

Missional Insights: Exploring the Foundations of Mission in the Southeastern European Context

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Summary

Our participation in God's mission to the world is a mandate for all followers of Jesus Christ - however, our understanding of the what, why, and how of God's mission is often viewed through the lens of immediate historical precedent and personal experience.

As mission is intrinsically related to how we understand God, who we are as God's people, and how we think about God's purposes in our particular contexts, it is therefore important to reflect upon its Biblical, theological, and historical foundations. In light of this, the article will explore the qualitative nature of God's mission and suggest some ways in which to think about our participation in God's mission in a Southeastern European context.

Introduction: My Pilgrimage in Missions

Over the last few decades, nations in Southeastern Europe have been actively involved in missions – both receiving and initiating. But what do we mean when we use the terms mission and missions? This might seem so trivial and straightforward that it hardly requires a practical or academic discussion – after all, did not Jesus clearly commission us in Matthew 28 to go into all the world and make disciples? And yet, the word ‘mission’ is often laden with historical baggage, different biblical interpretations, and personal experiences so that even as we use the word, we could be inferring a meaning from different conceptual paradigms. In truth, how we understand the what and the why of mission directly relates to the means and the how of mission. Mission is intrinsically related to how we

understand God, who we are as God's people, and how we think about God's purposes in our particular contexts – therefore, it is a subject that warrants deep reflection using all the tools that have been gained in missiological studies over the last decades.

As a foreigner in Southeastern Europe and one who studies and writes on the issues pertaining to mission, I have often wondered what it feels like to be in nations who have historically been the subject of frequent “received missions” from outside the region. Certainly, this would contribute to how one thinks about mission. Growing up in a Baptist Church in America, my own concept of mission formed from two impressions. First, it was influenced by those serious-faced American missionaries whose pictures were stuck on a poster board in the corner under the title “Our Missionaries”. I would briefly glimpse into their world when they returned once every two years to speak on a Sunday, showcasing pictures of skinny African babies or Bible translation work. My response was a mixture of revered awe at their sacrifices and relief that God had not called me to such a task.

Second, my idea of “mission” was formed by books of missionaries’ stories, many of which were written in a triumphalist style. Although one must recognize, appreciate, and learn from the immense self-sacrifice and innovation of missionary activity over the last two centuries, our 21st century eyes notice another fact – such books fail to portray the complexities faced in the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel, and leaves the impression that the missionary is the sole “carrier-of-God” to passive recipients.

My idea of mission expanded in high school and college to include the concept of the “short-term mission trip.” Early disillusionment and confusion confronted my mission idealism on a six-week trip to Papua New Guinea. The triumphalist missionary literature had left me with the impression that missionaries were supra-spiritual beings and I found myself shocked that they were actually very human. I was also surprised at the feel of a “little America” at the mission base, the unsmiling faces of the nationals that lived outside of it, and the tasks that made up the missionaries’ daily routine. My biggest assignment on that six-week trip was to home school the two children belonging to a missionary couple isolated in the jungle. “This is mission?” I thought to myself. I had envisioned myself wading through swamps and tromping through jungles, all the while proclaiming the gospel. I was further confused when we visited a tiny grass-hut church halfway up a mountain. Nobody spoke English, but we sang hymns in English, and the two national pastors had carefully donned white shirts and ties for the occasion, looking completely out of place amidst the others who were simply clad. What was the meaning of this?

One problem was that my understanding of mission was inextricably con-

nected to the idea of the “sent” missionary. Mission took place when a missionary was sent out from a church or agency to a far off place in order to “carry the gospel” to a people who had allegedly never heard the news. It never occurred to me that God pre-dates any missionary activity or presence, nor that some “far-off” contexts, seemingly so remote, already had thriving churches.

Another problem was that I had never before considered the relationship between context and the gospel – every person will hear the gospel through the filter of his or her particular culture, and the person sharing the gospel does so through the lens of his or her particular culture. The small bush church in Papua New Guinea apparently believed that the church must be clothed in western dress and style. To be a Christian did not just mean being a disciple of Jesus, but adopting a whole western cultural expression of Christianity.

My concept of mission was decidedly monocultural, one-dimensional, one-directional and loosely based on a single, albeit important, text from the Bible. However, such a thin exegesis of mission misses the richness of God’s mission gleaned when one approaches the Bible with what Christopher Wright calls a “missiological hermeneutic”. In essence, it is the whole Bible as a missionary book that reveals the mission of God. As he puts it, “The Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation” (2006, 22). When we put on such a missiological lens, we begin to understand that mission is sourced in God’s very being and in his earliest acts toward the world.

