Going with God in Mission from Bill Nikides

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

"Mission" and "missions" are words used by God's people in describing what we are called to participate in as believers. Some biblical texts describe where we fit in. Matthew 28: 18-20 describes the risen Jesus, having all authority over heaven and earth, commanding his disciples (his church) to make disciples of all people baptizing them in the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the "one like like a son of man" coming in the clouds and "given dominion and glory and a kingdom" (Daniel 7: 13-14). **1**

This echoes an early text, Psalm 50:2-3 that declares, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people…" The resurrection reveals who Jesus truly is, the divine Son who lives with "the ancient of days". Now, in the aftermath of the empty tomb, the divine Son speaks with his real authority. He, as a member of the divine Trinity, spoke creation into existence and now, once again, he breathes life back into it. **2**

People come into the life of Christ and are integrated into God's church as we the people of God introduce them to the gospel, but then commit to their growth in their new faith. As we can see, this involves God sending us into the world to raise up followers of Jesus. In this way, our mission involves doing. We are to follow Jesus' command to, not just make converts, but to make disciples, committed believers that are "on the way", learning and growing in Christ. Reformed churches share all of these commitments, but this is not where mission starts. Missions does not start with our

doing anything. Mission starts with God. For ordinary sinners like us, mission describes God's intentions and actions that redeem us from our fallenness and recreate us with new lives that reflect God's beauty and glory into his creation. In Genesis 1:26, right at God's creation of people like us, God said "let us make man in our image, after our likeness". It goes on to describe our relationship to God who made us and slowly unveils what a relationship with God means. In sum, this means that everyone of us, every person, is created as a reflection, representative, and a relation of God. As the Bible introduces us to our new lives in Christ, we begin to see how big and grand that word "mission" is.

The other thing we cannot afford to miss is this connection between Jesus who commands and Jesus, the divine Son of God who does not speak as an autonomous being. He is also the second member of the Trinity, a Trinity that speaks with one divine will and action to save and to judge. This is what theologians call the perichoretic

1 See H.N. Ridderbos. Matthew. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), pp. 552-555; John Nolland. NIGTC. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, pp. 1264-1265).

2 Sinclair Ferguson. Daniel. Mastering the Old Testament. (Dallas: Word, 1988), pp. 154-157.

relations within the Trinity. There is a mutual indwelling that makes them inseparable but equally distinguishable. We struggle with that because it describes a reality we cannot copy. What is vital for us, however, is that Jesus' command in Matthew 28 to his disciples cannot be isolated from the Trinity's full engagement in our salvation. That is the problem with contemporary missions. We either start with Jesus and move straight to us and our responsibility or we start with God, but we lump his mission of redemption from everything else he does.

THE MISSIONAL MINEFIELD

How do we engage mission and missions as God commands? It sounds easy. We

simply open our Bibles and do whatever he says. True, but we are not God. He says a great deal about this, so careful study of his word is required. We also have to deal with ideas and approaches that clutter the divine meaning of mission and in fact divert our attention from what he says and intends. Much of this involves our inability to escape our own time and intellectual world. We use biblical ideas but we redefine them. We are modern people. That means that we generally see whatever we do or think as inherently superior to what previous generations thought and did. I think that our modernist sense of superiority impedes our ability to think as God would have us to think by prioritizing his words to us first.

We have advanced terms that we believe represent improvements to what the church previously thought was the mission of God. We interpret our own history in light of improvements in the practice of missions and tend to discount what we did in the past. We use new ways of thinking (sociology, anthropology, psychology for example) and new organizational approaches. I contend that many of these things represent genuine improvements in service to the church's ministry, but they also represent distractions or even substitutes that crowd out the clarity of biblical instruction to us. We are not Luddites. We believe in improvement, but not if we lose the forrest for the trees. In some ways, I think we have and that God is calling us back to a greater biblical focus. Let's start our journey away from biblical clarity with an examination of terminology.
Some theological terms almost require trigger warnings. As soon as that term appears, red flags go up and the counterattacks begin, even before reconnaissance determines whether something is an ally or a threat. A polarizing term in the missiological world is the Latin phrase, "missio Dei". The problem with a term such as the mission of God is that it is associated to a mythology concerning its origins and meaning. On its face value, it looks biblical, and it is, but it links to a narrative of its theological origins that is inaccurate and, eventually, takes us away from its genuinely biblical and useful

meaning. I suggest that the mission of God is a vitally important concept that is often overlooked or rejected because it has been associated with poor theology. It is time to correct this misinterpretation and replant it in biblical soil. The key to that course correction is the Bible, specifically the Book of Ephesians, but before we explore it, we need to understand how the mission of God is misunderstood and misapplied.

