

Relevant Aspects of the Purpose of Christian Missions

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the importance of clarifying the purpose of Christian missions in the context of the general concern for the meaning and objectives of religious activities. It emphasizes the necessity of a clear and biblically grounded understanding of missions to prevent deviation from divine objectives in favor of institutional goals. The diversity of missiological interpretations—ranging from the proclamation of the Gospel and the establishment of justice to cultural adaptation—reflects the complexity of this field. The paper highlights that missions must combine proclamation with good deeds, underlining the importance of prayer and spiritual empowerment in confronting the forces of darkness. Finally, it emphasizes the calling of Christians to be a light in the world, participating in God's mission to bring knowledge, hope, and salvation to all peoples.

KEYWORD: purpose, mission, Christ, God, people, proclamation, Gospel

Introduction

The purpose of missions must be understood and articulated in ways that are biblically and theologically sound, avoiding a focus that is either too narrow or too inclusive, making missions a vital concern for people of God. Jesus' designation of his followers as the light of the world at once places the purpose of the church within a missiological framework based on the Old Testament expectation of a light to shine upon the Gentiles and the dark places. This understanding of the purpose of missions centers on the proclamation of the gospel of Christ by word and by deed while displacing ignorance with the knowledge of God, evil deeds with deeds of righteousness, and despair and bondage with joy and freedom. We live in an age preoccupied with the question of purpose. This concern is visible in books such as *The Purpose Driven Church* by Warren (1995, 56) and *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* by Van Engen (1991, 84). Institutions and churches rush to formulate purpose statements, reflecting a widespread concern that efforts should be directed toward consciously determined goals, and it may also reveal a certain uneasiness about the value of many traditional efforts.

The question of purpose is of particular importance in the field of Christian missions. Without a clear understanding of purpose, efforts that start from the best motives can lose focus. Even worse, when the church loses touch with its God-given purpose, its energies quickly become institutionally oriented and self-serving rather than self-giving. The enormous challenges, demands, and opportunities of modern missions make it essential for the church to have a clear, biblical and theological understanding of the purpose of missions. While one might assume that the purpose of missions is self-evident, David Bosch (1991, 186) demonstrated in *Transforming Mission* that the church's missionary endeavors over the centuries have reflected considerable variety in purpose. This variety has ranged from the embodiment of agape to the "Christianization" of culture to the expansion of Christianity (Rotaru 2023, 62-79), both in terms of governance and orthodoxy. Bosch concluded his impressive study with a summary of what he termed "emerging paradigms" that have further expanded the potential scope of the mission purpose, encompassing missions as *Missio Dei*, enculturation, liberation, and service by the whole people of God, to name a few.

The Purpose of Missions in a Pluralistic Context

A cursory examination of current texts in missiology reinforces this perception of diversity. Scott (1980, 146) emphasizes the establishment of justice. Kraft (1979, 164) and others, working from an anthropological perspective, view mission as a process of cross-cultural communication and contextualization. They emphasize mission activity as the incarnation of the Gospel. Piper (1993, 122) relates the purpose of missions primarily to worship and proclamation in the context of God's glory. Newbigin (1995, 142) sees the purpose of missions in relation to the kingdom of God understood from a Trinitarian perspective. In earlier centuries, missions for William Carey, as for many Christians who followed him, was understood primarily in the context of the Great Commission and its command to make disciples among all nations.

These differing understandings of the purpose of missions result in part from differing interpretations of the biblical and theological foundations of missions. Which biblical texts should be prioritized: the Great Commission, the Old and New Testament covenants, the theological formulations of Romans, or the eschatological emphases of Revelation? Which doctrines should be decisive: the nature of God, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, soteriology or eschatology? This diversity has been exacerbated in the modern era by the influence of disciplines such as communication theory, anthropology and sociology on missions. Different voices from different traditions, at different times, have offered different understandings of the purpose of missions.

