

# **Biblical Insights for Mission in a New Global Context**

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The title of this conference is: **Mission...A Journey of Hope**. This is a wonderful title. Very uplifting. Very challenging. But what does it mean to you? Let's reflect for a moment on the two words that define mission. What do you think of when you hear the word 'hope'? Do you hope for something – like hoping for victory? Or do you hope in something or someone – like trusting that the technician knows what to do with your unresponsive computer? In the first type of hope, there is usually something definite for which you hope. In the second, acknowledging your own limitations, you place your trust in the abilities of another who can accomplish a task that was beyond you. The hope of which this conference speaks is more like the second kind of hope. It is more than hoping for something. Rather, it is hope or trust in God. As the organizers of the conference have stated: "It is hope that is not based on human optimism but in the faithfulness of God who continues to invite us to participate in God's mission."

This brings us to the second important word in the conference's title – 'journey.' This is a very popular word in Christian spirituality today. In such contexts, the word 'journey' is usually employed as a metaphor, because most of us who are relatively settled in ministry are not really on a journey. That is, of course, unless you are thinking of us hurtling out into space at an incredible rate of speed, as astrophysicists tell us is actually the case. The metaphor 'journey' is probably biblical in origin, reflecting the

journey of Abram from his home in Haran to the land that God will give him, the much later journey of the descendants of Jacob from bondage in Egypt to the land of promise, the still later journey of the Israelites from exile in Babylon back to their homeland. This metaphor 'journey' takes on a slightly different dimension of meaning when Jesus sends his disciples out to continue the mission that he himself had received from the one he called Father. Each of these biblical instances shows that journey is more than a simple trip. In each case, it is a response to an initiative from God to accomplish something for the broader society. In each case, those on the journey could not trust in their own ability to succeed, for they were not given a clearly sketched map or set of directions. Instead, being sent on an unknown journey, they had hope in God.

We too have been called by God to accomplish something for the broader society. We too have been sent without a clearly sketched map or set of directions. For us too, hope is the disposition of mind and heart that is necessary to participate in the Mission of God.

### ***The Mission of God***

Just what is this mission of God? The great missiologist David Bosch defined it in this way: "The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* is God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world..."<sup>1</sup>

The implications of this understanding of mission are profound and far-reaching. It places our mission squarely within the context of the activity of God, rather than placing the action of God initially within the context of the activity of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 390.

Furthermore, it means that the church holds the *missio Dei* in trust as its guardian and overseer; the church is not its originator or proprietor. This perspective requires the church's constant openness to the movements of the Spirit of God, whose role it is "to carry on inwardly [Jesus'] saving work and prompt the Church to spread out" (*Ad Gentes* 4). Openness to the mysterious activity of the Spirit is essential on this journey of hope, since we do not have a clearly sketched map or set of directions.

Our understanding of the *missio Dei* has developed since David Bosch wrote his insightful book. In the Introduction of a recently published work entitled *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, Christopher J. H. Wright provides a contemporary definition of *missio Dei*. He writes: "Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our 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."<sup>2</sup> That the initiative is God's is not new to us, nor are we unfamiliar with the concept of redemption. However, many people might not have thought of the mission of God, to which we have been called, as including all of creation. Let us not misunderstand this. Wright does not view creation simply as a means through which the redemption of human beings unfolds. Rather, he maintains that creation itself is redeemed. In other words, the mission of God is not limited to human salvation; it includes the "transfiguration of the whole of creation." This idea resonates with Paul's notion of redemption when he says:

For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 22-23.

of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; Rom 8:19-22

Wright is not unique in this broader understanding of the mission of God. Over the last twenty years, several official religious bodies have issued similar statements. In its report of the 1989 assembly entitled *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today* the World Council of Churches states:

Christians are called through *metanoia* to “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), to be agents of God’s mission in the world (Matt 28:19-20, Mark 16:15), to identify the signs of God’s presence, affirming and promoting them by witnessing to and cooperating with all people of good will, and to be co-workers with God (1 Cor 4:1) for the transfiguration of the whole of creation.

