



CHAPTER 1

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GLOBAL MISSION?

What in the world is “global mission” anyway? Perhaps you have heard this term before, and you may have thought it sounded a bit stuffy and academic. But is it really?

Mission is not just a religious word. Pay attention the next time you walk into a hospital, government building, or even many business establishments. Often you will see a mission statement prominently displayed. Not every organization remains guided by their mission statement. But in every sector of society, you will probably find that the most effective ones do. And, after all, what is a mission? You can find lots of textbook definitions for this word. But, in practical terms, a mission is simply the task that you have been given to accomplish. Every individual task or role within an organization, if designed properly, should contribute in some way to the completion of the collective mission of the entire body of people who are working together.

The Bible reveals to us that God is at work in human history, and he too has a mission—something that he intends to accomplish. Furthermore, he invites people to get involved by finding specific roles and performing specific tasks that contribute in various ways

to the fulfillment of his grand purpose in human history. And that is what this book is all about. I believe that God has a place for each and every one of us in His global mission.

But I don't expect you just to take my word for it. So, in the next several chapters, we will be sharing examples from the Bible, church history, and current trends that provide a solid basis for building our lives, our families, and our local churches around God's mission in the world.

However, in this chapter, we are going to start by defining some of the most common terms used when talking about global mission. Hopefully this will clear up some of the confusion that exists over what we actually mean (or should mean) when we use them. And, in clarifying what these words mean, you may already begin to see a clearer picture of what your involvement in God's global mission should look like.

Understanding Missions Vocabulary

Global missions and the mission of the church are so intertwined that sometimes it can seem like a big ball of yarn—it's difficult to tell where it starts, where it's going, and where it ends. And, in the process, we sometimes make a mess of it.

And yet, the primary purpose of this book is to help local churches and local Christians understand that we are indeed participating in the same mission of God—whether through the local church and in our community, through our personal work and vocations, or through various missions efforts around the world.

I think some of the confusion that often surrounds the concept of global mission may stem from the fact that we frequently hear certain words that come from the field of missiology (the study of missions), but not everyone means the same thing when they use those words. This can lead to areas of contradiction or inconsistency in how we try to understand and explain the mission of the church—and our place in it.

The purpose of this chapter is not to solve every debate, or to get in the last word on some hot topic in the world of missiology. This

book is not intended for that. Rather, it is intended to bring simplicity, clarity, and unity to our mission efforts for the glory of God, the edification of Christ's church around the world, and most of all, for the sake of those who are yet unreached with the good news of Christ and His kingdom. To that end, in this chapter we will be looking at some of the vocabulary of Christian mission. And I am going to offer you some discussion and explanation for each term that I think may help us to sort through this "ball of yarn" together.

I need to insert a caveat here. Even among outstanding evangelical missiologists and missionaries, not everyone agrees on the best way to define and use these terms. So don't be surprised if you have some questions of your own. That's good. Just take some time to think about it and discuss it with other mission-minded friends. Wrestle with it. Search the Scriptures. Listen to people who are up to their elbows in the work of missions. And see how you can refine your own understanding.

However, I do hope that the discussion of these terms will help you to gain enough simplicity and clarity to your theology of mission that it will result in greater levels of passion and participation in this vital task of the church—and of every Christian.

With that in mind, let's dive into the world—and the language—of Christian mission.

Biblical mission definitions can have a gigantic effect on how local churches will make disciples of the nations—or if "the nations" emphasis of Jesus' command will even be acknowledged and embraced.
—Denny Spitters & Matthew Ellison¹

Missio Dei

The term *Missio Dei* means "mission of God." It is used in reference to all that God is doing in the world around us. It also has reference to God's activity throughout salvation history, as revealed in the Old and New Testaments, and as may be seen in the history of global Christianity.

This is a helpful term if it is used rightly.

