

“Communication Breakdown: Speaking the Language  
of Mission while Using Different Dictionaries”

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It is through language that abstract concepts such as mission and missions are shared and understood across time. However, the Church should always be cautious with her use of language. The terms and phrases used reflects belief, theology, and practice. If Jesus is defined as less than divine, then theological problems arise. If the church is understood as a building and not the people of God, then a great deal of ecclesiastical problems develops over time. Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers write “Language communicates what members of a society need to know. It is a major tool of the social group, effecting loyalties based on past, present, or future events and relationships.”<sup>2</sup>

Michael W. Stroope is correct when he notes the discussion of language is not a useless exercise. We must recognize that “mission language forms particular ideals and notions that shape identity and purpose, that determines why and how we act.”<sup>3</sup> A failure to communicate clearly, and biblically, when it comes to the apostolic work of the Church reveals a significant problem in stewarding well the Lord’s commission. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert summarize the problem at hand:

Because *mission* is not a biblical word like *covenant* or *justification* or *gospel*, determining its meaning for believers is particularly difficult. We could do a study of the word *gospel* and come to some pretty firm biblical conclusions about “What is the Gospel?”. . . But *mission* is a bit trickier.<sup>4</sup>

The Church uses the modern language of mission, but is often inconsistent with her definitions. The breakdown in the language of mission has resulted in a breakdown in communication. David J. Bosch observed this problem in the early 1980s:

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<sup>2</sup>Stepehn A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 88.

<sup>3</sup>Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), xiii.

<sup>4</sup>Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 17.

It is a commonplace that we are today experiencing a crisis in the church's understanding of mission. And it is ironic that this crisis is developing in a period when the word "mission" is being used more than ever before—albeit with many different meanings. We have reached a state at which almost anybody using the concept of mission has to explain how it is understood if serious confusion is to be avoided.<sup>5</sup>

Lest we believe such confusion was relegated to the end of the twentieth century, Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison note this challenge is present today. They write:

[W]e are concerned that an uncritical use of words, and in particular a lack of shared definition for the words mission, missions, missionary, and missional, has led to a distortion of Jesus' biblical mandate, ushered in an everything-is-missions paradigm, and moved missions from the initiation and oversight of local churches to make it the domain of individual believers responding to individualized callings.<sup>6</sup>

Eckhard J. Schnabel has challenged the academic community on their unclear discussions related to this topic. He writes, "Many exegetical studies on missions fail to indicate which notion of mission is used or presupposed."<sup>7</sup> If there is a lack of clarity in the academy, then confusion will exist in local churches and on the field. Consider that even the most traditional and conservative evangelical pastors will announce on Sunday the youth choir's "missions trip" will take place next year as they go to Appalachia to sing in the worship services of another church, and the "men on mission" will be doing "missions" in Honduras this summer by installing a roof on a school. But today they are to pray for the "missionaries" planting churches in the Middle East among an unreached people. The Church is involved in many tasks that reflect the kingdom ethic, but her apostolic labors have been relegated to a corner of a room surrounded with a multitude of good and noble activities. She now engages in missions even if the gospel is never shared.

This paper will describe the present linguistic problem, give a brief history of modern mission language and its evolution, and suggest a way forward that involves answering the following questions: *"Is there a biblical terminology and emphasis when it comes to the Church's identity and Great Commission activities in the world and how should such understanding be communicated today?"*

### **The Problem with the Language of Mission**

In 1961, Gerald H. Anderson edited possibly the first comprehensive work on the topic of mission theology. In his introduction he made a statement that still echoes into this century.

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<sup>5</sup>David J. Bosch, "Theological Education in Missionary Perspective," *Missiology* 10 #1 (January 1982): 13 full pg 13-34.

<sup>6</sup>Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison, *When Everything is Missions* (n.p.: BottomLine Media, 2017), 22-23.

<sup>7</sup>Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press and Leicester, England: Apollos, 2004), 11.