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) has no limits or barriers; it has been addressed to and has been at work within the entire human race and the whole of creation throughout history.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that whenever this WCC document refers to communion with God and with one another, it also includes communion with all of creation. For example:

Mission carries a holistic understanding: ...communion with God, communion with people, and communion with creation as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

At about this same time, the Roman Catholic Church addressed this issue. On January 1, 1990, Pope John Paul II issued his ‘World Day of Peace’ address entitled *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*. In it he states:

Christians, in *particular*, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990) #14

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, ‘Introduction’ 7a.

In 1991, the Bishops of the United States issued *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*. They noted the undeniable connection between the degradation of aspects of the natural world with social issues such as world poverty and the exploitation of vulnerable racial and ethnic groups. They further emphasized “a God-centered and sacramental view of the universe, which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth.”<sup>6</sup> In their 1999 statement *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, they insist that “[c]are for the earth...is a requirement of our faith.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, over the past three decades, several episcopal groups in North America have issued statements that address ecological concerns of their respective regions.<sup>8</sup>

Statements such as these show us that the mission of God, the mission to which each of us has been called, is broader than merely the betterment of human beings and the salvation of their souls. As stated above, it is concerned with the “transfiguration of the whole creation.”<sup>9</sup> Is this a radical shift in understanding mission? Perhaps, but it is not the first time we have had to shift our understanding of mission. A similar shift occurred at the time of the Second Vatican Council. Before the Council, the primary goals of mission were the implantation of the Church and the salvation of souls.

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<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*. (Vatican, 1990) #15.

<sup>6</sup> National Council of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1992) II,B.

<sup>7</sup> National Council of Catholic Bishops, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1999) 3, #9.

<sup>8</sup> *The Land is Home to Me*, Appalachia, 1975; *Strangers and Guests*, Heartland America, 1980; *A Public Declaration: To the Tribal Councils and Traditional; Spiritual Leaders of the Indian and Eskimo Peoples of the Pacific Northwest*, 1987; *At Home in the Web of Life*, Appalachia, 1995; *Reclaiming the Vocation to Care for the Earth*, New Mexico, 1998; *Celebrate Life: Care for Creation*, Alberta, Canada, 1998; *And God saw that it was Good*, Boston Province, 2000; *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good*, Columbia River International Bioregion, 2001; *A Catholic Perspective on Subsistence: Our Responsibility Towards Alaska's Bounty and Our Human Family*, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See n.3.

Furthermore, the prevailing theological point of view was Western. Influenced by the anthropological insights of many missionaries, the Council did not abandon these goals but began to view them through the lens of cultural diversity. As a result, both the theory and the practice of mission experienced a radical change.

A similar shift in understanding mission is taking place today. The betterment of human life and the redemption of human beings, the focus of much of our mission activity, is now enhanced by being placed within the broader context of the “transfiguration of the whole of creation.” In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II underscored the importance of such a shift in reinterpreting or further developing theological understandings when he spoke of the need “to make them more real, relevant and personal, distinguishing the valid elements in the tradition from false and erroneous ones, or from obsolete forms which can be usefully replaced by others more suited to the times.”<sup>10</sup>

If the mission of God includes all of creation, and if our duty toward nature is an essential part of our faith, what might this ecosensitive mission of God require of us today? In the document *Renewing the Earth*, the bishops of the United States link Catholic Social teaching with environmental ethic. They state:

The tradition of Catholic social teaching offers a developing and distinctive perspective on environmental issues. We believe that the following themes drawn from this tradition are integral dimensions of ecological responsibility:

- *a God-centered and sacramental view of the universe*, which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth;
- *a consistent respect for human life*, which extends to respect for all creation;
- *a worldview affirming the ethical significance of global interdependence and the common good*;

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*. (Vatican, 1991) #50.