Unfortunately, in some circles it has been used to water down the evangelical focus and fervor of Christian missions by focusing primarily on humanitarian and social concerns to the neglect (or exclusion) of proclaiming the central message of the gospel, which is rooted in the biblical story of creation, sin, grace, redemption, and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

However, *Missio Dei* can be a helpful term if we use it to point to the big picture view of God's redemptive activity in the world. *Missio Dei* also helps us to remember that the mission of the church is not something for us to invent for ourselves, but rather, it has been entrusted to us by God himself. And as such, the mission belongs to him. Furthermore, *Missio Dei* reminds us that God is actively involved in all aspects of his creation—including the material world, cultures, societies, and all aspects of human life. Therefore, there is a valid (and vital) place in Christian mission for doing deeds of mercy, advocating for biblical justice and righteousness in cultures and societies, and promoting the *shalom* (wholeness and well-being) of humans everywhere.

As evangelical Christians, we also recognize that at the heart of God's mission is his desire to redeem and reconcile all things to himself by bringing them under the lordship of Jesus Christ. And this can only happen as people come to hear and believe the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is one of the major themes that is woven throughout the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The term is used to speak broadly of His kingship and authority over everything. He is not just the Creator; He is also the King. I have written elsewhere about this as follows:

The kingdom of God refers to His righteous rulership over all things—both in heaven and on earth. And wherever God's will is being done—even in the most ordinary of things—there we see His kingdom breaking through. And it is a glorious kingdom, because

it is the visible expression of His holy character—His glory.

In Matthew 4:8, we see Satan tempting Jesus, offering to give Him the glory of the kingdoms of this world. But Jesus rejected it in favor of a kingdom that is “not from this world” (John 18:36 GNT) nor built by human hands (Dan. 2:44–45). It is a kingdom which His Father is giving to Him (Eph. 1:22; Heb. 2:7–8), and which He also will hand over to His Father in its future consummation (1 Cor. 15:24).

But in the present time, we must live with the tension that this world still “lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19) and “we do not yet see everything in subjection to [Christ]” (Heb. 2:8c). But the time is coming when Christ will vanquish all His enemies (1 Cor. 15:25) and bring about “new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will be at home” (2 Pet. 3:13 GNT). All of this is revealed to us in Christ, through the proclamation of the gospel.²

However, although we do not yet see the kingdom of God as it will one day appear when Christ returns, we are called to earnestly pray, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10 NKJV). And this prayer also informs us as to what is the ultimate goal of God's mission—to restore all things under the righteous reign of God. This is the picture we see so beautifully depicted in the final chapters of the book of Revelation. And knowing that this is where God is moving all of human history should cause us to align every aspect of our lives, our families, and our churches. In other words, the church's mission must ultimately be aligned with this vision of the kingdom of God on earth.

And, as we do this, we will have the privilege of seeing God's kingdom already beginning to break through the darkness of the sin, brokenness, suffering, and decay that is all around us in this present world. As Craig Ott puts it, “Where the powers of evil and

consequences of sin are being overturned, the kingdom is already in our midst.”³

Therefore, the kingdom of God is an important biblical term for us to understand, because it paints a picture for us of the *vision* that drives God’s *mission* in the world. Without a clear grasp of this biblical theme of God’s kingdom, and all that it implies, we probably will misunderstand His mission in the world, and therefore, will misunderstand what is the mission that He has entrusted to the church, which is the next term that we will discuss below.