What is Mission?

In the great nineteenth and twentieth centuries of Protestant missions, missionary activity exploded all over the globe, promulgating both lasting fruit for the kingdom and serious, unforeseen consequences to the global church. One consequence was the connection between the missionary enterprise and colonialism, thus linking the concept of mission with political and economic power. Part of this resulted from a segmented motive for mission - one limited to saving individual souls (separated from their social context), cultural transformation (the need to “civilize” the East and South through western culture), or denominational expansion (Bosch 1991, 389).

While historically reviewing the missionary movement, there is often a temptation to offer a simplistic analysis, and describe the missionary movement as triumphalistic -- the glorious missionary bringing the gospel to the people in darkness, or imperialistic – the missionary destroying cultures and perpetuating injustices by imposing western culture. In truth, both explanations are reductionistic; they both make the mistake of placing the missionary at the center of

mission, and implying that the “receiving” peoples were completely passive and dependent (Hanciles, 2006).

In the last 50-60 years, however, there has been a vital shift of understanding from “our mission” to the *missio Dei* – God’s mission. Eminent missiologist David Bosch traces the historical development of this concept - beginning with Karl Barth’s sourcing of mission from within the trinitarian God. This developed into the understanding that as God sends his Son, they both send the Spirit, and all three are sending the church into the world (Bosch, 1991, 390).¹ Eventually, the concept of *missio Dei* expanded to include all of God’s activity, inside and outside the church. In other words, God’s mission has a cosmic scope because the gospel is good news – not just for individuals, but for families, societies, cultures, arts and sciences, creation, and every part of existence within the cosmos (Bavinck, 1992, 224).

God’s mission, therefore, is much broader and deeper than a one-dimensional sense. Flowing out of his dynamic trinitarian relationship of love, God’s mission is to actively reconcile, redeem, and transform humans, cultures, and creation until his reign is fully established. If this is God’s mission, we can say that mission is everything the church does that points to the kingdom of God - in fact, the church should be the fragrance of the reign of God, a foretaste of what is to come (Bosch 1991, 11). But how does the church decide what points to the kingdom of God?

The Quality of God’s Mission

Putting on a missiological lens, one can discern the qualitative nature of God’s mission throughout the Bible. Wright notes that the Bible as a whole is a “missional phenomenon”, and the individual texts reflect the “struggles of being a people with a mission in a world of competing cultural and religious claims”. God’s interaction with humanity as revealed in Scripture reveals insights into the why and how of his missionary being. This becomes evident as he calls and forms a people for himself - a community of “memory and hope, a community of mission, failure, and striving” and through his interactions with people in different contexts and time periods (2006, 50, 51).

The holistic nature of Christ’s mission also illuminates the qualitative nature of God’s mission. Jesus’s proclamation of the inauguration of God’s kingdom in Luke 4:18-19 also describes his mission. Framed in the context of “the year of the

1 The full summary of the historical progression of *missio Dei* is found on pp. 389-393 of *Transforming Mission*.

Lord's favor," it is concerned with the effects of sin in all areas of life. His ministry actively displays the width and depth of God's mission as he heals the sick, frees the demon-possessed, confronts social and economic injustice, and proclaims the kingdom. Mission, then, cannot just be proclamation or evangelism, nor just be advocacy or care for the poor. Rather, it involves a holistic participation and concern for all avenues of God's mission.

Significantly, Jesus' method was that of an incarnational missionary. The christological hymn in Philippians 2 poetically displays God's mission as being willing to cross all manner of barriers and borders - even that between God and man. Not only did he cross them, but also out of love, he took upon himself the cultural rules and restrictions of a 1st century Aramaic speaking Jew. He crossed borders from God to man, Jew to Samaritan and Gentile, rich and poor, male to female. Although he restricted himself within the constraints of humanity, his manner of challenging cultural and social barriers pointed to the expanse of God's mission - entrance into the kingdom of God is open for everyone: rich and poor, oppressed and oppressor, sinner and devoutly religious.

It is this incarnational way of living out God's mission that challenges the way we think about participating in God's mission - can we give up the rights, privileges, and the ease of being in our culture to step into someone else's world? Are we bound from crossing certain boundaries out of our own cultural taboos, or do we display the generous expansiveness of God's mission by freely entering the world of the "other"? Do we participate in God's mission in all aspects of its opposition against the insidious effects of evil?