In this context of plurality and complexity, the trustees of CRU International launched a remarkably simple and straightforward statement of purpose in February 1995, which states that "our basic aim is to provide all people with the opportunity to hear, understand and respond to the Gospel in their own cultural context". Several aspects of this understanding are significant. While there is an emphasis on proclamation, there is also an emphasis on understanding and response, and all within the cultural context of the hearers. Therefore, the purpose of missions is not fulfilled until the Gospel has been presented in the most viable way possible given the specific cultural context.

The same CRU International document states that the basic task of the missionary is "evangelism through proclamation, discipling, equipping, ministering and multiplication resulting in indigenous churches that multiply". So, the emphasis is clearly on evangelism; but the instruments of evangelism are identified as proclamation, discipling, equipping and ministering. Indigenous churches are generally understood as self-sustaining, self-governing and multiplying churches. Some missiologists would add "auto-theologizing" to the characteristics of a truly indigenous church.

Wagner (2009, 67) argues that missiologists strive to strike a balance between the different facets of missions. They seek biblical and theological foundations that are broad enough to allow a holistic approach, but restrictive enough to prevent the confusion that sees everything as mission. The discussions sometimes centered around the *Missio Dei* (the Mission of God in which the church is engaged), the kingdom of God, or the glory of God. Each of these foci and others have proved helpful in the ongoing discussion about the purpose of missions. The absence of any one of them from the whole diminishes the beauty and fullness of the overall picture.

Missiological Roots of Light

To those who embraced the kingdom of God, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14 NSAB). Newbigin (1989, 214) says this expansive and poignant picture of the nature and purpose of missions connected the Old Testament missiological themes and linked the purpose of missions to the nature of divinity and Jesus' own mission. Jesus used images that defied strict mathematical equivalence and required the listener to reflect in order to understand. He spoke of bread and water and of seeds and yeast. His parables also invited reflection. His miracles were

"signs" which, when correctly understood, conveyed the truth about his nature and mission. Light is one of Jesus' thought-provoking terms that overflow with meaning for the truth-seeking listener.

The concept of light had important missiological roots in the Old Testament. Isaiah envisioned a servant of God who would be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6 NIV 1984). In a striking passage, God declared of His servant: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and to bring back those of Israel whom I have preserved. I will also make you a light to the nations, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6 NIV 1984). These and other passages from Isaiah make it clear that, for the prophet, light was indeed a missiological term linked to God's purpose of making himself known to the nations, to the Gentiles. Jesus maintains this missiological emphasis in his own statement, for the world is the recipient of the light shining through his disciples.

Wagner (1993, 67) states that several purposes of missions are perceptible in the image of light, which, of course, must be understood in relation to the opposite image of darkness. First of all, light suggests knowledge, whereas darkness suggests ignorance, as anyone who has ever stumbled in the darkness of an unfamiliar environment in search of an object can well understand. Where there is no light, there is no knowledge, and what better than darkness could describe the plight of a world devoid of the message of redemption and hope? In this context, light is closely associated with revelation and the glory of God and implies the knowledge of God. Paul could therefore speak of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6 NIV 1984).

Therefore, an essential aspect of missions is proclamation, the passing on of the knowledge of God through the Good News of Jesus Christ, in particular His sinless life, His crucifixion for our sins, His resurrection and His return in glory. The proclamation was central to the mission of God's servant described by Isaiah, who was to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to captives, sight to the blind, and the season of God's favor (Isaiah 61:1-2 NIV 1984). Jesus, of course, made exactly that proclamation.

The kingdom of God was central to Isaiah's mission, as it must be for all Christians; only now, as Newbigin (1986, 124) observed in *Open Secret*, this kingdom has a name and a face - Jesus of Nazareth. For the church to fulfill its mission as the light of the world, it must be faithful and clear in proclaiming the Gospel and in conveying the information essential to an understanding of salvation and an experiential knowledge of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, proclamation is more than words. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God through words and deeds. Just as the parables proclaimed the Kingdom in words, the miracles proclaimed the Kingdom in deeds. And this was part of Isaiah's missiological vision, for by bringing light to the Gentiles, the servant will open the eyes of the blind, set the captives free, and bind up the brokenhearted (Isaiah 42:7; 61:1 NIV 1984).