The “fundamental task,” he wrote, “of the missionary enterprise today is to clarify the nature and meaning of its being. This must be done in the realm of theological thought, not only to increase effectiveness in presenting the Gospel to the world, but also to give Christians a deeper understanding of what their task *is* in the world.”<sup>8</sup> It was no wonder Anderson made this claim. Two years prior, Stephen Neill published *Creative Tension* in which he made the infamous statement: “When everything is mission, nothing is mission.”<sup>9</sup> His point was that once the Church believes everything she does is mission, then the apostolic work of the Church is neglected.

When terms are extrabiblical, it is difficult to assign them an agreed upon meaning.<sup>10</sup> This becomes even more problematic whenever a robust exegetical theology is not attached to such terminology. The result is that the definitions for *mission*, *missions*, and *missionaries* will not remain constant but change based on contemporary realities and readers’ perspectives. Everything becomes mission—or missions—because the language lacks a biblical origin and justification. Missions becomes evangelism and fighting for social justice. Missions becomes church planting among an unreached people and helping a village dig a well. Since the Scriptures do not contain the word missions, and the Scriptures are clear that the Church *is* to be involved in evangelism, social justice, planting churches, and caring for the poor, then each of these may be labeled missions and reflect God’s mission in the world. *What was missions yesterday is not missions today, and may be radically different tomorrow.*

### **Are History and Context King?**

Whenever the Church lacks exegetical support for her theology, then extrabiblical nomenclature can result in concepts with a variety of meanings. Since there is no biblical word for *mission*, *missions*, or *missionary* who is to say any definition is more accurate than another one?<sup>11</sup> Church cultures and contexts become most important as defining factors of mission. Given this relativistic understanding, Bosch writes that “mission remains undefinable; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections. The most we can hope for is to formulate some *approximations* of what mission is all about.”<sup>12</sup> Stroope describes *mission* as a “broad river in which there is space for many usages and meanings” and is a term “quite elastic in its meaning.”<sup>13</sup> Such fluidity exists partially due to meaning and activity being socially constructed in the moment or developed into a paradigm across an epoch.

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<sup>8</sup>Gerald H. Anderson, “The Theology of Mission among Protestants in the Twentieth Century,” in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (Nashville, TN and New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1961), 4.

<sup>9</sup>Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1959), 81.

<sup>10</sup>Even with biblical words, scholars frequently disagree over definitions.

<sup>11</sup>Of course, some will say there is no biblical word *Trinity* either. However, a major difference is that the Church has a definitive understanding of the Trinity. Any definition that differs from this orthodox statement is considered heterodoxy. The Church has no equivalent standard for *missions* or *missionary*.

<sup>12</sup>David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 9.

<sup>13</sup>Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2017), 4.

According to Bosch, mission evolves with the contextual factors of the present.<sup>14</sup> The historical gap is so great that the Church is unable to return to the Scriptures to determine what should be done in her day. He writes:

The Bible is not to be treated as a storehouse of truths on which we can draw at random. There are no immutable and objectively correct “laws of mission” to which exegesis of Scripture gives us access and which provide us with blueprints we can apply in every situation. Our missionary practice is not performed in unbroken continuity with the biblical witness; it is an altogether ambivalent enterprise executed in the context of tension between divine providence and human confusion.<sup>15</sup>

For example, any attempt to understand the mind of the apostle Paul and expect any methodological continuity “is a task fraught with danger.” For the Church is “tempted to draw hasty conclusions and apply these to our contemporary situation, forgetting that Paul developed his missionary theology and strategy in a very specific context.” Bosch’s solution to this problem is that the reader should allow Paul to “‘fertilize’ our imagination and, in dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to prolong, in a creative way, the logic of Paul’s theology and mission amid historical circumstances that are in many respects very different from his.”<sup>16</sup> According to Bosch, some of the biblical writers contradict one another regarding the notion of mission. Just as Matthew differed from Paul, the Medieval Roman Catholic missionary paradigm differs from the post-Enlightenment Church. The present becomes the determining factor for definition and practice. The Church within her contexts is the hermeneutic by which she is to understand Jesus and mission.<sup>17</sup>