The ongoing challenge of missiology is to grapple with Jesus' model and method within the questions of our own context. As Bosch puts it,

. . . We are challenged to let Jesus inspire us to prolong the logic of his own ministry in an imaginative and creative way amid changed historical conditions. Now, as then, it should make all the difference to society if there is within it a group of human beings who, focusing their minds on the reality of God's reign and praying for its coming, advocate the cause of the poor, serve those on the periphery, raise up the oppressed and broken and, above all, "Proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (1991, 34).

How Do We Participate in God's Mission?

Since mission originates from God's very essence, it follows that as God's people participating in his mission, it must also flow out of our sense of being - our identity as image-bearers of God and witnesses of Christ through the power of the spirit. Mission is how we orientate ourselves to our neighbors, our commu-

nity, our place of work, and our world. Such an orientation must be based in the vast reservoir of God's love for all people, and expressed in the incarnate, humble model of Christ through the power of the Spirit. In other words, mission is not just another task on the church's "to-do" list – rather, it is at the heart of its reason for being, the center from which everything else is directed and flows. Christopher Wright states it in this way: "Our mission means committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation" (2006, 22, 23).

We live in an age of unsettling trends and global shifts: rapid global population growth and migration, the global economic crisis and increasing poverty levels, globalization and the frantic pace of technology development, the increase of the sex trade, the AIDS crisis, religious pluralism, and increasing ethno-religious conflicts and tensions. In addition, the 20th century has witnessed an ongoing geographic shift of Christianity and missions. According to Operation World's 2001 statistics, in 1900, only 16% of Christians lived outside Europe and North America; in the year 2000, 59.4% of the world's Christians lived outside of Europe and North America. Most Christians today live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands (Pocock et al, 2005, 134). In 1950, the majority of missionaries were from Europe and America - now missionaries are from everywhere to everyone, and the majority are not western.²

The startling trends and difficult questions of our day require the church to intentionally engage God's mission as it intersects the world. But what is our rubric for doing so? How do we determine how God is working in a particular place or on an issue, and how do we participate in a way that is according to His will and purpose?

Missiology - or the study of mission, missions, and the *missio-Dei* - is a tool to help the church thoughtfully participate in God's mission in a particular context. It is an interdisciplinary study; although the foundations are biblical and theological studies, they are in dynamic interplay with the human context which involves disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, history and psychology. The purpose of missiology is to better understand how God's mission manifests in the past, present, and future, and to help better equip individuals and the church for their intentional participation in God's mission.

Missiologist Charles Van Engen suggests picturing missiology as four interconnected spheres of study. First, this essay has already touched on applying a "missiological hermeneutic" to the Bible, to understand how God has been inter-

2 See Jehu Hanciles' groundbreaking study of migration and mission in *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*. 2008, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.

acting with the world and his people from the beginning. Second, it is important to understand how the church has confronted and responded to various issues throughout its history in its attempt to be faithful to God's mission. Third, one's own context must be studied: theology, history, anthropology, sociology, and other religions. Finally, one's own experience must be taken into account. The vigorous engagement within these four circles can lead to missional engagement which is both incarnational – speaking to the questions of a particular culture and context, and prophetic – pointing to the areas God's mission must transform.

Missiologist Andrew Walls characterizes the inherent tensions between being incarnational and prophetic as the “indigenous principle and the pilgrim principle.” That is, although God accepts us as we are in our particular social and cultural context, he also seeks to transform us within our context which will necessarily put us at odds with some parts of our culture. In other words, Walls states the gospel is both a “prisoner and liberator” of culture (2009, 133-145).

Despite painful lessons from history and thought-provoking studies in missiology over the last decades, perhaps the church still does not take the issue of context seriously enough. Mission history has revealed that in order for the gospel to be truly transformative, it must take on an indigenous expression. Mission historian Jehu Hanciles insists, “Christ cannot be the Way if He does not know where you are coming from. He cannot be truth if He does not answer the questions you are asking from your context, and He cannot be life if He does not embody your humanity” (2006). This means, for example, that the questions and issues facing a rural Roma village in Croatia will be different from urban young Serbians living in Belgrade. Therefore, participating in God's mission in each of these contexts might look different, but all should be modeled after what David Bosch calls a “bold humility” – Christ's way of mission in “self-emptying and bold proclamation of God's ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ reign” (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004, 285).

Conclusion: Missional Implications in Southeastern Europe

If all mission is God's mission, and God's mission has a cosmic scope, and the church participates in God's mission, what implications does this have in Southeastern Europe? I first came to Southeastern Europe to collect oral history and do mission research, to write about this part of the world and learn from some of the issues facing the church here. After studying missiology, mission history, and current mission trends, however, I was plagued with the question: Since mission is a state of being, and I can participate in God's mission wherever I am, is it better just to stay in my own culture? For a variety of reasons – including the fall of Communism and the war in the former Yugoslavia – Southeastern Europe

has been the context of much “received mission,” with both positive and negative results. If changing trends show that missionaries are now from “everywhere to everyone,” what is the point of crossing cultural boundaries?