The Church today (Rotaru 2017, 57-76), likewise, must proclaim God's message in word and deed. In fact, it is often the proclamation by deeds that validates and authenticates the proclamation by words and vice versa. Accordingly, home and foreign missions have emphasized the importance of ministering to the needs of the people, sponsoring inner-city homeless shelters, agricultural projects in underdeveloped areas, medical missions, and a host of other ministries.

Light denotes good deeds, even as darkness suggests evil deeds. The Gospel of John, for example, speaks of the light that came into the world and was rejected because people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil (John 3:19 NIV 1984). Evil deeds are hidden under the cloak of darkness, but righteous deeds can be done in the light. When Jesus declared that his followers were the light of the world, he urged them to let their light shine so that the world would see their good works and glorify God. Good works—ministering to the suffering, humanitarian aid, medical missions, social ministry or any other form of compassionate action—glorify God. But Christ must also be proclaimed through actions that demonstrate the power of God and the Gospel. Paul reminded the Corinthians that his

proclamation in words was simple and direct, but it was accompanied by demonstrations of divine power (1 Cor 2:4 NIV 1984).

If today's missionary is to be an instrument of light in a world of darkness, God's power must be evidenced by saving deeds. Proclaiming in words that neglect actions properly associated with the children of light will be empty indeed. Furthermore, proclamation in actions without accompanying words will stop at mere sentimentality, responding to the needs of the moment, but leaving the greater and eternal need unanswered. Word and deed must never compete with each other, as if one were diminished by the other. Word and deed clarify and define each other. One without the other is superficial and powerless, but together they shine like light in a dark world. However, both must be exercised under the empowerment of the Spirit of God.

Light, as used by both Isaiah and Jesus, suggests joy and hope in contrast to the gloom and despair of darkness. Isaiah (9:2-7 NIV 1984) describes a people living in the despair of darkness and oppression. Yet when the light dawns on them, their sorrow turns to joy, like people celebrating a bountiful harvest or warriors sharing the spoils after a great victory. Such is the joy when the darkness is dispelled by the light of missions. Nor is it surprising that joy was such a common manifestation among New Testament Christians and was listed by Paul among the fruits of the Spirit. Newbigin (1977, 267) stated that the mission of the church and of Christians, as the light of the world, is not only to spread the knowledge of God through proclamation accompanied by works of light, but also to bestow joy and hope, dispelling the darkness of sorrow and despair.

Light and spiritual warfare

Van Engen and Tiersma (1992, 232) noted that *All this, of course, involves a kind of spiritual warfare, a confrontation between light and darkness*. Those who live in darkness are in bondage to the powers of this dark world, against which Christians must fight. Darkness is partly the result of the rejection of God's glory (Rom 1:21 NIV 1984) and partly a work of the "god of this age" who has blinded the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4 NIV 1984). Throughout the New Testament, Christians are reminded that they have been delivered out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and that they are to walk in the light, avoiding any form of compromise with evil and darkness. Nowhere is this confrontation with darkness more evident than on mission fields, at home and abroad. When missionaries cross barriers or enter neglected sectors of the world and society, they are invading Satan's domains. Indeed, confronting the forces of darkness (invading these dark domains) is a primary purpose of missions. It is not surprising, therefore, that God instructed Paul to turn the Gentiles "from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18 NASB). Therefore, the most critical need is not for more money or better strategies, though these are vital, but for an awareness and appropriation of God's spiritual equipping and empowerment. Those who have brought light into the dark corners of the world and society know the importance of this empowerment because they have seen fear and despair with their own eyes. They have experienced the battle against evil in which Satan's territory is yielded only by the maximum effort of all resources.