THE TALE OF MISSIO DEI

Two simple Latin words, mission Dei (the mission of God), but the source of almost infinite controversy. The first use of the phrase occurs in the writing of Karl Hartenstein, **3** the director of the Basel Mission, and a friend of the theologian Karl Barth. John Flett describes the story whereby Barth supposedly invented the phrase and used it to introduce the modern ecumenical church to a new understanding of mission, one that flowed straight from the inner being of the Triune God. **3** As such, it is described as an all-encompassing concept that flows from the infinite creativity of God in himself. It is not rooted in redemptive history. It is not a consequence of events such as the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 19-20) or Acts 1:8. The story is that Barth sees mission as an internal dynamic, wherein the Father sends the Son and Spirit into creation in order to redeem it. Subsequent theologians and missiologists, inspired by this expansive picture of God, exhorted the 20th century church to attend to what God was already doing in the world, in every part of it, and in almost every way.

This understanding of missio Dei is not, crucially, something tasked by God to or overseen by the visible church. God is on mission, not principally, we. It, as Flett points out, includes every act of God. That means that the church is only one bit of a vast divine mission. It also implies that what we think of missions is only one small part of what the church should understand as mission; specifically, the evangelistic proclamation of the new birth in Christ and the making of disciples. We could go even

further and say that as mission extends far beyond our usual understanding, we can revisit specific terms such as “evangelism” and “discipleship”, finding new flexibility in these words. Whatever they mean, they mean more than the few examples supplied to us in Scripture. Because this vast and fuzzy understanding of missio Dei, we see missions as everything creative or life-affirming coming from God.

Flett also pointed out that 20th century theologians such as Vsevolod Spiller, attempted to correct a view of missions as a specialized ministry vocation belonging to a few by aligning mission with all of the work of the church, without, according to Flett, mentioning specifics. **4** By doing that, by describing mission as everything the church did, it meant almost nothing distinctive. It became a validation of whatever activities the church pursued. Mission became a catch-all. The historically understood and unique mission of the church was largely ignored. Is mission about baptizing sinful humanity in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or is it about supporting Angolan rebels fighting a bush war of Marxist liberation with South Africans?

Mainline ecumenical churches embraced missio Dei as a corrective to missions that was entangled with excesses of the colonial age. The memory of the colonial period became a cage of guilt for the Western church. In a sense, Western churches in the 20th century and beyond sought to atone for the evils of the colonial age, but they failed on two fronts. They failed to supply an effective missiology that could surpass colonial mission in terms of its core activities of evangelism and church planting with something demonstrably better. Second, it failed entirely to show how God authors and directs mission. It failed to demonstrate that mission belongs to God.

3 See John G. Flett. The Witness of God: Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

4 Flett 7f.

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We evangelicals forget that so many accretions of 20th century missions that were sponsored by mainline Protestant churches that diverged away from the traditional models of evangelism and strayed fatally into politics, social justice etc. Many of these initiatives were fatal on the mission field because the World Council of Churches and the bodies that comprised it started to die themselves. They had lost the connection between the Bible, the person of God, a robust Christology and missions. So, they lost missions and they lost God. David Hollinger described the reciprocal and sometimes radical theological effect 19th and 20th century mission work had on American Protestant churches and their mission fields in Africa and Asia. 5 A cycle developed in the last half of the 19th and the 20th century where missionaries left their homes, worked internationally and then changed their home churches based on what happened to them in the field. That can be a good thing. All too often, it was not. Entirely new approaches to evangelism, discipleship, theology, and ecclesiology, foreign to the church's historic understanding of the Bible emerged. 6

Flett's contribution to our understanding is his explaining the irony of the church rallying around the dominant influence of Karl Barth to embrace missio Dei when Barth had nothing whatever to do with the doctrine. The Trinity emerged as a focus of missio Dei years after the phrase finally came into use only in the 1950s, more than 20 years after Barth supposedly introduced the connection between Trinity and missions in the 1930s. This narrative entered the missiological consciousness when another influential missiological voice in the 20th century, David Bosch repeated the story. 7 It was, however, a myth. The Trinity and missions were connected, but not accurately. Subsequently, the 1950s-present has seen a muddling of what missions means. Denominations, parachurch organizations all chase the Trinitarian connection but they

do it following Barth's imaginary lead. That road led to closing the distance between the Trinity and the world, often ruled by an overblown expansion of the meaning of ideas such as "incarnation" or "incarnational". It also means that the Bible's unique and overwhelming focus on the redemption of fallen humankind because of sin disappears from view.

Two missiological impairments result. First, we saw missions described as an initiative undertaken by the church, a task, at the command of Jesus who is newly risen from the dead and back amid his disciples. There is no hint in this version of mission of Trinitarian involvement. Second, we have the concept of missio Dei posited in mainline and evangelical churches that merges the unique work of redemption accomplished on the cross and empty tomb as a salvation of sinners with any other sort of divine benevolence. God indeed cares about ecology, justice and mercy, but the Bible describes how God uniquely redeems fallen, sinful humans by the will of the Father, the sacrificial obedience of the Son, and our union to him by the Spirit. That is the missio Dei we will focus on, but we still have one more problem to confront.

5 David A. Hollinger. Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America. (Princeton: Princeton University, 2017).