However, in an almost contradictory fashion, Bosch notes that even though Paul was a unique person with a specific context, the contemporary reader should still seek to understand what Paul’s letters mean today. For the modern task is to “bridge the gap between the then and the now.” After all, Bosch writes, Paul cast “his vision and image of mission to his fellow-workers and to the churches.”<sup>18</sup>

Such esoteric, and even contradictory, writing creates a quagmire. Should the Church trust the Scriptures for missionary practice? How can she understand not only missionary activity in the first century, but what is translatable—if anything—to the present? While the Church can and should learn from the New Testament (somehow), the Church’s historical context is king for

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<sup>14</sup>Bosch, 511.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 171.

understanding language and definitions. The first century is unlike the fifth, or fifteenth, or twenty-first, and therefore, mission understanding and practice will evolve.<sup>19</sup>

For example, in 2008, I attended a breakout session of the Evangelical Missiological Society to hear Ralph D. Winter present a paper. Winter, who was known for his pioneering work on unreached peoples and emphasis on cross-cultural evangelization, was one of the most influential missiologists in the late twentieth century. I was eager to hear this living legend for the first time. To my surprise, along with several others in the room, Winter spent his time addressing the destruction of the works of the devil as part of the mission of the Church.<sup>20</sup> This destruction was primarily defined in terms of eradicating disease from humans caused by “evil working parasites.” He writes the following in the widely distributed *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* used as part of the Perspectives course that has been taught to over 230,000 people since 1974:<sup>21</sup>

But, is the total eradication of evil microbes part of, and essential to, the task of winning souls and reaching unreached peoples? Is *the mission of the Kingdom* that broad? If so, is it not ominous that neither our sermons nor conventional missiology seriously reflect this dimension of the task? Do we know what it means to ‘destroy the works of the devil?’ Is that a mission frontier?<sup>22</sup>

Or, consider the field of ecology. Scholars have recently drawn attention to the relation of environmental issues and the work of the Church. Allan Effa refers to this as the “Greening of Mission.”<sup>23</sup> Neil Darragh represents the perspective of a growing number of people:

God loves all of creation and that the mission of the Christian community is not restricted to human beings alone. Eco-missiology, a missiology that is concerned with the whole of creation insofar as human beings [sic] impact upon it, has begun to make a shift from a purely human-centered to Earth-centered mission. Eco-missiology is about the part that human beings may play in the reconciliation, characterized by interdependence, among all of God’s creation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>In his review of Bosch’s book, William J. Nottingham wrote, “Paradigms of mission are not equally worthy, and some must be judged self-serving and false or even demonic.” Wise words. Just because the Church is able to do something does not mean she should use such liberty. Everything is not a reflection of wise kingdom stewardship. William J. Nottingham, review of *Transforming Mission: Shifts in Theology of Mission* by David J. Bosch, *Mid-Stream* 33 #1 (Jan 1994): 128.

<sup>20</sup>Robin Dale Hadaway was also in the room that day and briefly reflected on his experience in *A Survey of World Missions* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 277.

<sup>21</sup>Taken from [https://www.perspectives.org/About#/HTML/our\\_history\\_and\\_ministry\\_vision.htm](https://www.perspectives.org/About#/HTML/our_history_and_ministry_vision.htm); accessed December 5, 2020.

<sup>22</sup>Ralph D. Winter, “The Mission of the Kingdom,” *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 573.

<sup>23</sup>Allan Effa, “The Greening of Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32 #4 (October 2008): 171-76.