The Christians in Ephesus had to struggle with the powers of darkness. Paul prayed that their eyes would be opened to know God's great power on behalf of believers, a power demonstrated in Christ's resurrection from the dead and their own resurrection from the death of trespasses and sins into the life of Christ (Eph 1:18-2:7 NIV 1984). Paul's prayer makes it clear that the resources needed for a victorious life are available and only need to be appropriated. Therefore, missionaries must not tremble in the face of darkness, for their weapons of warfare are not of the flesh, but are of divine power, so as to destroy the strongholds of the evil one and take every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:3-5 NIV 1984). Therefore, to undertake missionary work without such spiritual weapons and without knowing how to use them is futile and even foolhardy. The weapons of the missionary include righteousness, faith,

truth, the Word of God, and a willingness to share the Gospel, all exercised with vigilant prayer (Eph 6:13-18 NIV 1984).

Wagner (2012, 236) says that it is impossible to overestimate the importance of prayer in this conflict with darkness. Prayer is the main instrument by which God's available power is appropriated in the missionary's life. One of the great stories of contemporary missions is the story of how God has used prayer to open doors to unreached people groups, bringing light to those in darkness. Even so, we still have much to learn about prayer missions and the relationship between prayer and victory over the forces of darkness. And we may still have important lessons to learn about the nature of this war.

If part of the purpose of missions is to confront and oppose the powers of darkness, then missionaries need a clear idea of the enemy and his tactics. Fortunately, the Scriptures provide detailed information about Satan's activity. He is the adversary, the accuser, the destroyer, the deceiver, the liar and the murderer who holds men and peoples in bondage. In contrast, God reveals himself as the advocate and defender, as the giver of abundant life and the one who leads to all the truth, who sets free those who are in bondage. These traits may seem so familiar as to be commonplace, but they are vitally important and need to be kept in mind whenever we think of mission. Missionary service is modeled on the character of God. The missionary, therefore, goes into the world as an advocate, not an adversary; he goes in truth, not in deceit or falsehood; he goes to set free, not to enslave.

The Purpose of Cultural Transformation in Missions

Another purpose of missions that is integral to the call to be light in a dark world concerns the relationship of missionaries to culture and society. On the one hand, missionary service requires cultural adaptation aimed at penetrating and transforming culture. It also requires confrontation with culture. Interestingly, this tension is depicted in the biblical imagery of light, as light both transforms and exposes. Like the salt and leaven used by Jesus to describe his followers and their influence, light is a transforming agent. As such, it illuminates the landscape or home, making it manageable and even hospitable. Many valuable things may be in that setting, but if it is not transformed by light, it remains shrouded in darkness and stained with sin. Even so, within cultures there can be much that is noble and valuable. However, without the light of Christ, this inherent value cannot be truly appropriated. On the other hand, light exposes all that is desirable or detestable, revealing the evils of individuals and societies. Light confronts the deeds of evil, removing the protection of darkness. This tension between transformation and judgment is reflected theologically in the tension between the incarnation and the cross. In the incarnation, we see God adapting Himself to humanity and accommodating human culture. In the cross, however, we see God's judgment of sinful humanity and fallen culture. One of the weaknesses of his (Kraft 1991,210) work in Christianity in Culture is that it works almost exclusively from the perspective of the incarnation, without the tension of the cross. Consequently, Kraft thinks primarily in terms of transformation and not in terms of judgment on culture. On the field, missionaries may be tempted to sacrifice this tension by either embracing the host culture completely or repudiating it altogether. But the tension implied by light, which both transforms and exposes, must be maintained in mission.

Therefore, there is a mission purpose for culture that requires the transformation and validation within a culture of that which has value and can be placed in the service of Christ, as well as the exposure and rejection of that which belongs only to darkness and can never be compatible with the kingdom of light. Expressions of culture need to be judged to determine whether they have a positive value, are neutral or constitute a negative presence in the context and need to be opposed. Sometimes resolving these issues is difficult because cultural elements may not be what they seem to an outsider. Missionaries have often drawn conclusions without the necessary cultural understanding.