Mission

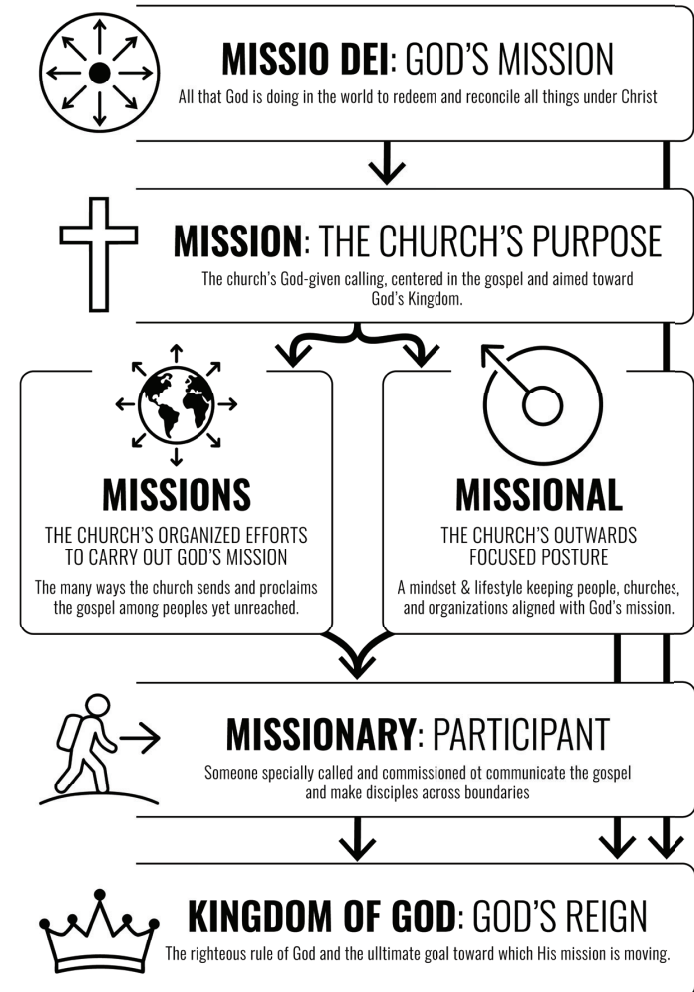
The term *mission* (singular) is used broadly, even in secular usage, to refer to the purpose for which an organization or company exists. This is why you will often see a mission statement posted on the wall in a hospital, government agency, business, or other organization. It serves to ensure that all of the various roles and functions within the organization are being channeled toward their central purpose for existence. Similarly, we will be using the term *mission* in this course to refer to the purpose for which the church (universal and local) exists.

Moreau, Corwin, and McGee define *mission* as “everything the church is doing that points toward the kingdom of God.”⁴ This definition of mission has been adopted by many writers. And understandably so, because the church indeed is called by God to live out the implications of the gospel in all sectors of society.

However, others have cautioned that broadening the definition of mission too much may, in effect, dilute the meaning of Christian mission until it no longer means anything other than some bland form of “do-good-ism.” As Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison warn us:

In fact, if everything is missions, then the goal of the Great Commission might not be to make steady headway in reaching more nations, tribes, and tongues, but to win as many people to Jesus as possible. This may explain why the overwhelming majority of the Church’s resources are spent at home and not on extending the gospel into new frontiers.⁵

– UNDERSTANDING KEY TERMS –



I think this is a valid concern, and one that we should take seriously when we consider the best ways to define and communicate the mission of the church.

But how do we resolve it? There is no end to the discussions that have unfolded in missiological writings surrounding this topic. But I will do my best to offer a simple, straightforward answer to the question.

First, I believe we must recognize that there is a difference between the *essence* of the gospel and the *implications* of the gospel.

The *essence* of the gospel centers in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is here that we see what salvation history was flowing into. And it is also here that we clearly see what Christian mission must flow out from. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, joined himself to humanity and to the entire creation through his incarnation. He lived a perfect, sinless life. He suffered and died on a cross for us, thus making it possible for our old sinful life to be crucified and buried with him. He rose again on the third day, making it possible for us to live a new kind of life—one that is created in Him. Through faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit places us in Christ—joins us to Him—and also brings the very life of Christ to live within us. In this way He enables us to follow Christ and to become His hands, His feet, His voice—reaching out with love and mercy to a lost and dying world. Without this basic *essence* of the gospel, our message has no power to transform anyone or anything!