6 Missiologists such as Andrew Walls, Charles Kraft, and Donald McGavran all testify to the life-

changing ideas that their work on the mission field stimulated.

7 Flett 12.

5.

THE MODERN TURN TO THE HORIZONTAL AXIS

One feature of modernity, ushered in through the Age of Renaissance humanism, and

the Enlightenment to us has been an explosion of knowledge. Our focus shifted in the period following the Middle Ages from God and his eternal realm to world we can see and inhabit. We could say that our imagines shifted from the “there and then” to the “here and now”. This age we live in we refer to as modernism. In a sense our imaginations narrowed. We became experts in what we could grasp with our senses since we no longer focused as much on the invisible, “enchanted” world.
Mark Noll extended modernism directly to American Christianity. “Modernists were Protestants who felt that it was necessary for the Christian faith to adjust self-consciously to the norms defining modern culture. They believed that God is best understood as working within human societies. And so they were convinced that the evolving shape of modern life as well as the developments in learning conveyed the realization of God's work in the world”. 8

Modernism embraces the human. The Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce traced the gradual rise and triumph of modernism in the West. 9 He noted the tendency to invest the modernism with an “axiological” meaning that he understood as implying a point of no return. Writing in the 1960s-1980s, Del Noce struck intellectual pay-dirt. Modernism always looks forward and drives forward. It is prefers the new. Anything that impedes the modern, progress, has to be discarded. This increasingly comes to mean discarding anything that holds back rapid change. Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist, called this distrust of “harnesses” such as tradition, culture, and so on “Liquid Modernism”. 10

The two impulses of modernism, to atomize and compartment information on one hand and to rapidly discard old knowledge, often compete against each other. What they have in common, however, is an absorption with life lived here and now. It is life lived with scant if any interference from the vertical dimension, specifically, God. God may be real or not, but he has to fit in along the horizontal axis of human existence. In a word,

he has to be practical or he is not deemed relevant. Theologians, historians, and philosophers have all passed their expiration dates. Traditions and authority structures have to change or get left behind.

The modernist centers of cultural influence became the universities not the churches. Early American seminaries and universities were closely connected to American Christian denominations. The triumph of modernism changed all of that. So too did the triumph of one particular model, the German university. The newer institutions became places of narrow specialization aided by the explosive growth of supposedly

8 Mark A. Noll. A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 373f,

9 Augusto Del Noce. The Crisis of Modernity. Translated by Carlo Lancellotti. (Montreal: McGill

University, 2014).

10 Zygmunt Bauman. Liquid Modernity. (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

6. unimpeachable objective information. The academy becomes an alternative source of Christian authority.

The academy spearheaded “new” knowledge, emerging in the 19th and 20th century: Sociology, anthropology, psychology. These all gained “soft power” in society and, given the society’s embrace of the horizontal, churches increasingly had to embrace them too. Traditional Christian pursuits such as Soul Care and missions dramatically morphed in order to accommodate the exponential changes of secularity flooding Western culture.

What, then, should churchmen do? The answer returns clearly: become, avowedly, therapists, administrating a therapeutic institution-under the justificatory mandate that Jesus himself was the first therapeutic. For the next

culture needs therapeutic institutions. “Society as a whole needs patterns of community life which will help ordinary people to fulfill themselves in much the same sort of way the psychiatrist out those who are especially troubled”. 11
Where the church, rooted in centuries of doctrine and practice, constructed on the base of Scripture, once defined our reality and fed our imagination, other forces in society did the defining. Too many voices. Too many power centers. Too much incoherence. Why bother to drag you through all of this? Why not just plunge into “mission work” or even just talking about what the Bible says about it? We follow this painful route because it is the world we inhabit but never talk about. We are not self-reflective at all. We are truly moderns. Charles Taylor referred to this as the “immanent frame” that completely shapes our “social imaginary”, our conceivable thought world. 12 The fact that we may be Christians and engaged in ministry does not alter this fact.

We pursue missions as through-going fragmented modernists. We are specialists. Missions becomes a playground for linguists and anthropologists. Missiologists used to be considered theologians, but their expertise rarely extends to the Trinity or Christology. These traditions and doctrines are, in the modern world of missiology, impediments to the efficient conduct of evangelism. We only know as much of a storied past as to scorn it as hopelessly out of touch. In truth, we are. We already read and listen through filters constructed to alter our understanding according to the way of the modern world.

MODERN MISSIONS FOLLOWING THE HORIZONTAL AXIS

On New Years Eve 2025, I attended a party held by a friend. It was crowded and hot. I had not eaten. Consequently, I found myself falling in the middle of a conversation, banging into a refrigerator and opening my eyes as I lay on the floor. A friend and former nurse got on the floor next to me and reassured me that I had indeed passed

out. It turned out, after the legion of tests, to have been nothing more than an

11 Philip Rieff. The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud. 40th Anniversary Edition. (Wilmington, De.: ISI Books, 2006) 215.