- *an ethics of solidarity* promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community;
- an understanding of *the universal purpose of created things*, which requires equitable use of the earth's resources;
- *an option for the poor*, which gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world;
- a conception of *authentic development*, which offers a direction for progress that respects human dignity and the limits of material growth.<sup>11</sup>

This more expansive understanding of the mission of God does not consider ecojustice simply an addition to the well-established essentials of social justice. Rather, it sees it as the basis of all justice, for every other aspect of justice is somehow rooted in our perception of the created world of which we are a part. For example, world poverty results from the inequitable distribution of the goods of the earth; war is frequently waged over the use or control of natural resources; gender and racial biases result from derision of certain physical human characteristics; ethnic discrimination can be traced to a disdain for unfamiliar ways that groups live within their environment. Everything about us is embedded in and thus is an integral part of the natural world. Since the natural world is the matrix of our entire existence, this more comprehensive understanding of the mission of God calls us to place everything we do within the context of “the transfiguration of the whole of creation.” This does not necessarily mean that we must abandon our missional focus. However, it does suggest that we ask ourselves: How does what I am doing enhance all of creation?

This expanded understanding of the mission of God does not require that we choose between human needs and the needs of creation. *Renewing the Earth* states this strongly when it says that “Christian love forbids choosing between people and the

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<sup>11</sup> See n.6.

planet.”<sup>12</sup> Any dichotomous point of view forgets that humans are a part of creation; we are not separate from it. Both scientists and poets claim that we, like everything else in the universe, are recycled stardust. However, we are unique in that we are natural creation reflecting on itself. This expanded understanding of the mission of God requires that we reexamine our place in creation and the interdependent and collaborative relationships we have with other creatures. We must realize that all elements of an ecosystem or a life-system are important. For example, if we did not have certain insects, plants would not be pollinated, and we would not have food to eat. We are part of our world, dependent on it for our health and survival, and now it is dependent on us for its health and survival.

### **Over and against...or in harmony with?**

How are we to understand this interdependence, a kind of mutuality that must be considered if we are to be faithful to our call to work for the “transfiguration of all creation”? A careful reading of the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2 will provide biblical grounding for the ecological dimension of the mission of God as found in contemporary Catholic social teaching. It is there that we find the very first ‘mission’ given by God to human beings.

In 1967, Lynn White, a professor of medieval history, published an article in the journal *Science* entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.”<sup>13</sup> According to him, the Bible’s statement that human beings were given dominion over the earth and all living creatures on it established the trend toward exploitation that has resulted in the crisis we are now facing. We cannot deny that a literal reading of the first creation story

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<sup>12</sup> *Renewing the Earth*, IV, C.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* (March 1967) 1203-1207.

has often resulted in this point of view. But various aspects of these stories have always suggested that they were never really totally understood literally. For example, in the first account, light was created before there was any heavenly body that might have produced that light (Gen 1:3), and the second account describes a serpent that talks and may have originally walked upright. If we are to understand the meaning of these stories, we must try to discover how they would have been understood by the original audience.

In the first creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a), the fundamental meaning of the creation of the human couple and of their subsequent commissioning is contained in one expression - "image of God" - and in two verbs - "subdue" and "have dominion" (vv. 27-28). In the ancient world, people fashioned images of their gods. These images were not considered the gods themselves, but were simply representations of the power or authority of the gods. Aspects of this practice were not unlike the way we revere national flags. They are symbols of the jurisdiction of the power and authority of the nation. While it is true that in the ancient world images as symbols of authority often came to be valued as idols that actually possessed some form of divine power, this does not seem always to have been the original intent.

If this is how images of gods functioned in ancient times, then to say that the human couple was made in the image of God is to say that they represented where and how God exercised power and authority. Though they were not themselves divine, there was the great temptation to begin to think of themselves as divine. In fact, Genesis 3 tells us that this was precisely how that first couple sinned. The serpent argued: "God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and

you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad” (v.5). The serpent suggested something very attractive - that they could be like God – and the couple chooses to follow that attraction.