The *implications* of the gospel flow out of its essence. *Because* Jesus died and rose again for us, and *because*, through faith in him, we now live by him and for him—we have become God's ambassadors in the world (2 Cor. 5:20). And as his ambassadors, God leads each of us into various paths of service—all of which are intended to help announce the good news of Christ and of the kingdom that He is bringing to this world. These gospel implications can include a wide variety of missional activities, such as feeding the hungry, advocating for those who are weak and vulnerable in our society, helping addicts to find freedom, or even running a business with a missional focus. The list here could go on and on.

If these activities are truly (and intentionally) flowing out of our faith in Christ and what He has accomplished on behalf of the world, then they will result in the furtherance of both the church's mission and the advancement of God's kingdom on earth. However, if the essence of the gospel does not form the core of our missional activities, it will devolve into what has sometimes been referred to as purely a social gospel that is void of the life-transforming power of Christ.

To be clear, we should be careful to live out *both* the essence *and* the implications of the gospel. And the way we explain and articulate the mission of the church should reflect this understanding. Our vision is to see God's kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven (implications of the gospel). And we cannot pray to this end without also engaging the world in ways that work toward that vision in whatever ways we possibly can. But the core mission of the church must begin with, and prioritize, the core essence of the gospel—the message that we are called and commissioned to proclaim.

Missions

The term “missions” (plural) has received a lot of discussion. Some people may prefer to only use the singular form of this word, arguing that since we all participate in one and the same mission, we should therefore refrain from speaking of missions in the plural. However, while it is true that there is one unifying mission of the church, the ways in which we participate in that mission are many. Furthermore, while the mission of the church is singular in focus, it is also supported by many functions and in many facets. And that mission is carried out in many different places and cultures around the world. This is why we also use the term *missions* (plural) to refer to the various ways in which the church sends out missionaries and engages in cross-cultural gospel proclamation for the sake of peoples who are yet unreached. And, yes, there probably is some overlap in our usage of both words (“mission” and “missions”). So, don't overthink it! Just understand that there are some valid reasons for using both.

Missional

The term “missional” has emerged in more recent years as a way of describing a person, church, or organization as being oriented toward the fulfillment of their mission rather than self-focused or inwardly focused. Thus, the term missional is best used in reference to the posture and focus of the church (and of individuals and families too). A missional mindset leads to missional priorities and a missional lifestyle. Missional churches and organizations are constantly evaluating themselves to make sure that the ways in which they disciple, train, send, and steward people and resources are aligned with God’s global mission (as well as their personal or institutional mission). Probably the best way to evaluate whether you, your family, your church, or your organization is “missional” is to ask yourself—Do we have systems, structures, priorities, and practices in place to ensure that everything we do is oriented around our God-given mission? That is not the same thing as just having a mission statement or a vision statement. It means you are actually holding yourself accountable, evaluating yourself, re-adjusting priorities and plans, and most importantly, doing stuff that moves God’s mission forward.

Missionary

The term “missionary” has been commonly used to refer to Christians who engage in carrying out the mission of the church in cross-cultural settings. The term missionary comes from the Latin word *missio* which carries the idea of “sending” someone for a particular task or purpose. Although different words are used, this idea finds its roots in Scripture, where God is described as one who is both sending and (in some cases) being sent into the world. This same idea is further seen in the New Testament (Greek) word for apostle (*apostello*), which also means someone who has been sent.

There is a sense in which the whole church exists as a sent people—sent by God into the world to participate in His redemptive mission. As Craig Ott writes, “The church is indeed God’s missionary people, a sent people, as expressed in Jesus’s words to his disciples, ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you’ (John 20:21).”⁷

In this sense of the word, we might well agree with Brian D. McLaren when he says that “every Christian is a missionary and every place is a mission field.”⁸

However, while the term “missionary” does have this broader connotation, it has been commonly used in the context of the North American church (and some other contexts) with reference to people who are specially called by God and commissioned by the church to share the gospel cross-culturally.