12 James K.A. Smith. How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

7. inadequate amount of salt in my system. I spent the next day in the hospital making sure I was healthy enough to leave. The time was not wasted. I had been obsessing about the specifics associated with my own ministry and life. I was overthinking things like money, conferences, writing etc. Seeing things in moving from the horizontal to the vertical helped me rethink my own perspective and priorities. I realized on New Years Day that my life had to align itself with my vertical relationship to God and less my concerns with my schedule.

I see this as analogous to what has happened to the church over time. The church is not the world but the church lives in the world, comes out of the world but not without bringing the world with it. It was popular when I entered the world of vocational missions about 30 years ago to refer to the act of outreach to non-Christian religious communities as “bridge building”. Don McGavran, in the Bridges of God (1955), posed a question. Taking the hypothetical, “how do people become Christian?” McGavran proposed, “How do peoples become Christian?” He then went on to explain the differences by stating that “people” were specific clans, tribes, castes, etc. Then, if we move toward specific peoples, could we use those bridges to induce chain reactions of conversion among them? 13 His point was essential to the future of missions. He subtly shifted the focus in missions from the vertical dimension that moves from God to humans resulting in both their conversion and transformation (discipleship) to the horizontal dimension. In that case, how can I develop an approach to evangelism that facilitates rapid conversion along that horizontal plane?

The means by which we facilitate that conversion chain reaction involves gaining deeper understanding of culture, particularly the "sociological and religious processes" by which people become Christians. The terms, "sociological", "religious", and "processes" are all critical to understanding what McGavran and the Church Growth movement he helped launch meant. It was a shift to technique that exploited a newly gained scientific understanding of anthropology, using it to produce "conversions" that despite claims to the contrary, amounted to little more than testimonies of a relationship with Christ. It was a throughly modernist development. McGavran was spurred on by frustration with traditional methods and erected a bridge-building methodology to break the logjam. One sees in it the pragmatism of Charles Finney in defining evangelism as "the right use of the constituted means." In his Revival Lectures.

Evangelical churches have increasingly reflected the modern societal drift to the horizontal axis. Modernism (whether in its modern or postmodern expression) shifts the church's focus from the vertical to the horizontal. Philip Rieff announced the 20th century triumph of therapy, applying it as a perceived replacement for traditional Christian ministry. 14 Even more, devastatingly, he implied that the church and its leaders would ultimately have to apply therapeutic models in order to remain in any way relevant. The Myers-Briggs indicator a wildly popular tool for measuring personality was

13 Donald Anderson McGavran. The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005: previously published by World Dominion, 1955).

14 Philip Rieff. The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud. 40th Anniversary Edition. (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006).

8. the creation of Carl Jung is just one way in which psychology not only enters ecclesial life, it redirects it. Everything cascades down from the therapeutic. Preaching, congregational singing, discipleship all conform to the new horizontal plane.

Perhaps no one has done more to chart the polar shift to the horizontal, human-

centered societal dimension than Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor, in A Secular Age, charts the journey from a world inconceivable without a pervasive God to one in which God's existence is but one possibility among many, but also in which God may not be altogether relevant. Devotion is along the way replaced by the powerful impulse for human flourishing in what Taylor termed, "the immanent frame". 15

There is a gradual shift in focus for Christians and society in general from a transcendent perspective in which everything is evaluated and ordered according to a vertical perspective, from God down to humanity to a horizontal perspective in which humans occupy more and more of the spotlight. To say that Enlightenment philosophers or Nietzsche beat the secular drum is to belabor the obvious. My point extends well beyond that. Christianity itself, in the contemporary world is immersed, sometimes engulfed by the horizontal focus. At its best, there is still a subtle shift in perspective. In 2015, the Yale theologian Miroslav Volf published his work, Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World. 16 He wrote and offered world religion as a response to world conflict. It was understandable. His own part of the world, the Balkans, had been devastated by war between societies usually described as embracing different faith systems. What he wanted was encouraging world religions as a key to world peace rather than the reason for its absence. In his view, what the world needed was human flourishing and the key to universal flourishing was religion as a positive reshaper of human behavior. He was certainly wrong. World religions do not lead to human flourishing because only Christianity is true. False religion does not create genuine peace and flourishing. He believes that world religions are not naturally violent. This seems at odds with observable reality because it ignores the spiritual basis for our behavior. We are violent because we have an undeniable sin problem that brings death. My point, however, is not that Volf has a poor grasp of human nature and what the Bible says about it. Rather, my point is that Volf sees religion as the servant of world

peace, human flourishing.

