and purpose, its “most succinct declaration” is found in Genesis 12:3.

However, the writer is of the view that the intention of God to bless the nations through Abraham simply displays God’s commitment to His word in Genesis 3:15; and that He aims to actualize it through Abraham’s lineage. Abraham answers God’s call and later his descendants become a nation called Israel (cf. Exodus 19:3-8). Johannes Verkuyl notes that Israel was constantly reminded by the prophets that her election is a call to service, a duty to witness among the nations, a sign to other nations that Yahweh is both Creator and Liberator.¹⁶ Israel was not to see her election as a privilege she should selfishly keep to herself. She was to live as God’s people and be a light among other people demonstrating to them His grace, justice, mercy, and liberating power which she has received or benefitted from.

¹⁴ Zane Pratt, M. David Sills and Jeff K. Walters. *Introduction to Global Missions* (Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 38.

¹⁵ Walter C. Kaiser. *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 7

¹⁶ Johannes Verkuyl, *The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate in Perspective on the World Christian Movement. A Reader* edited by Ralph Winter (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992), A52.

Nevertheless, Israel severally rebelled against God, committed idolatry and was sent into exile several times (cf. 2 Kings 15:29; 17:5-6; Jeremiah 52:28-30). During the Babylonian exile, as recorded in Isaiah 43:10-12 God declared to Israel, “You are my witnesses...” This shows that the redemptive purpose of God demonstrated in the Old Testament was not for Israel alone. Rather, Israel was to serve as a witness to other nations so that they would know the Lord. Walter C. Kaiser explains accordingly that God intended for Israel to preach that “Yahweh reigns and he will come to judge the people with equity.”¹⁷ Even in judgment, Israel was to proclaim God’s righteousness and opposition to sin. God sent His Son into the world that those who would believe in Him by faith would escape eternal judgment. The purpose of God in mission is to reconcile man to Himself and save him from the punishment of the guilt of sin – eternal death.

Thus, the Old Testament lays a foundation for mission. It portrays God as a missionary God. The acts of God recorded in the Old Testament are missionary in nature and purpose. God reaches out to humankind, first by Himself and then through the Nation of Israel via Abraham. Several events point to God’s love, mercy, righteousness, and judgment. The redemptive drama of the Old Testament climaxes with the coming of Jesus Christ. This ushers in a new dispensation under a new covenant. The New Testament is the record of Christ’s life and ministry and the impact thereof.

Biblical Basis in the New Testament.

John D. Harvey writes that “the record of Jesus’ teaching found in the synoptic gospels reflects the fact that he had a clear understanding of his own mission.”¹⁸ He maintains that

“He [Jesus] taught that he was sent by the Father with the task of seeking and saving the lost and that – although he envisioned a future worldwide mission – his own mission was focused on the

¹⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 35.

¹⁸ John D. Harvey. “Mission in Jesus’ Teaching” in *Mission in the New Testament. An Evangelical Approach*, edited by William J. Larkin Jr. & Joel F. Williams (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 30.

nation of Israel. Jesus' teaching on mission, however, encompassed more than his own task. It included the task entrusted to his disciples. Prior to the resurrection, the disciples' mission was identical to and an extension of Jesus' mission. The resurrection, however, brought a significant change...(Jesus) assumed the role of sender, who sent the disciples with the task of bearing witness to the forgiveness of sins...available in him.”

Jesus did not only speak about His mission but He carried it out, primarily to Jews and to some Gentiles (cf. Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 8:5-13) given that all men are lost and need God's salvation. This hinted to His universal objective in mission. This universal objective was expressed by Him after His resurrection in Matthew 28:19 when he outlined that the scope of the disciples' mission was to “make disciples of all nations...” and in Acts 1:8 when He promised them the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth.”

The obedience of Jesus' disciples to His commission (cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8) is what led to the record of the Book of Acts. Lois K. Fuller points out that “in the book of Acts, Jesus continues his work by his Spirit in the disciples...they started fulfilling Israel's commission to bless the nations.¹⁹ Similarly, Joel F. Williams states that the book of Acts emphasizes God's involvement in mission by pouring out His Spirit to empower His people to serve His redemptive purpose effectively.²⁰ Through the disciples' faithfulness and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, missions is carried out to Gentile nations. God, the initiator of missions and the first missionary has not abandoned the work. He has entrusted it to reliable men and women, Jews as well as Gentiles, and is directing them by His Spirit.

In spite of the claims by the previously cited scholars who believe that there is a biblical basis for missions, Michael Sills maintains

¹⁹ Lois K. Fuller, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2005), 90.