<sup>24</sup>Neil Darragh, “Hazardous Missions and Shifting Frameworks,” *Missiology* 38 #3 (July 2010): 278. Ross Langmead describes “ecomissiology” as “an approach to mission that sees the mission of God in terms of reconciliation at all

In his concern for a better environment, Darragh notes that missionaries are commonly “associated with over-consumers” and therefore “the integrity of mission comes further under question.” His solution? Missionaries need to share a message that involves the value of God’s creation and the use of resources and reduction of waste. For a failure of the Church to shift from a human-centered approach to an earth-centered mission “constitutes the most significant hazard to the integrity of Christian mission today.”<sup>25</sup>

In his highly influential work, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, Christopher J. H. Wright believes the ecological sphere must be included in understanding the mission of God and has implications for the Church. Though Wright’s perspective is not to the extreme as Darragh, he notes creation care must be included in the Church’s mission:

Those Christians who have responded to God’s call to serve him through serving his nonhuman creatures in ecological projects are engaged in a specialized form of mission that has its rightful plane within the broad framework of all that God’s mission has as its goal.<sup>26</sup>

Or, consider a Barna Group study of the views of U. S. Christians regarding missionary service. Their findings revealed that 29% of younger Christians (18-34 yrs) and 23% of older Christians (35 yrs +) “say a missionary and ‘someone else who does work to fight poverty and injustice’ are *very similar*.” Almost half of younger Christians (47%) want missionaries to save lives. This service expectation exceeded their other expectations of missionaries being involved in evangelism (44%) and discipleship (40%).<sup>27</sup>

### **Mission Language: A Catholic Innovation**

The Church had a variety of terms for the expansion of the faith and the individuals sent since her beginning. As a modern expression, André Seumois notes that Ignatius of Loyola was using variations of *missions* in 1540 which was applied to the Jesuits.<sup>28</sup> Ignatius appropriated the word (from the Spanish *misión*, Latin *missio*, Portuguese *missão*, and French *mission*) and

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levels,” and could be called “missionary earthkeeping” (Ross Langmead, “Ecomissiology,” *Missiology* 30 #4 (October 2002): 505-18). J. Andrew Kirk included a section on environmental care in his book *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 164-83.

<sup>25</sup>Darragh, 278.

<sup>26</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 416.

<sup>27</sup>*The Future of Missions: 10 Questions about Global Ministry the Church Must Answer with the Next Generation* (n.p., 2020), 21-22, 44 These numbers reflect “engaged Christians” defined as those who attend a Protestant Church at least once a month, involved in ways beyond just attending services, have a commitment to Christ, and say their faith is very important in their lives (108).

<sup>28</sup>André Seumois, *Théologie Missionnaire: Délimitation de la Fonction Missionnaire de L’Eglise* (Rome: Bureau de Presse O.M.I., 1973), 9.

developed it for his context.<sup>29</sup> This novelty reframed the Roman Catholic, and eventually Protestant, understanding of service in the world. The Latin verb *mitto* (I send) and *missio* (mission) were ancient words and had been used by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, and Aquinas to describe the inner workings of the Godhead. Prior to Ignatius, the Spanish and Portuguese governments used *mission* to describe political and military actions in foreign contexts while the French used it as a legal term to reveal indebtedness and obligations between differing parties.

The Catholic Church developed a partnership with the State whereby she would support commercial and political advancements as long as the State reciprocated with protection and assistance with the Christianization of new territories. Though not all Catholic missionaries were in favor of European development being attached to their efforts, over time a close relationship developed between colonial expansion and the Church's work. Military, merchants, and missionaries were often in close proximity. The government's mission became both a political and ecclesial mission. Mission was comprised of a wide array of activities. It could involve evangelistic work, but also included going to serve Christians in need.