We shift from the vertical to the horizontal dimension in other ways. The era of the Reformation focused on the end times, but with important distinctions. The Reformers, as with the earlier periods of the church focused their hope on what we call the Beatific Vision. The church's hope for the future was based on the vision of living eternally in the presence of the risen Jesus Christ, resplendent in all of his glory and beauty. That was the believer's ambition. N. T. Wright in his History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology, addresses the subject of our heavenly ambition but its focuses elsewhere. 17 Wright has written persistently and persuasively on the misguided

15 Charles Taylor. A Secular Age. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2007).

16 Miroslav Volf. Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World. New Haven: Yale University, 2015.

9. vision of the contemporary evangelical church driven by a hope for eternity in a heaven that has nothing whatever to do with the earth they presently occupy. Rather, Wright understands the Bible to describe a remade new heavens and new earth, here where we live, not out in some imaginary part of the universe. Of course he is right, but his focus remains with what happens to us in the New Heavens and New Earth. He misses the vertical dimension, perhaps because he sees it as far too otherworldly or essentially as a concession to Platonism.

This too is understandable as Christians commonly go on about the next life in much the same way as Muslims. It is about the treasures of heaven. In Wright's case, he focuses less on the material benefits of heaven than of our transformation for an eternity in the heavenly Jerusalem. It is about us being transformed. It is still a way of looking at our faith in a sense horizontally, not vertically. The focus is on God changing us (which is true), but without the element that makes it worthwhile, the beautiful living presence of

Christ. A counterpart to Wright's focus is Hans Boersma's Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition. 18 This short work on the horizontal and vertical dimension in mission is not a place for a close reading on Wright and Boersma's differing visions concerning eschatology. Neither is it a place for endorsing one over the other. My point is even more simple. I just note that Boersma, echoing the pre-modern, pre-critical confessional Christian church, focuses the hopes and dreams of believers on eternity with God, manifest in the beauty of Christ. 19

How then do we understand the mission we have been called to? What does it look like? What are its boundaries? Where is it headed? How does it relate to the whole of the Christian life? Rather than leave it up to the theological heavyweights to fight it out, we will go back to the beginning of mission as we know it, to the Word of God. There are myriad starting points for addressing the scripture's engagement of the subject. Most consist in going straight to our savior and missionary prototype, Jesus Christ. What does he say in Matthew 18 or Acts 1 for example? I propose that these starting points limit what we know about mission far too much. Starting with texts such as these, rightly emphasizes what we do as a consequence to what Jesus commanded, but that still leaves out far too much information. Reducing missions to the Great Commission leaves almost every detail about missions up to our imagination. These words of Christ become disconnected, in a sense, even from God. How do they relate to the whole church, the whole life in Christ, to God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to the fallen world as it is? I say all of this to introduce us to a biblical map of missions that incorporates God's work, our lives, his empowerment, and our remade imaginations into one understanding. That map is the Book of Ephesians.

17 N.T. Wright. History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology. The 2018 Gifford Lectures. (Waco: Baylor University, 2019).

18 Hans Boersma. Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition. Grand Rapids: 2018.

19 There are disagreements beyond the scope of this short paper that differ concerning what the beauty of God includes or excludes. Analogously, as the beatific vision Boersma addresses is also related to our participation in the life of God. Scholars differ about whether that participation

is located exclusively in our union with Christ or includes the Trinity. It also treads into the controversial conversation of a Protestant understanding of deification .

10.

RECENTERING MISSION ON GOD HIMSELF AND GOING FROM THERE

What is our baseline? How do we know whether something we do is faithfully biblical? How do we know whether Jesus is in it or for it? God is the author of all creativity and beyond that, the author of life. How do we determine whether our plans, programs, and activities harmonize with him? What makes something acceptable? My premise and that of the historical church is that God not only verses what we do, he decrees and defines it. When we decide to focus on the horizontal axis, we prioritize our thoughts, perhaps our science, not simply to describe the world as it is (as anthropology was originally conceived) but to define what should be. In a sense, we define good and evil. My premise in writing this reflection on missions is that the only appropriate author of reality is God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is God who authors, defines and directs missions. To be more precise, it is our Trinitarian God who authors missions. Ephesians describes this miraculous work of God and his mission. 20 Here is a very brief outline of God's mission. Paul, the apostle, writes a letter to a seriously challenged church. It was full of conflict and interpersonal barriers. The city had experienced centuries of warfare and struggle between ancestral enemies. There are tragic stories of massacres, race hatred, riots and more. What could better demonstrate how great our God is than to make one new body of people who radiate the love of God out all that violent raw material? That is just what God did. And the rebuilding of enemies into

brothers, sisters, families, and churches started with what God purposed and accomplished. To sum it up, our salvation started with the will, sacrificial love, and perfect accomplishment of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all working in perfect love (because God is love 1 Jn 4:8) to save undeserving people like us by giving us, as my old friend said, “new hearts, new records, and new lives. Ephesians shows how salvation flows down from the heart of God through Christ. It gets better. The Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus our savior who then brings us back into the life of God we were designed for when God made us. 21 Think of it…when God chose to save us, he made it happen and that opened up a whole new life for us.