These questions must be addressed prayerfully, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with the help of indigenous Christians. Kraft (1979,112) warns that the missionary can advocate

for cultural change, but that only those within the culture can innovate in bringing about change. In addition, time must be allowed for the Spirit of God to work in individuals to bring about the necessary transformation of the culture or the rejection of the evil ingrained in the culture. However, these principles may prove difficult to apply if the missionary is confronted with a practice such as sati, the Indian practice of burning a widow alive on her husband's funeral pyre - a practice that William Carey vehemently opposed (Drewery 1973, 181).

The call to be light is also a call to the communion of light. Paul saw Christians as being united in a community through which they could encourage and strengthen one another as sons of light (Eph 5:8, 15-20 NIV 1984). Similarly, John was emphatic that if Christians truly walk in the light, they fellowship with one another as common members of the family of God in a relationship defined by love (1 John 1:7; 2:8-11 NIV 1984). Certainly, the task of missions is not fully accomplished until believers are united in communities of faith, fellowships of light and loving spiritual families. From within such a community the light of Christ can best shine through his followers, and the creation of such communities is an integral part of the missionary task. To be the light of God in a dark world is therefore to overthrow ignorance with the knowledge of God. This service includes counteracting the evil deeds of darkness with deeds of righteousness and light. Serving the light involves offering joy and hope in Christ where there is sorrow and despair and engaging the powers of darkness in spiritual warfare in the power and name of the living Christ. Serving the light includes both transforming and confronting culture. Light is therefore a fitting metaphor for mission and a guiding standard for mission. Christians are called to the light of eternal life and commissioned to bring this light to those in darkness. An effective witness must show this light through proclamation, ministry and spiritual warfare. Good works done in God's name and by the power of the Holy Spirit do much to show the light of God's message.

As servants of God's light, missionaries must act both as advocates of indigenous culture and as judges of local culture. While missionaries will advocate for cultural change, they must also enable the local people to effect change. Some cultural elements may remain as part of receiving the light, but others will bear such marks of darkness as to be unbearable in the Christian context. Believers, as sons of light, should be drawn into communities of light, local Christian communities. As Christians share the nature of light in God, they live together in the essence of the communion of light. Fielding (2008, 224) says that only to the extent that churches exemplify light in joy, unity, hope and service can these congregations share in the mystery of salvation. Light summarizes much of what mission is all about.

The call to be light also draws missions into the sphere of the nature of God and the mission of Christ. John declared, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5 NIV 1984). Similarly, Paul described God as dwelling in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6:16 NIV 1984). Indeed, Paul had encountered the risen Christ on the Damascus road as a dazzling light. Moreover, Jesus declared himself to be the light of the world, promising that those who follow him will no longer walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12 NIV 1984). Just because Christ is the true light, Christians are light. In other words, Christ is the light, and Christians become light as they are properly related to him. The designation of Christians, and missionaries in particular, as the light of the world reminds us that they are called to be partakers of the divine nature with him who is light by nature. Missionaries are called to join in mission with him who has shown himself in the darkness, bringing light to the nations. "As the Father has sent me," Jesus said, "I am sending you" (John 20:21 NASB). Therefore, to be light in a dark world is to participate in the nature of God and to participate in the mission of Christ.

Consequently, arrogance and pride have no place. Paul, having contemplated the work and majesty of the God of light shining in people hearts, went on to declare that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that this all-power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:6-7 NIV 1984). This recognition can only produce humility and gratitude to God for his indescribable grace.

Everything is mission?