²⁰ Joel F. Williams, “The Missionary Message of the New Testament” in *Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century. Discovering the Mission of God* ed. Mike Barnett (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2012), 56

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that rather than arguing for a biblical basis of missions, it should be viewed that the work of missions is the reason for the Bible.²¹ He contends that the Bible teaches that God “is a missionary God with a heartbeat for the nations” and that in studying the Bible, one sees “*Missio Dei* (mission of God) woven throughout it from beginning to end.”²² To him the Bible is all about missions and therefore “to say that there is a biblical basis for missions is to understate the entire message of the Bible.”²³ While Sills position is to an extent justified, the writer opines that claiming a biblical basis for missions does not play down the entire message of the Bible. Rather it defines and outlines the *Missio Dei* beginning from the Old Testament to the New Testament in a way that is comprehensible.

The Nature of Christian Missions

Missions involves more than just preaching the Gospel and trusting God to make converts through the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not only preach the Gospel but He healed the sick, provided food for the hungry, etc. and taught His disciples to do likewise (Matthew 25:31-45). Man is spirit, soul, and body. Missions must minister to the spirit, soul, and body. Tormod Engelsviken agrees that Christian missions from its very beginning always encompassed a holistic feature.²⁴

Engelsviken points out that “mission as proclamation is an attempt by every Christian to tell the Gospel story in his or her context.”²⁵ It is an invitation to a commitment to Christ by faith. This can be done through various means or approaches such as one on one evangelism, crusade, sharing of tracts, etc. While this description is approvable, it limits mission to only proclamation. The writer opines that the biblical practice of mission showcased by Jesus in fulfilling His mandate must

²¹ Michael Sills, *The Missionary Call: Find Your Place in God's Plan for the World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 47.

²² Ibid

²³ Michael Sills

²⁴ Tormod Engelsviken, Ernst Harbakk, Rolv Olsen, and Thor Strandenaes (editors). *Mission to the World: Communicating the Gospel in the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Knud Jorgensen* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2008), 112.

²⁵ Ibid

be that which should be practiced by mission workers today. Jesus clearly stated that “as my Father sent me even so I send you” (John 20:21). Mission is more than just proclamation, though proclamation is the key aspect.

Mission as demonstration can also be referred to as social action or social ministry. Stott and Fernando view demonstration as a manifestation of proclamation.²⁶ This is accurate because one cannot proclaim the Gospel to a people claiming to be concerned about meeting their spiritual needs and yet ignore their physical or psychological needs – some of which are usually obvious. Social action may include: providing potable water in a community, starting a school, building a hospital, etc. The motivation for social action is the love of Christ which is the message of the Gospel.

Therefore, proclamation and demonstration are key characteristics to Christian missions. Stott and Fernando note that evangelism (proclamation) and social action (demonstration) go hand in hand.²⁷ They cannot be separated. “Social action is a useful preliminary...in its best form it gives the gospel a credibility it would otherwise lack”.²⁸ Sometimes social action may even follow evangelism. This is because it is when one moves towards the heathen in a bid to proclaim the Gospel message that one discovers or sees the necessity of social action. Social action may serve as a door to penetrate that community. However, care must be taken not to merely use social action as a bait but to truly demonstrate the unconditional love of God in all sincerity which is the message of the Gospel proclaimed.

Misconceptions in Christian Missions

The basis for Christian mission rest on the fact that mission originated from God, is pursued by God and accomplished in God. Opinions vary as to what constitute the task of mission. Considering certain scholars, the mission of the Church should be viewed and pursued in relation to the biblical order. However, the understanding of what the

²⁶ Stott and Fernando, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 42.

²⁷ Ibid, 41.

²⁸ Stott and Fernando

biblical order represents differ. This section will discuss what the writer considers as misconceptions in the missions of the church.

Many believe in missions by proxy. Churches, Christians and organizations view missionaries as their substitute in world evangelization.²⁹ They feel satisfied to pray for missionaries, to support them, and to encourage them. All these things should be done, but doing them does not relieve each Christian of his responsibility to be involved directly in God's mission.³⁰ Missions by proxy is the standard operating procedure in many churches. Some Churches leave missions to the Woman's Missionary Union and expect the women to be responsible for the church's involvement in missions. At other times the Mission Board is expected to take full responsibility for fulfilling the mandate that God gave to all his people. Some Christians interpret their giving as paying their part of missions' gifts and thereby discharging their obligations to evangelise the world.³¹ It can be said that this phenomenon is sometimes encouraged by missionaries and mission boards who challenge people to give for missions and emphasis that their giving is their own mission. Missionaries, mission agencies, and mission boards are practical expressions of concern by Christians and local churches, but these alone cannot fulfill the obligation God has given to every Christian and to every church. Not everyone can be a missionary, but everyone can be on mission for God.