Because all believers are “in Christ”, we are all together in Christ. The Bible describes us as being one body in Christ because we are all in Christ. We are, as Robert Letham put it, caught up “in a sweeping movement of God’s grace toward us, from the Father, in or through the Son and by the Holy Spirit”. 22 Letham’s description is practically musical. It describes redemption, similarly to the Creation, as having order, proportion, harmony and dynamics. Just as the Trinity embodies all these, so does his redemptive work.

20 Ephesians is certainly only one part of scripture that addresses the mission of God. It is highlighted here because of its summary nature.

21 Fred Sanders. The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything. Second edition with study guide. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017). Sanders characterizes this redemptive flow as our “adoption into the Trinity”. As with the ancient church, he weaves together high Trinitarian theology and high Christology.

22 Robert Letham. The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship. Revised and Expanded. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2019) 74.

11.

Ephesians describes being “in Christ” as a dynamic state because the Trinity that united

us into the life of God in Christ is dynamic. Life comes from life.
Hatred and deep prejudice divided the people of Ephesus. But in Christ, they become one people, one family. God created us for this in the beginning; to reflect the one who made us. In the new Testament, we find out that what it means for us is that we begin to resemble Christ (Col. 1:15, the perfect reflection of God who we grow to resemble and then represent by reflecting him into the world. Let's pause for a moment. Our triune God of love, chose to love us by creating us to resemble the kind of love they have, even though we are just humans and can never express that kind of love perfectly. In Christ, we are then gathered together to reflect that wonderful saving love into world. In Christ, as new people with new hearts, records, and lives, we represent Christ and reflect that love back into our families, our neighborhoods, our work, our schools, so that as 2 Corinthians 2:15 says it, we smell like Christ to those around us.

In Christ, we the church, his body become a family. But, the Bible takes it even further. Christ is not static. He is on the move, spreading salvation, through the Word and Spirit, in every part of the world. Because we are in him, we go out into the world with him. Hebrews 12:1-2 describes this work of reflecting and representing Christ into the world as running a race together with Christ. Rev 1:5 describes Christ as the faithful witness. That means if we run with the faithful witness, Jesus, we run as his witnesses. Can you see the point here? We are made by God and remade in Christ, filled by the Holy Spirit, to be his witnesses everywhere. That also has two aspects to it. God moves out into the world with his redemption, let's call that centrifugal grace. He also moves the world into the church. Let's call that centripetal grace. God does both and we participate in both. We bring people into the church from the world so that they experience God's words in God's Spirit and we go out into the world carrying God's Word in the Spirit. Both are part of God's mission.

As a church, the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22), we are a body of witnesses. All of us. We live different lives, but we were all created to be Christ's witnesses to the world. We are fitted by God for that purpose. Some of us go overseas as witnesses, some stay closer to home, but all of us share a calling as Christ's redeemed witnesses, being transformed (2 Cor. 3:18), day by day to look like Christ and reflect his saving grace everywhere we go. That is what it means to be not just individual believers but a whole people on God's mission.

There is one more bit of good news that comes with this calling. Ephesians describes what a life lived out as spiritual warfare looks like. Being witnesses in a fallen world is hard, much too hard for us. But incorporated by Christ into the world of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are also equipped for the battle. As we step out into the world, we are protected from spiritual harm by armor that safeguards our souls (Ephesians 6:10-20). It is defensive in protecting us from the mortal opposition of Satan. If you look at all the elements of armor we are granted in faith by God, all are protective, but their protection works in two ways. They are defensive in protecting our eternal future. They are also offensive in protecting our witness to the world through the Word of God and 12. out transformed lives. The gospel was never made simply for our protection. It was made for the advance of Christ's kingdom throughout the world, in little ways and big ones, locally and globally.

The emphasis of evangelical Christianity on individual faith is tremendously enhanced by books such as Ephesians and Revelation that describe the whole church as engaged in spiritual warfare. Revelation often loses its intended impact in the church by becoming either a story that climaxed long ago or only has relevance in a yet to be fulfilled rapture. In fact, Revelation (e.g. Rev. 7:4-8; 14:1-5; 15:2-4; 19:14-16), when understood in the context of witness as a form of spiritual warfare, sees the whole

church called out as an army of witnesses (Rev. to the reign of Christ, following him in suffering witness on earth even as he has already defeated his and our supernatural enemies. 23 It therefore expands the horizon of what Ephesians points to and demonstrates that mission is truly God's work, not only started by him and secured in the work of the Trinity, but actively led by him into battle in the here and now.
God has already incorporated you into this new calling if you are in Christ. The question is where will you serve? How is God calling you to follow him? The church has many different ways to serve Christ and be his witnesses. The question is not whether you will be his witness, but how. It is our joy to welcome you to the fray.

THE REDISCOVERY OF A REFORMATIONAL MISSIONAL IDENTITY

The Reformed landscape is complicated but not without promising developments. One of the most promising is Reformed scholarship's rediscovery of Reformational complexity. Fifty years ago, Reformed Christians were simply referred to as Calvinists. It saved time. It was also very wrong. The Reformed faith is vastly deeper and wider than any single human's influence, however profound. In a sense, Western Christianity was never as simple as it seemed. The early Western church was never reducible to Augustine, though he was its greatest theologian. The Middle Ages was emphatically not all about Aquinas; nor was the Reformation distilled down to Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. We tend to treat church history as though it was a series of Marvel superhero comics; moving from one great man to another. We thrive on finding heroic men and villains, assuming that our own histories are products of their lives in a straight line from past to present.