Francis Xavier (1506-1552) was the first member of the order to be sent outside of Europe. In his correspondence from the field, Xavier did not prefer to communicate with the language of mission. Years after arriving in India, however, he began referring to those sent from the order to reach unbelievers as *missionaries* who participated in *mission*. Yet, it was during the seventeenth century work of the Franciscans in the Americas that the word *mission* became more commonplace and described an established station in pioneer territories.<sup>30</sup> While Catholics maintained the monastic structures for sending missionaries, Protestants avoided such structures and gave attention to other matters. Bosch notes "it would take centuries before anything remotely as competent and effective as the monastic missionary movement would develop in Protestantism."<sup>31</sup>

Various forces eventually resulted in a Protestant shift. Stroope notes that Protestants embraced the rhetoric of mission less out of conviction and more from convenience as their countries dominated the seas in search for colonies.<sup>32</sup> While there were a few exceptions, with the Moravians and William Carey, a great deal of Protestant work was state sponsored. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of Protestants were serving in lands in which their governments had no jurisdictions.

It was through the leadership of Zinzendorf that the language of mission would develop within the Church. Stroope writes, "Just as Ignatius innovated mission language for the Roman Catholic orders, Zinzendorf and the Moravians introduced mission as ecclesial language for

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<sup>29</sup>Stroope, 238. I am indebted to Stroope for his research on early years of the Jesuits. I have adapted portions of his historical study in these paragraphs related to Ignatius and Xavier. For more details see Stroope 238-87.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 287.

<sup>31</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 250.

<sup>32</sup>Stroope, 303-04, 306-07.

Protestants.”<sup>33</sup> Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Protestants would develop many societies that used the language of mission in their titles.

### Twentieth Century Shift

Pietism that developed in the seventeenth century had little concern with producing a theology of mission. The Church was to go into all the world and preach the gospel, not ponder the ideal of preaching. Carl E. Braaten writes, “Orthodoxy had no heart for mission and the Enlightenment could not square it with reason, so it was left to Pietism to assume a near monopoly on the propagating of the faith.”<sup>34</sup> Terminology and language were insignificant. While there were few exceptions, theologians had little to say about a theology of mission until after the Great Century of missions (1792-1910).<sup>35</sup>

Theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were forced to respond to the volume and success of the Church’s global activity and began to address the concept of mission with much attention.<sup>36</sup> As they turned toward the Scriptures with the modern language of mission in hand, they argued that God’s actions were much broader than the redemption of the elect.<sup>37</sup> The *missio Dei* involved a wide range of divine acts to bring about the redemption and restoration of all things. *By implication, the Church’s activities (i.e., missions) needed to become more diverse and multifaceted. Mission belongs to God and is to be reflected in the Church actions.* Traditional terminology that had been closely connected with evangelism, church planting, and leadership

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 313.

<sup>34</sup>Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), 14.

<sup>35</sup>Some of the exceptions include: Adrianus Saravia (1532-1613) was a Protestant theologian whose work *De diversis Ministrorum Evangelii gradibus (On the Various Levels of Ministers of the Gospel as They have been Instituted by the Lord)*, influenced what would become the discipline of missiology. He influenced Justus Heurnius (1587-1651), Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), the Danish-Halle Mission, and English Puritans such as John Eliot (1604-1690). Erasmus (1469?-1536) was known for making a mission appeal, but no one accepted the challenge.

<sup>36</sup>Wilbert R. Shenk writes, “The International Missionary Council (IMC) played an indispensable role in the development of mission theology through a series of international assemblies between 1928 and 1958” (Wilbert R. Shenk, “Introduction,” in John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 18. For a survey of the theological developments between 1910 and 1952 see Wilhelm Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission*, International Missionary Council Research Pamphlet No. 2 (London: SCM Press, 1955).

<sup>37</sup>Anderson’s desire for a “radical trinitarian theocentrism” (15) manifested itself in numerous publications throughout the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A few examples include Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1965); Francis M. DuBose, *God Who Sends: A Fresh Quest for Biblical Mission* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1983); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995); David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010); and Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participating in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).



development was coopted with an expanded definition that reflected the multiple actions of God throughout the Scriptures.