As suggested earlier, mission leaders must avoid two extremes in developing an understanding of mission purpose. On the one hand, the purpose of missions should not be so narrowly defined that vital missional concerns are overlooked or obscured. On the other hand, the purpose should not be stated so broadly that everything becomes mission. Then there is a danger that the more important concerns will be overshadowed by a host of less important concerns, and the missions will lose their focus. Garrison (1990, 335) says that two aspects of missions as sharing God's light help protect missions from being watered down or becoming too generalized. First, missions must present a primary concern for God's glory. Missions should always be seen in the context of their ultimate purpose of leading a lost humanity to join the whole creation in praising and glorifying the living God. Second, the call to be light requires prioritizing missions over those in darkness. Of course, all those who do not know Christ are in darkness; but there are also degrees of darkness related to factors such as the availability of the Gospel, the accessibility of Christian worship, the existence of Scripture and related Christian literature in the basic language of the target people, or the presence of oppressive structures and traditions. Missions must be zealous to take the Gospel to the darkest corners of the world and society so that every creature has the opportunity to receive the light of Christ (Rotaru 2010,7).

Some Christians may be led to emphasize a particular part of mission as a particular expression of mission for their group. This arrangement is not necessarily an error as long as particular ministries (literacy, children's ministry, medicine, education) are not presented as the way to do missions. The whole body of Christ should express the whole mission of winning and developing people, meeting their physical and spiritual needs, and bringing them into communities that influence and transform their localities.

Everything is mission and mission is everything. The only caution to be expressed is not to allow one expression of mission to be the whole of mission. The body of Christ (Rotaru 2012a, 5) must be careful to express the whole meaning of mission in the particular expression of mission throughout the world. It is important to remember at this time that every Christian is called into God's service to be light in a dark world. When Jesus said, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:15 NIV 1984), he was not just referring to missionaries. However, the call to be light has special relevance for the missionary and for the mission of the church in a lost world. While not every Christian is called to be a missionary in the strict sense of the term, every Christian is called to be part of God's total redemptive purpose.

The role of some, those we call missionaries, is to cross the barriers that separate people from the Gospel and introduce them to the knowledge, claims and character of God. Their calling does not make them holier or more valuable than other Christians, but it does require special gifts from God that enable them to become bicultural, to be separated from kin and country, and to recognize ways of proclaiming and ministering in environments different from their own. Nevertheless, all Christians are part of God's mission, His unique mission to make Himself known to all the people and peoples of the world. One of the most dramatic developments in mission in this age has been the emergence of volunteers in mission. Unprecedented numbers of Christians, who are not career missionaries, have voluntarily taken up the missionary banner and joined forces with vocational missionaries to share the light of Christ with the world (Rotaru 2012b, 5). Others who have not gone to the mission fields at home or abroad have committed themselves to remarkable levels of prayer and giving to the mission cause. This fusion and partnership of all Christians with those who are called by God as missionaries is essential for the missionary task to be accomplished.

Mission and ministries must be the consuming passion of the whole church of God and not the exclusive domain of an elite missionary regiment. Only then will the church be like a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. Only then will the full meaning of mission as the light of God be realized.

Conclusion

The purpose of missions needs to be understood and articulated in biblically and theologically sound ways, avoiding either too narrow or too comprehensive an approach and making missions a vital concern for the whole people of God. Jesus' designation of his followers as the light of the world immediately places the purpose of the church within a missiological framework based on the Old Testament expectation of a light to shine to the Gentiles and the dark places. Garrison (2004,98) stated that this understanding of the purpose of missions is centered on proclaiming the Gospel of Christ by word and deed, replacing ignorance with the knowledge of God, evil deeds with righteous deeds, and despair and bondage with joy and freedom. Missions is, therefore, about engaging and overthrowing the powers of darkness through the power of God. It involves an encounter with culture that both confronts and transforms.

Moreover, the call to be light identifies the missions with the God who is light and with the luminous and life-giving mission of Christ. The mission can be fully realized when believers are called into the communion of churches where the light of the Gospel is lived in love, unity and service. Ultimately, the mission requires efforts that glorify God and favor those who, by virtue of their social or geographical position, are in the greatest darkness.

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