Along with these oversimplifications come sweeping narratives that attempt to present the history of missions. Some are great works that help us see the vast scale of God's design for fallen humanity. They do, however, follow common presuppositions

concerning great periods such as the Reformation. We would be wise to identify these ideas as soon as possible because they influence how we see the Reformation itself

23 See for example Brian K. Blount. Revelation: A Commentary. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Richard Bauckham. The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation. (London: T&T Clark, 1993); Richard Bauckham. The Theology of the Book of Revelation. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993); Adela Yarbro Collins. The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation. (Eugene: Wipe and Stock, 2001); Stephen Pattemore. The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure and Exegesis. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004).

13. and how we now engage in missions, either as acts of continuity or discontinuity with it. Perhaps the greatest of modern historians of Christian mission, Andrew Walls, concluded that for most of the church's history, it had little interest in a missionary movement. When these events took place, they were not a concern for most of the church. "For most of the time that church was simply too busy about its own local concerns to take much notice of what was known as "the mission field." 24

This is drastically incomplete and misleading. Its own local concerns? The Protestant Reformation was a kind of world war of survival. It transcended the "local" in its first generation.

In one sense, Walls' conclusions seem unassailable. It is hard to see a commitment to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth during The Great Inquisition, the Babylonian Captivity of the Church or the Great Schism. We must, however, exercise caution here, because we, know it, or not, are stepping into a minefield. Most scholarly evaluations tend to downplay a missiologist's or anthropologist's theological traditions and convictions. Can Roman Catholic historians such as Carlos Eire produce outstanding books addressing the era of the Protestant Reformation? Of course they can. 25 Will their work reflect their religious identity? Of course they will. The same thing goes for all of us. Eire himself does an admirable job of describing how one's religious loyalties alter

historic narratives. The same thing applies to Eire too. In his view, the Roman Counter-Reformation is a Catholic Reformation. He addresses why Roman Catholics spearheaded foreign missions but not Protestants. His reasons are sensible but entirely incomplete. I am not suggesting that inherent bias makes history untrustworthy. It is simply to acknowledge that missionary history reflects its authors and their own beliefs and biases. A historian's religious traditions, academic disciplines, and personal experiences should never be overlooked. Missionary historical narratives that describe the early modern period (ca. 1450-1750), the period that includes the Protestant Reformation just prior to the Age of Missions, without addressing the Reformed or Protestant experience with persecution, evangelism, church planting, and missions missions, are, by definition, incomplete.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

I write this work as a Reformed minister, missionary and theologian. This identity frames my thoughts and efforts. I conclude on the basis of my understanding and experience that any modern mission enterprise that attempts to be coherently Reformed must choose which master it will serve. The choices are represented by the vertical and horizontal axes that we have described.

A further word of explanation. The mechanism that Reformed Christianity employed in understanding the mission of the church was the theological engagement of Holy Scripture by and within the visible church. In other words, there has always been a strict

24 Andrew F. Walls. The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002.

25 Carlos M.N. Eire. Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650. New Haven: Yale University, 2016.

continuity between the formal church and the mission of God. That mission flows from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, down to the church he created as his image, his witness of life to the world. The reliable guide that carries the mission map of Scripture is the biblical, creedal, confessional church.

There are other guides offering their services, ultimately not in support of the churchly guide but as a replacement for him. “Peter Berger, the modern American sociologist, claims that sociology “is now the name of the scientific and humanist critique of religion, the fiery brook through which contemporary theology must pass.” Drawing out what was always tacitly present in sociology, this definition transforms the sociology of religions into the sociological critique of religions.” 26

In a way, the shift in missions from the vertical to the horizontal was also aided by the useful insights of anthropologically-informed missiologists such as Andrew Walls and David Bosch who carefully show the heavy-handed presence of Western culture in order to separate the biblical seed from its cultural husk. 27 They made valid points, to a point. When Western missionaries insisted on the exclusive truth of the Bible, it was not simply a Western gesture. Practices such as ordination, elders, deacons, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church itself are not essentially Western cultural baggage. They are essentially biblical and that makes them essential.

The problem that Scholars such as Augusto Del Noce 28 , Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, John Milbank 29 and Brendan Sammon illustrate is that contemporary social science no longer restricts itself to its 19th century role as a modernist tool for describing religious phenomena. It has become the definer of religion not simply its describer. It also becomes religion’s missional guide. It has its own map or it reads and interprets the map it is given. We choose to believe what it tells us in terms of what mission is, who

does it, how it is carried out, how we know when we are faithful (read successful), and crucially, in our modern world, who has the power of oversight.

