

Core Value No. 1

The Mission of God: The ministry of reconciliation of people with God through Jesus Christ is our central purpose.

Jargon:

“Missio Dei” is an expression in Latin that you will find in articles and books about mission. It means literally, “mission of God” or “God’s Mission”. It’s theological purpose is to emphasize the idea that mission originates and belongs to God prior to any human involvement in it.

Going deeper:

The first modern person to write extensively about **missio Dei** was Leslie Newbigin – particularly in **The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology**, 1978 and core to **The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society**, 1989 - which some think is his best, most mature work. All of Newbigin’s work is excellent and well worth reading.

Mission begins in the heart of God. The story in the Bible is a long and passionate description of God’s love for his created people and the extravagant lengths to which he has gone to restore their relationship with him. The center of the story is the Good News of Jesus: the Gospel. Many Biblical scholars describe the Good News as being “eschatological”, which means that it is about “the end” or “the goal” or “the culmination of the human story”. The Bible teaches that the whole history of the cosmos, and especially human history, has a beginning, middle and an end. Perhaps more importantly, all history has a purpose from God’s point of view. God’s purpose is to restore human beings to intimacy with himself and, ultimately, to place all creation under the Lordship of Christ. To be restored is a new beginning that all comes together or is “fulfilled” at “the end” – which is when the new beginning takes on the added dimensions of a “new heaven and a new earth”. In them, sin and death are abolished and life is restored as eternal.

Jargon:

Eschatology: Having to do with the end of everything. **Eschaton:** The time of the end.

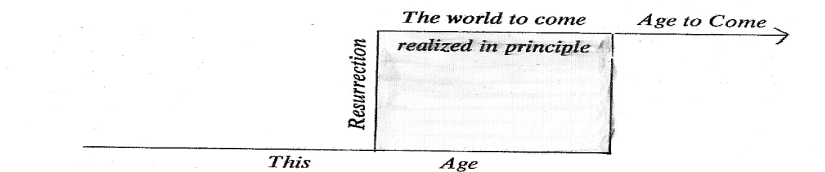
The Oxford Dictionary’s definition of **Eschatology:** The part of theology concerned with death and final destiny.

You can see this by looking at three places in the Bible.

1. **The beginning.** Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Soon after this it says, “God created human beings in his own image.” Genesis 1: 27.
2. **The middle:** Galatians 4:4a “When the set time had fully come, God sent his son...”
3. **The end:** Revelation 21:1 “Then I saw a new heaven and new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”

This is a different view of time and history than many people hold. Do you remember the TV programs that the late Carl Sagan made about the Cosmos? If you watched them, you can almost hear him saying, as he did to introduce each show, “The cosmos is all there is, all there ever was and all that ever will be.” The series was masterfully put together with stunningly beautiful photography and creative graphics – but the Bible’s story disagrees with Dr. Sagan’s theory of time, space and life. In the Bible, there is much more to the story than the accidents of random chaos and the collision of atoms. In the Bible, all history and all creation are personal and purposeful.

Before his death, New Testament scholar George E. Ladd used to draw a picture of the Bible’s view of time with chalk (remember chalk?) on the blackboard (remember blackboards?) for his students. Here’s a copy from his book, A Theology of the New Testament, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974, page 68.



According to this picture, we live in the “shady part” in which the Kingdom of God is both “now and not yet”. The Kingdom of God has come, but it is not in its most complete version. The fallen world is still present, alive and not well. Grace has

come, substantial and real, but less than what is to come. It is a guarantee of things to yet to be, not the whole package.

See the line on the bottom that says “This Age”? That’s the time of God’s mission. It starts before the creation of the world and reaches its fulfillment when Jesus returns – which will mark the end of “This Age” and usher in the “Age to Come”. In the meantime, or “now”, God has predestined, chosen and called people to be reconciled to him and is saving, healing, restoring, delivering, transforming, comforting, empowering and more. It’s what God is “about” in history. One word in the Bible for it is “salvation”. Another descriptive word for it is love.

Stories and such:

It’s fun to speculate that our time – between the beginning of the end of time and the end of the end of time – may have been in J.R.R. Tolkein’s mind in the Lord of the Rings stories. He was a devout Christian and his books are filled with Christian virtues and themes. Maybe, like Frodo and Sam, Merry and Pippin, we all really do live in Middle Earth!

Key Verse:

Paul puts the whole story very beautifully in Ephesians 1: 3-14. Notice how he describes the beginning, middle and the end. Notice also how God works this out as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be to the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory."