Some confusion has arisen here, due to the broadening usage of this word. I frequently hear well-meaning people say with great confidence that “everyone is called to be a missionary.” And, of course, we all understand what is meant by these kinds of statements. Every Christian is indeed called to engage in God’s redemptive mission. That’s what this entire book is about! However—and I’m begging you to hear me out on this—I think it is a mistake to call every Christian a missionary.

Every Christian is indeed called to participate in God’s global mission. But a *missionary* is a unique calling—a special task. And if we tell every Christian that they are called to be missionaries, I’m afraid that the unintended consequence of this kind of rhetoric is that *it diminishes the urgent need for more people to hear and answer God’s call to the specific task of communicating the gospel in cross-cultural contexts—and most especially for the sake of those who are yet unreached*. It’s already hard enough to recruit missionaries. And I am concerned that broadening the definition of this word only makes that task even more difficult.

Let’s test this concept for consistency in other aspects of the church:

- The Bible teaches that all Christians should care for one another (1 Cor. 12:12–27; Gal. 5:13; 6:2), but are all Christians called to be pastors (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Acts 20:17, 28)?
- The Bible teaches that all Christians are called to share the gospel with unbelievers (Acts 1:8), but are all Christians called to be evangelists (Eph. 4:11–12; 2 Tim. 4:5; Acts 8:5–40; Acts 21:8)?

- The Bible teaches that all Christians should serve one another (1 Peter 4:10; Gal. 6:2), but are all Christians called to fulfill the office and responsibilities of a deacon (Acts 6:1–6; 1 Tim. 3:8–13)?
- The Bible teaches that all Christians should proclaim the Word of God (Ps. 96:3), but does that mean that everyone is called to be a preacher (2 Tim. 4:2)?
- The Bible teaches that all Christians should be good stewards of the resources entrusted to them (1 Cor. 4:2), but does that mean that every Christian is a leader or administrator (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28)?

Let's test this idea in other contexts outside the church:

- Everyone has a responsibility to protect and defend their country; but how do you think a member of the military (or a veteran) would feel, if someone were to say, "Well, really, we all are soldiers for this country"?
- Everyone should take responsibility for their own health by reading and making informed decisions that they believe are in the best interest of their physical well-being; but what would you think if you heard someone say, "Well, really, we all are doctors and nurses"?
- Everyone has a responsibility to teach and mentor others according to their capacity and within the scope of their particular life situation; but does that mean that we should say, "Well, really, everyone is an educator"?
- I like to putter around in my spare time, cut a few boards, and build something. But I would never claim to be a builder. I enjoy sketching out the plans for those projects, when necessary. But I would never claim to be an architect. One time, with a little help from some guy on YouTube, I managed to adjust the carburetor on my weed eater (and felt rather proud of myself). But I certainly would not claim to be an ASE-certified mechanic.

I do not mean to belabor this point. But I do want to be clear. The gifts and calling to be a missionary are just as unique as any other gifting and calling that the Holy Spirit gives to the church (Acts 13:2).

And the work of a missionary requires just as much training and skills as any number of other skilled trades or professions. This remains true, even though there are plenty of missionaries who have been sent out without the training and skills that should have been required. So, while there still may be a wide variety of missionaries and missionary roles, I think we need to carefully preserve the uniqueness of this calling and title within the church.

Greg Wilton expressed this so well when he wrote, "Am I really a missionary? Should that also be said of us? Are we all missionaries? My direct and simple answer to this question is 'no.' . . . *The word is too precious and vital to what God in his sovereign plan intends to do throughout the world.*"⁹

Matt Rhodes states, "The missionary's task . . . is to go in Christ's authority as ambassadors of his kingdom to communicate his message to the nations."¹⁰ This task requires men and women to leave behind their homeland with its native familiarity and comforts, and start at ground zero in a new culture, with new surroundings, learning a new language, and developing new relationships. It is indeed a unique kind of role. And not everyone is called or designed to do it. But for those who are—we need a word by which to identify them and their calling. Our word for that is *missionary*. If you are referring to something else—I think you should find some other word.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed the importance of understanding the vocabulary of missions. Although there are many important words to learn and understand in the study of missions, we have focused on six of the most foundational terms—*Missio Dei* (mission of God), kingdom of God, mission, missions, missional, and missionary.