However, theologians and missiologists failed to temper this breadth with gospel urgency and kingdom stewardship.<sup>38</sup> How was the Church to make disciples of the billions who had never heard the gospel if mission was broad and included a wide range of activities? Were there more important questions to ask, given the breadth of God's mission? The demise of colonialism and the rapid growth of the Majority World Church led many to ask multiple questions regarding the role of the Church in the traditionally western countries. With such global expansion, and mission now being from everywhere to everywhere, maybe the Church in the West should become more pastoral and less apostolic? Is it possible the day of sending missionaries to other nations was over? Could it be that those from the West should not engage in church planting activities? Has the time arrived for traditional societies and agencies to consider shifting to developing established churches that have been around for years? The shift to a theocentric approach to mission, grounded on Scriptures, quickly resulted in conflict between two parties: the traditionalists and revisionists.

### **Traditionalists and Revisionists<sup>39</sup>**

The traditionalists had a long heritage of defining and communicating mission (and missions) primarily in terms of evangelism, church planting, and leadership development. Zeal, love for the Lord, sacrifice, and a commitment to the Great Commission that developed from Pietism led many to the nations. They were the ones in the trenches sharing the gospel. Over the centuries, multitudes were sent, preached the gospel, planted churches, trained leaders and gave their lives for the cause of Christ and his kingdom. If anything, they earned the right to define the terms.

However, if *mission* is of God, then the traditionalists incorrectly limited missions. The Scriptures reveal God who is engaged in more than personal redemption. The Church engaged in numerous tasks in the world to display the glory of God among the community of saints. *The traditionalist understanding of mission and missions was reductionistic*. Dependence on modern language and the lack of a robust theology for identity and practice limited the traditionalists' perspective and resulted in a heavy dependence on tradition and zeal.

*Though the work of the revisionists revealed the shortcomings of the traditionalist view, they also made two significant mistakes: The apostolic work of the church became one equivalent*

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<sup>38</sup>Such was part of the concern of Donald McGavran who accused the World Council of Churches of betraying the billions of unreached peoples. See Donald McGavran, "Yes, Uppsala Betrayed the Two Billion: Now What?" *Christianity Today* 16 #19 (June 23, 1972): 16-18.

<sup>39</sup>At the risk of being reductionistic, I am developing these two typologies for heuristic purposes, recognizing variations of perspectives were found in the twentieth century and to date. Traditionalists disagreed with other traditionalists and the same was true among the revisionists. Stroope also describes a group with the title "Revisionists" (Stroope, 344), but distinctions seem to exist between our understandings of the group.

*function among many and the urgency to communicate the gospel to the lost was diminished. Just because God's activity is broad does not lead to the conclusion that the Church's multiple actions are equivalent. It is true the Church was involved in many activities throughout the New Testament, but the apostolic functions received special attention, a matter often overlooked by revisionists. When everything became equal, the urgency of evangelism and disciple making faded. If God was just as concerned about restoring a polluted environment as he was with saving an unbeliever, then why prioritize?*

### **A Way Forward – Watch Our Language**

The revisionists won the debate. But in the end, both sides fell short of providing and communicating a more excellent way to the nations. Both failed to discern a biblical nomenclature and clung to modern terminology in need of biblical definition. While the revisionists had a more comprehensive understanding of God's work in the cosmos and the need for many Church actions, they lacked the biblical priority and urgency given to the apostolic work. Though the traditionalists emphasized the specific function of the Church's apostolic labors, they overlooked a great deal of what the Church was to do once established within a context.

But what is the solution to the problem when everything is considered mission and all missions are equivalent? Neill's response: Change the language. "If everything that the Church does is to be classed as 'mission'," he writes, "we shall have to find another term for the Church's particular responsibility for 'the heathen', those who have never heard the Name of Christ."<sup>40</sup>

Timothy C. Tennent states that mission needs a "reclaiming of something closer to the original meaning of the word."<sup>41</sup> Keith Ferdinando comes to a similar conclusion. If it may be said that everything God does in the world is His mission, then he notes, "a new terminology is required to categorize his specifically redemptive activity."<sup>42</sup>

Stroope takes a more radical approach and advocates the removal of the traditional terms and concepts from the Church's rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> He claims the solution is found in the use of kingdom language. For it is an "Orientation to and formation in the kingdom of God readies us for engagement with the world by transforming us into *witnesses to the kingdom* and *pilgrims of the kingdom*. As *pilgrim witnesses we participate in the coming reign of God*."<sup>44</sup> This language would include all believers, with none being called *missionaries*.