There is some other aspects of the metaphor ‘image of God’ that are pertinent here. In the ancient world, kings and queens were looked on as divine. They were thought to be either direct descendants of the gods or gods in human form. From this one can draw the conclusion that ‘image of god’ was a royal designation. Finally, “subdue” and “have dominion” is royal language. The monarchy was responsible for subduing dangerous chaotic situations and for exercising dominion over the realm.

Bringing all of these insights together, we can see how ancient Israel incorporated aspects of Near Eastern royal ideology into its own understanding of monarchy, yet reinterpreted these aspects to fit its own monotheistic faith. The monarchy did indeed have a special relationship with God; it did indeed represent God in a certain way. But it was not in any way divine. As images of God, Israelite royalty were ambassadors of the sovereignty of God and were commissioned to subdue or bring order into chaotic situations and to exercise dominion over all creatures of the earth. However, they were to do this remembering that “the earth is the LORD’s and all it holds” (Ps 24:1) and that all of creation was valuable because the creator saw that it was all “very good” (Gen 1:31).

When we read this passage today we discover that human beings are not granted a license to exploit the earth or tyrannize other living creatures, as a literal reading has sometimes claimed. Instead they were granted a mandate including

serious responsibility for the world of which we are a part and accountability to the creator of that world.

The second creation narrative (Gen 2:4b-25) also contains a double injunction, “serve” and “guard”. Here the man is made from the ground itself (v.7), the same material from which are made the trees (v.9) and the beasts of the field (v.19). Thus an intimate connection between human beings and the rest of natural creation is indicated. When the man is placed in the garden, he is told “to serve and guard it” (v.15). The Hebrew word often translated ‘till’ is from the same verb usually translated ‘serve.’ The second verb can also be translated ‘keep’ or ‘watch,’ hence the rendering ‘guard.’ However these verbs are translated, the meaning is the same, the man is responsible for the care of the garden.

Most likely this story originated from within an agricultural society, one that appreciated the close relationship between human beings and the land and its crops, as well as the animals that inhabit it. Like the first creation narrative, this account shows that human beings may in some way be a unique expression of the natural world, but they are still an intimate part of it. Furthermore, along with their uniqueness comes the responsibility to care for creation, not to exploit it. They have a God-given responsibility to see that it thrives.

Contemporary environmentalism has sensitized many people to our responsibility of stewardship of the natural world. They support their understanding of this responsibility in various ways. Most people appeal to our own human health and survival. It has become quite clear that we cannot exploit and impair the resources of the rest of the natural world as we are doing and hope to live hale and hearty lives and

bequeath a healthy world to future generations. As welcoming as this attitude of environmental responsibility might be, it still focuses primarily on human well-being and not on the well-being of the entire natural world for its own sake.

Other people share the environmental perspective stated in many of the recent church statements, namely, that care for the whole creation is a matter of justice. They are concerned with the inequity between those who amass material goods and those who live in abject poverty, with the oppressive use of power over others that often accompanies control of natural resources, and with the disastrous consequences of ecological devastation that we are passing on to our children and grandchildren. While these social justice issues are much broader than the self-interest concerns stated above, they still reveal an anthropocentric or human-centered focus with little concern for the entire created world.

Paul's metaphor of the body offers biblical grounding for another point of view, one that recognizes the uniqueness of human responsibility within the created world as well as the interdependence that exists between and among all creatures.

Now the body is not a single part, but many. If a foot should say, "Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body," it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. Or if an ear should say, "Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body," it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. 1 Cor 12:14-17

Though Paul is speaking of the Christian's individual participation in the body of Christ, the metaphor can be expanded to demonstrate how we human beings, like everything else in the world, are part of natural creation. We have no problem acknowledging the material character of other creatures. However, it seems to be difficult for some people to appreciate our commonality with the rest of physical creation. They forget that in fact,

we are made of the same material as are “the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth” (Gen 1:28). This connectedness in the web of life has long been recognized and celebrated by the Lakota people who pray: “Mitakuye Oyasin – For all my relatives.” We need not go out of our religious tradition to find praise of our membership with all of creation. In his ‘Canticle of the Sun,’ Francis of Assisi celebrates aspects to natural creation as his sister or brother.