As you have read through the discussion of these terms, you may have found yourself asking further questions about them. If so, then that's a good thing! You may want to discuss them further with other mission-minded friends. Better yet, talk with a missionary about them.

Also, if you find yourself in the role of a pastor or leader within your church, or serving on a missions committee, then these are

questions that you really need to think about and discuss with your fellow leaders. Definitions matter. And we need to be as clear and consistent as possible in how we communicate our vision for reaching the unreached with the gospel.

Discussion

1. The author distinguishes between the “essence of the gospel” and the “implications of the gospel.” In your own words, what is the difference between the two, and why does the author believe both matter for the mission of the church?
2. The author warns (in essence) that if *everything* is missions, then *nothing* is missions. Do you agree with this concern? How do you think a local church should balance broad social engagement with a focused priority on cross-cultural gospel proclamation—especially for the sake of those who remain unreached?
3. The author argues that not every Christian should be called a “missionary,” even though every Christian is called to participate in God’s global mission. Do you find this distinction helpful or overly technical? How might it change the way your church talks about missions?
4. How does the concept of the *Missio Dei*—the idea that the mission belongs to God first—change the way you think about your own role in global mission? Does it feel freeing, challenging, or both?
5. The term “missional” describes a posture of outward focus rather than self-focus. Using the author’s definition, how would you evaluate your own life, family, or church. Are they genuinely missional? What would need to change in order to become more missional?

6. The kingdom of God is described as both a present reality and a future hope. How does holding that tension shape the way Christians should engage with suffering, injustice, and brokenness in the world today?

CHAPTER 1 STUDY GUIDE

What in the World is Global Mission?

Chapter Overview

This chapter lays the vocabulary foundation for the entire book. Before diving into missions involvement, Christians must understand what terms like *Missio Dei*, mission, missions, missional, and missionary actually mean—and why these distinctions matter.

Key Terms to Know

Missio Dei: The mission of God—all that God is doing in the world to redeem and restore.

Mission: The overarching task and calling of the church in the world.

Missions: The specific, cross-cultural activities that advance God's mission.

Missional: A posture of outward focus; orienting your life around God's redemptive purposes.

Missionary: Someone specially called and sent by the church to share the gospel cross-culturally.

Kingdom of God: God's righteous rulership over all things—both present reality and future hope.

PAIR ACTIVITY: Term in Your Own Words (10 minutes)

With a partner, take turns explaining each of the following terms in your own words—as if you were explaining it to a friend who has never been to church. Then, together, discuss where you have heard these terms used incorrectly.

- What is the difference between 'mission' and 'missions'?

- Can someone be a 'missionary' without leaving their hometown? Why or why not?
- What does it mean for a church—not just a person—to be 'missional'?

GROUP ACTIVITY: Mission Statement Analysis (15 minutes)

Look up the mission statements of 2–3 churches, hospitals, or businesses (use your phones if needed). As a group, answer these questions:

- Which statements reflect an outward focus? Which seem inward?
- Does your own church's mission statement align with what this chapter calls the *Missio Dei*?
- Draft a one-sentence 'missional statement' for your own household or small group.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

- When you hear the word 'missionary', what image comes to mind? How has this chapter challenged or expanded that image?
- On a scale of 1–10, how 'missional' would you say your life currently is? What would a 9 or 10 look like?
- If the kingdom of God is both here now and still coming, what is one practical thing you could do this week to reflect that kingdom in your daily life?