Ephesians presents a radically different narrative of what God's mission is and the evangelical, Reformed church presents a relatively reliable interpretation and guide. The reason it is reliable is because it does not originate its own authority or base it on a fiction such as objective human judgment of divine intent. It has delegated authority and that authority from God shifts its focus from the horizontal to the vertical. When John on Patmos sat immersed in the contemporary reality of Roman and Rabbinic persecution in First Century Asia Minor as the last living apostle of Christ himself, God transformed his

26 Quoted in Brendan Thomas Sammon. "The End of the Sociological Critique of Religion".
Religion and the Polis Conference. (2008).

27 See for example, David J. Bosch. Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991; Andrew F. Walls. The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002); Andrew F. Walls. The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith. (London: T&T International, 1996).

28 Augusto del Noce. The Crisis of Modernity. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 2014).

29 John Milbank. Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

15. perspective from the reality of day-to-day suffering to viewing the present and future from God's vertical and eternal understanding, from the throne room of God (Rev 4:1ff). The vertical plane is our lifeline. The contemporary Western church is battered and submissive to the power centers of modernism. We settle for too little because our guides cannot take us all the way home. We settle for human flourishing or feeling better about ourselves because we have talked ourselves into believing someone's "damned statistics". I am not saying that we have to discard every kind of knowledge

gained in the modern era. I am not a theological Luddite. What I am saying is in line with John Milbank's caution concerning the relationship between social science and theology. His problem is that these are two different disciplines with two separate domains. He is careful to say that theology must not posture itself as competing with social science by sporting a supposed "Christian sociology". 30 He counters by saying that Christianity indeed defines people and culture. In other words, what the Bible says about "religion" is definitive. It cannot therefore yield to social science where definition is involved.

"In this fashion a gigantic claim to be able to read, criticize, say what is going on in other human societies, is absolutely integral to the Christian church, which itself claims to exhibit the exemplary form of human community". He concludes by saying that since understanding, interpreting and judging culture, regardless of its religious affiliations or origins is part of what it means to be the church, allowing other "discourses" such as social science to assume the role of defining cultures rather than simply describing them, and going further to define who they are in God's understanding and commend better ways for entering into a happy relationship with him, goes far beyond the scope of social science or as a theology driven(not simply informed) by it. 31 Ultimately, Milbank is saying that only God defines his creation. That places Scripture back in the driver's seat. Therefore, we must return to the vertical fork that follows God's lead home.

IMPLICATIONS

What would it mean for Reformed evangelicals to embrace the vertical dimension that proclaims God's mission? There are many things. Let me mention a few.
Missions must reengage with the mission of God by embracing the Trinitarian reality of mission as defining what it does. It has been my and others' personal experience working on church plants and evangelism on five continents that the explicit

understanding of the Trinity, and still less, its application to the world of discipleship is more than deficient. People new to biblical Christianity are commonly not clearly taught the Trinitarian foundation of their faith. Those being taught are often not taught well because their teachers often do not know that theology any better than their students. The Trinity, its clear biblical understanding, and embrace, must be a priority.
The confessional church must drive the theology that underpins the work in the field. In an effort to divest missions of its Western cultural garb, we have thrown out the baby with the bath water. Dynamic equivalent theological contextualization, Insider Bible
30 Milbank 381.
31 Milbank 388.
16. translations, and other missiological approaches must be critiqued clearly and correct where they deviate from the church's creedal and confessional standards. I realize that my words are targeting only a portion of the church, but it is the portion that can clearly address its failings and should.

Therefore, church's must revisit their relations with parachurch organizations so that these organizations fall in practical ways under the oversight of biblical, ecclesial bodies. Along with this, denominational mission organizations must have more robust oversight by their denominational courts. Beyond that, denominational mission bodies must not second their people to organizations with which they theological disagree. In other words, if your denominational board would not condone particular missiology, it must send people to organizations that violate your practices. That may sound sensible but it is violated routinely.

Denominations should carefully review how well their members and organizations align their mission practice with their core theology. There seems to be a strange gap that enables missions to escape a certain kind of theological scrutiny. Missiological texts abound that explore minute

differences in anthropological interaction with biblical texts for the sake of advancing the missions agenda.

Missionaries and missiologists need to revisit the measures of merit they routinely use to measure success in the field. If the church's mission is truly driven by the vertical dimension of God himself, is that compatible with the approaches that are expressions of the church growth movement? This implies careful reconsideration of pragmatic Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT), Miraculous Movements to Christ (Jerry Trousdale), Disciple Making Movements (DMM) and many other approaches. Again, my words only apply to Reformed, confessional churches because they should be driven to practice approaches compatible with their core, detailed theology.

NOTES

Contrast between foci in missions: anthropological center focusing on the translatability of religious forms between cultures and a now and not yet theological focus that always considers a cosmic perspective that interprets human interaction in terms of spiritual warfare.

Centrality of the church wed to the Trinity in Christ vs locating Jesus within culture and religions.