More so, mission is perceived as a super special assignment for extraordinary people. Nothing could be farther from God's purpose. The Bible teaches that God's method is to use the foolish, the weak, and the despised persons of the world to bring glory to him (1 Cor. 1:26-31). God's purpose is to be accomplished by ordinary people who believe in and serve an extraordinary God.³² Paul has been upheld as the ideal missionary for so long that many failed to realize that the spread of the gospel in the first century was accomplished primarily by people named Barnabas, Silas, Mark, Aquila, Epaphroditus, and a host of other

²⁹ Avery T. Willis. *The Biblical Basis of Missions*, 3

³⁰ Avery T. Willis. *The Biblical Basis of Missions*

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid, 3

Christians.³³ God intends to use everyone—the Marks and the “Epaphrodituses”, as well as the “Pauls”—to accomplish his mission. If this generation will carry out God’s mission, then it must get rid of the idea that only unusually gifted persons are missionaries.³⁴ Such thinking discourages people from identifying with missions unless they perceive an extraordinary gift and calling. Every believer must be on mission for God, sharing His love and living for Him. This is the only way the Church will accomplish its mission to the world.

In addition, Evangelicals are now being influenced by the tenets of liberation theology, which holds that in the preaching of the gospel, special preference should be given to the poor. The idea that God has a preferential option for the poor causes dismay and is repudiated by many. It is argued that God is impartial. To claim that He is particularly favorable to one group of people is to run the risk of giving a false sense of security. It may lead to a subtle form of idolatry as explained by Kirk.³⁵ Peter Beyerhaus testified after the World Mission and Evangelism’s Bangkok Conference of 1973, that “the concept of salvation [had] been so broadened and deprived of its Christian distinctiveness, that any liberating experience at all can be called ‘salvation’ . . . any participation in liberating efforts would be called ‘mission’, and therefore, evangelicals now are challenged to present the biblical alternatives by articulating our faith and by acting accordingly in obedience to Christ’s Great Commission”³⁶ The evangelical mission movement is undergoing a metamorphosis of monumental proportions as it contemplates and pursues its missional obligation to the world. Liberation theology is distinguished by its commitment to social justice. Its cardinal focus is that the church should give priority to the poor and the oppressed, and that this should inform the goal of the church.³⁷ However, if the mission of the Church becomes a focus on the poor, what

³³ Willis

³⁴ Willis, 3

³⁵ Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1999)

³⁶ Peter Beyerhaus, *Missions: Which Way? Humanization or Redemption*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 150, 161.

³⁷ Christopher R. Little, *What Makes Mission Christian?*, Published on *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (<https://www.emqonline.com>), 2.

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about the rich who are perishing. The message of the gospel is for all, not only for the poor as upheld by liberation theologians.

Another implication can be seen in the meeting of one hundred and sixty leaders from fifty-three countries under the World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission met in Iguassu, Brazil in 1999 to craft the Iguassu Affirmation. Drafters hoped it would be received as a working document to stimulate serious discussion around the world, and that it will become a point of dialogue that will help shape both missiology and strategy in the next century.³⁸ Surprisingly as outlined by Taylor, “embedded in the Affirmation is a desire to: emphasize the holistic nature of the gospel, pursue appropriate responses to political and economic systems, study the operation of the trinity in the redemption of the human race and the whole of creation, address the realities of world poverty, commit themselves to reflect God’s concern for justice, and engage in environmental care and protection initiatives.”³⁹ It is however observed that the priority of mission in the Church is conspicuously absent. The writers believe holistic mission is acceptable as a means of reaching out to people. However, when the focus of the holistic act is not missional, then it becomes nonsense and not mission. The lost must be reconciled because only the souls of men are eternal, every other thing is temporal. Focusing on the temporal and neglecting the eternal is not God’s priority as a missionary God.

Conclusion

The ultimate purpose for missions is to bring glory to God, so that a multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language might declare the praise and honor and glory and power of God for all eternity. Consequently, mission is not fundamentally done for the welfare and glory of man, but the glory of God forms the highest goal of missions. If the chief end of mission is the glory of God, the means of mission must reflect this priority. This obliges the Church in mission to realize that world evangelization is its greatest and holiest work. None of this is meant to deny God’s concern for the physical condition of humanity but

³⁸ William Taylor, ed. *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 16

³⁹ Taylor, 17.

instead to affirm that the deepest impoverished state a person can suffer is alienation from God and therefore the greatest demonstration of his compassion is the remedy for this plight. It is glaring that the debate over the mission of the Church will continue, but the church must not lose the centrality of the Great Commission.

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