Mission anthropologist Sherwood Lingenfelter suggests that our culture is both our prison and our palace (2006). As such, we have the opportunity to understand God’s mission in a unique way, but we may also be blinded to other aspects because of the limits imposed by our culture. If this is true, then despite the many challenges involved, we need each other. Perhaps the best way to engage in God’s mission is with others from different cultural, social, and economic contexts.

Such engagement is often referred to as “partnership”, but this word does not go far enough to portray the interdependence required for a truly mutual participation in God’s mission. Missiologist Vinoth Ramachandra argues that the “partnership in mission” terminology is laden with corporate and contractual nuances. Such language and all of its baggage should be exchanged for the Scriptural metaphor of working together as a Body within the household of God (2010). This metaphor allows more freedom and creativity when thinking about working together with people from different cultural, economic, and social frameworks. In this way, we can be more deeply drawn into the mission of God. Such attempts at interdependence will undoubtedly bring up uncomfortable and possibly painful subjects such as power and control, money and resource capacity, differing theology and concepts of mission - but perhaps Southeastern Europe, with its unique history and different cultures, would be an ideal place for such conversations.

My research in this part of the world has been illuminating - expanding my concept of God’s mission, pointing out my own cultural biases, and birthing questions regarding cross-cultural missional interdependence. God’s mission in Southeastern Europe is wide-ranging, sometimes surprising and awing in its manifestation: the growing Roma churches in various countries, Christians advocating for women and their unborn babies, a woman serving the disabled by bringing them wheelchairs, peacemakers who are able to successfully work between different groups of people, and many faithful Christians who are loving and serving their neighbors as an everyday practice.

Despite such numerous stories, the particular questions, challenges, and obstacles in this context are numerous, multi-layered, and complex. The specific cultures and complicated history of Southeastern Europe are vital factors in how we perceive and participate in God’s mission. The better we explore the foundations undergirding our understanding of mission, perhaps the better equipped we are to participate in God’s mission. If we think about the four interconnected spheres of missiology, a few guiding questions emerge:

1. What missional themes in Scripture can best speak to this context?

2. What are the particular cultural questions and issues unique to each context?
3. Does the church in history reveal any insight or precedent to these issues or questions?
4. Where do we see evidence of God's holistic mission, and in what ways can we participate?
5. What methods of mission display the pilgrim and indigenous principle - appropriate and applicable to the culture and seeking to transform the areas that require it?

In one sense, God's mission is not a mystery - traces of his kingdom can be seen when people are freed from sin and shame, when others are healed, when people care for the poor, or advocate for justice for the marginalized. However, it can also catch us by surprise because we can become lodged in our own cultural understanding of what it should look like. Therefore, this requires us to move slowly and with humility, being open to listening to others and the Spirit. Mission has largely lost the triumphalist overtones of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - embracing the reality that it is God's mission and not ours humbles our approach and methods. As Bevans and Schroeder characterize it, this new humility can also lead to an excitement and urgency because "it is about God's gracious invitation to humanity to share in the dynamic communion that is at the same time God's self-giving missionary life; it is more urgent because in a world of globalized poverty, religious violence and new appreciation of local culture and subaltern traditions, the vision and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth can bring new healing and new light" (2006, 285). In this way, each of us are on our own mission pilgrimages, seeking to follow Jesus in his vision and creatively applying his praxis in our particular contexts.

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Misijski uvidi: istraživanje misijskih temelja u kontekstu Jugoistočne Europe

Sažetak

Sudjelovanje u Božjoj misiji u svijetu nalog je svim sljedbenicima Isusa Krista – međutim, razumijevanje onoga što podrazumijeva što, zašto i kako u Božjoj misiji, često biva promatrano kroz objektiv neposrednih povijesnih primjera i osobnog iskustva.

Budući da je misija bitno povezana s načinom našeg razumijevanja Boga, našim postojanjem kao Božjim narodom i načinom na koji promišljamo Božje svrhe u našim specifičnim kontekstima, vrlo je važno, dakle, razmotriti biblijske, teološke i povijesne temelje misije. U svjetlu toga, ovaj će članak istražiti kvalitativnu narav Božje misije i predložiti promišljanje sudjelovanja u Božjoj misiji u kontekstu Jugoistočne Europe.