Paul employs this body metaphor to make a second point

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you," nor again the head to the feet, "I do not need you." 1 Cor 12:21

Here, referring to the synergistic character of the human body, he emphasizes the interdependence that exists among the members, each member needs the other. In a similar manner, ecosystems function synergistically, each component contributing to the harmonious functioning of the whole while depending on every other component for its own enhancement and development.

If we join the insights gained from the employment of this body metaphor to the understanding of ‘image of God’ as explained earlier, we will see that though we exercise a degree of delegated authority over the rest of our world, we are really an intimate part of that world as it is a part of us. We will also have to admit what experience teaches us so well. That is, that while we may contribute to the development of that world, we are totally dependent on it for our own survival. Thus, we must learn to live in harmony with all aspects of nature, not over and against it.

### **A Journey of Hope**

One might wonder what all of this has to do with mission. A closer look at the list of imperatives found in *Renewing the Earth* shows that in many ways those of us committed to mission have indeed already incorporated aspects of these imperatives into our ministry, but is our perspective anthropocentric or bio- or geocentric?:

1). “a *God-centered and sacramental view of the universe*, which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth.” People are often overwhelmed by the grandeur and mystery of creation. However, do we cherish these experiences because they calm and enrich our spirits, or because they reveal traces of the divine to us?

2). “a consistent *respect for human life*, which extends to respect for all creation.” Many people agree that ‘pro-life’ means more than ‘anti-abortion.’ However, is our allegiance to life issues limited to matters of human life, or does it embrace the entire biotic community?

3). “a worldview affirming the ethical significance of *global interdependence and the common good*.” In many ways we are already committed to the ‘common good.’ However, is it the ‘common good’ of human society alone that concerns us, or the ‘common good’ of the entire world, realizing that if one aspect of this global body is threatened, the whole body is threatened?

4.) “*an ethics of solidarity* promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community.” We frequently join in solidarity with others in order to accomplish something good for society. However, does this solidarity promote human well-being at the expense of global well-being?

5). “an understanding of *the universal purpose of created things*, which requires equitable use of the earth's resources.” Our efforts to eliminate world poverty involve

commitment to a just distribution of the goods of the earth. However, do we maintain that such distribution requires more production so that others can enjoy these resources, or do we realize that, for the sake of the health and well-beings of creation, it might call for relinquishment of what we ourselves enjoy.

6.) “*an option for the poor*, which gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world.” The Latin American *Puebla Document’s* ‘preferential option for the poor’ has truly shaped our current understanding of mission. However, do we address the implications of that option exclusively from the perspective of the rights of people to possess material goods, or are we sensitive to the earth’s ability or inability to sustain more use?

7). “a conception of *authentic development*, which offers a direction for progress that respects human dignity and the limits of material growth.” Our concern for the welfare of others prompts us to ensure their participation in the benefits of industrial and technological progress. However, is such concern always motivated by genuine respect for human dignity, or does it sometimes flow from human greed and a disregard of the limits of the goods of the earth?

The new ecosensitive challenges to which we have been called do not necessarily require that we leave our established ministerial commitments, but they do demand that we view them within a different and broader context, and this might require that we search for new ways of accomplishing of ministerial goals. Most, if not all, of us will probably be overwhelmed by the shift in perspective that this expanded notion of *mission Dei* requires. However, it would do us well to view our missional endeavors as a journey, a journey that is a response to an initiative from God, a journey on which we

cannot simply trust in our own ability to succeed, for we have not been given a clearly sketched map or set of directions. Instead, having been sent into the unknown of new understanding and insights, we must trust that God will provide some kind of guidance. After all, it is God that we seek as we contemplate our membership and participation in the created world, a world that truly possesses a sacramental character, for it “discloses the Creator's presence by visible and tangible signs.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Renewing the Earth*, III. A.