A Main Point:

God is the principle actor in the salvation of humanity. "God so loved..." God sent his son. God chose us before creation. God forgave us in Christ. God established us. God restored us. God healed us. God gave us the gift of His Holy Spirit. And the list goes on, extravagantly. God himself has a mission that is described in Ephesians 1: 9-10 as "...the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ...to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

Hot Debates:

We think that the Bible defines the “end times” as beginning with Jesus’ life and ministry on earth and ending with the restoration of all things at the return of Jesus – at a time that “only the Father knows”. Since some 2000 years have passed since Jesus’ birth, a number of folks take great pains to prove that the “end times” are limited to the immediate present and that current geopolitical events are the direct fulfillment of biblical prophecies. It may be that some current events will be shown – well after the fact – to have been the fulfillment of some specific prophecy. But, throughout history (and aside from Scripture itself), most prophecy fulfillment statements have turned out to be wildly speculative and serious distractions from ordinary, faithful living. More importantly, such speculation has tended to overshadow important ethical and moral judgments about events in themselves. Every century, for example, has produced “the **true identity** of the Antichrist” – usually an unsavory or unpopular world leader at the time. Nowadays, for some folks, anything whatsoever that happens in the Middle East can be justified as somehow part of the fulfillment of prophecy, no matter how unjust, brutal or even genocidal. We believe that this present age is an age of matchless grace in which God is moving forward in his mission of compassion and reconciliation. It’s what we should be about and speculative eschatology is a distraction.

Stories and Such:

On end times theories: a family history by Dave Mark. Back around 1843 a Baptist lay minister named William Miller put together an elaborate theory to interpret apocalyptic and prophetic writings in the Bible. In it, he “figured out” exactly when Jesus would return. He and his friends turned out to be the “media experts” of their day. In those days, most Americans lived in rural settings. Miller’s followers made huge paintings of the Colossus in Daniel, the Beast in Revelation and other apocalyptic images to be used as teaching devices to interpret end times prophecies. The pictures were so large that they could be attached to four sides of a barn. The speaker would then gather a large crowd. He would walk around the barn with a pointer and explain the meaning of the pictures and symbols. My ancestor’s barns were part of the story. The first date that Miller came up with for the Second Coming was in March of 1844. My ancestors in upstate New York and Vermont made white robes to wear. They opened their barns and let all the animals run free. Then they sat on the rooftop to wait. It didn’t happen. Undeterred, Miller issued a correction, this time identifying October 22, 1844 as the definitive date. Again, my ancestors sat on the rooftop, waiting. Imagine their embarrassment when they had to climb down and travel around the countryside to retrieve their animals. Imagine the scoffing of their neighbors. This event came to be known as, “The Great Disappointment” and it was a theme of conversation at my childhood dinner table, many years later.

Dig Deeper:

If you want to learn more about “The Great Disappointment” and early American theories on the end times, go to

www.cornerstonemag.com/cart/millerite-art/

Is World Mission an intolerant idea?

As we have spoken about world mission in congregations around the US, someone invariably has asked, “Aren’t you imposing your beliefs or your religion on other people? Don’t all religions lead to God? Isn’t this ‘one way’ thing provincial, arrogant and intolerant?”

Stories and such: TIME magazine, September 3, 2007 “Inbox” (used to be “letters to the editor”) Vishwanath Ayengar wrote, “As a Hindu Indian who has been a naturalized American for many years, I have been deeply concerned about the clout and popularity of (Billy) Graham. To believe that whoever receives Christ as his savior goes to heaven is quite acceptable to me. To say Christianity is the only way to God and heaven is outrageous.”

These are very important questions. Unfortunately, replies to them are, themselves, often aggressive and intolerant – sort of confirming what the questioner already thought. While our answers may not satisfy everyone, we think that gentleness and respect are vitally important. This is particularly true toward those with whom we disagree.

A Key Verse:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” 1 Peter 3: 15

People around the world know more about each other now than ever before. World travel has increased enormously and media like television, movies and the Internet have put far off places right under our nose. In a sincere desire for good will, harmony and peace, many people would like to believe that all religions embody humanity’s loftiest ideals and pretty much amount to the same thing. That sounds nice, but the trouble is that all religions are made up of human beings who are a decidedly mixed bag. There are lofty ideas in most religions, but there is also the darker side. Religious behavior has often challenged the assumption that they are peaceful and benign. Some expressions of every major religion, including Christianity, have been harsh and intolerant. Throughout history and into the present day, they have shown themselves willing to condone and even encourage brutality and violence to defend or further their cause. It

should not surprise anyone when thoughtful and sensitive people express dismay over the sins of religion. Any meaningful response must take that record into account.

We must respectfully disagree, however, with those who identify religious belief itself as the cause of violence, intolerance and hatred, as does Oxford professor and scientist Richard Dawkins in his bestseller, The God Delusion. We would ask, rather, why it is that every human endeavor, regardless of the nobility of its cause, seems to have that inevitable inner dynamic that leads to destructiveness. Why is **it** that people seem to be unable to refrain from hurting themselves and hurting others? It is so universal in time and place that intervening factors like politics, religion, national identity, skin color and social position don't seem to be the point – just excuses after the fact. “Imagine no religion...” John Lennon sang, and people would still find reasons to add to their willing capacity to hurt each other. In our experience, people will fight about anything at all.

Followers of Jesus begin their argument from an odd starting point. They freely admit that every human evil is resident in their own heart, even if they haven't acted on all of them. This is radically different from all other religious and philosophical theory. Virtually all others claim some kind of superiority for themselves via enlightenment, clear thinking or some such. Not so, the follower of Jesus. Whenever anyone says, “Someone has done this or that terrible thing”, the follower of Jesus says, “I have seen it before – in my mirror.” They find great hope not in their moral superiority over others but in their solidarity and common humanity. Their heart motivation for world mission is, “Because we have received mercy from God in Christ Jesus, we joyfully announce that Good News to **all** people.” It really is as simple as that.

Stories and such:

Eugene Peterson wrote the following in his book, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, InterVarsity Press, 1980. “The world, in fact, is not as it has been represented to us. Things are not all right as they are, and they are not getting any better.

We have been told the lie ever since we can remember that human beings are basically nice and good. Everyone is born equal and innocent and self-sufficient. The world is a pleasant, harmless place... The lie (“everything is OK”) covers up and perpetuates the deep wrong, disguises the violence, the war, the rapacity.” Pages 22-23.

Why Jesus?

Theologians used to write about “the scandal of particularity”. Maybe they still do. The idea that God only came up with one way to himself, that being

through his incarnation in the particular man, Jesus, is – well – intellectually troubling to a lot of folk in our present diverse and pluralistic age. If we had designed God’s solution to humanity’s problem, we might have come up with something else – maybe along the lines of “all belief leads to God”, or, as we read in a cartoon somewhere, “It don’t matter what you believe, just so’s you believe somethin’.” But we believe that God has done something particular and specific; that is, reconcile people to himself through Jesus’ death, resurrection and Spirit-giving life. It may not be how we would have done things, but we are stuck with it. God defined the ways and means of his mission, not us.

Key Verse:

“Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people...For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” 2 Corinthians 5: 11, 14-15.

STORIES AND SUCH: a reflection on biblical ecology and the restoration of all things under Christ:

(Our core values, at this point, have not included a statement about God's concern for all of creation, on one hand, or the uniqueness of humankind in relation to it. Many Christian organizations now reference ecological concerns and others, like the Asian Society of Missiology's Bangkok, 2007 Declaration "affirm that people are the special objects of God's reconciling mission..." We are considering such affirmations for our next revision.)

To see things whole is a wonderful and profound aspiration - one that is often lacking in our fragmented and compartmentalized way of living.

**"The heavens declare the glory of God,
the skies proclaim the work of his
hands" Psalm 19:1**

"Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." Romans 1: 20

"Fill the earth and subdue it." Genesis 1: 28

"Cursed is the ground because of you." Genesis 3: 17

"...creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." Romans 8: 21

Westmont College professor of literature, Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, wrote the following in an article entitled "This One Body" for *Weavings*, Sept. Oct. 2007.

"Separation of body from spirit has been a destructive habit of mind whose damage we are still in the process of calculating. Its logical extension is separation of what is human from the rest of the natural world: if the life of my body is only incidentally, and inconveniently, pertinent to my spiritual pursuits, so also the life of the plants, animals and soil I whiz past on the freeway may seem similarly remote as I sing hymns and pray on my way to my air-conditioned office. We see the consequences of that segregation all around us in toxic landfills, in devastated forests, and in oil spills that remind us of the voracious bleeding of fossil fuels from deeper and deeper veins in the earth's body. To speak of the earth's body in this way can incur suspicions of "New Age" mysticism, which raises yellow flags for many Christians. But recognition of our fundamental relatedness to the earth and its creatures, and of the three-tiered analogy between our bodies, the earth and the church, is utterly biblical."