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<sup>40</sup>Neill, 81.

<sup>41</sup>Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 54.

<sup>42</sup>Ferdinando, 50.

<sup>43</sup>Stroope, 347-53.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 370.

Stroope is to be commended for his extensive study and calling the Church to a more biblically specific vocabulary. Though he is correct in the importance of kingdom language, his solution is reductionistic. Most importantly, he comes very close to making every believer a missionary, without using the language of mission. If everyone is a pilgrim, witness, and filled with the Spirit, where are the apostolic teams? What becomes of the apostolic functions? Or have they been subsumed under the function of witness? Has the apostolic, once again, been consumed by the Church's general ministry?

The centuries-old language of mission is here to stay. Mission is an umbrella term that encompasses a diverse array of actions. While it is easy to state the way forward is to stop using such language, such is easier said than done. Some will venture down this path using biblical terminology, which is the best route to travel. Most groups will attempt to continue to squeeze biblical definitions into modern terminology. If such is the case, a language of apostolic priority is still needed. For those continuing with modern terms attached to their definitions, then explanations must always be provided when communicating with those outside their church, denomination, agency, or network, a wordy endeavor that is absolutely necessary.

Another way forward is a possible hybrid approach. The language of mission is to be understood in at least two categories: apostolic categories (e.g. the sending nature of the Church, preaching, teaching, witnessing, and disciple making that results in churches) and other important kingdom-related activities. Rethinking language with an apostolic imagination may mean drawing from both the modern terminology and biblical language and concepts.

The language of kingdom and *apostolic* not only reflects Scripture but offers a degree of clarity related to Church activities. For years, I have used the expression *apostolic missionaries* and *apostolic teams* and *apostolic church planting* to communicate a specificity and urgency lost in the classic terms of missions, missionaries, and church planting.<sup>45</sup> Given that many people have significant misunderstandings and reservations with the word and concept of *apostle*, the use of the adjective makes the neologisms more palatable while making a point. Other scholars follow a similar direction. For example, Ferdinando suggests *apostolic mission* as a possible expression instead of mission.<sup>46</sup> Larry W. Caldwell and Donald T. Dent take a similar approach and use *missionary apostle*.<sup>47</sup> George W. Peters collapses apostle into evangelist and notes they are "fully responsible for the apostolic function minus the apostolic office and original authority."<sup>48</sup> Robertson McQuilkin's wordy descriptions include *pioneer church-starting*

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<sup>45</sup>J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 383-84 and *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

<sup>46</sup>Ferdinando, 59.

<sup>47</sup>Larry W. Caldwell also makes use of this term in *Send Out!: Reclaiming the Spiritual Gift of Apostleship for Missionaries and Churches Today* (Manila, Philippines: Church Strengthening Ministry and Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1992), 104. Donald T. Dent, "The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions," D.Miss. dissertation. Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary (November 2009), 173.

<sup>48</sup>George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), 247.

*evangelists and pioneer apostolic church starting evangelists.*<sup>49</sup> Others, such as, Daniel Sinclair, Alan R. Johnson, and Alan Hirsch advocate for the usage of *apostle*.<sup>50</sup>

Regardless of tradition and theological perspectives, the Church must communicate in terms that clearly prioritize and distinguish her apostolic labors from other global activities. The apostolic imagination will not allow her to remain content with the status quo and communication breakdown. A linguistic shift to kingdom language that includes use of apostolic is needed, and will be easier for some than others.

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<sup>49</sup>Robertson McQuilkin, "The Missionary Task," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed., A. Scott Moreau (UK: Paternoster Press and Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 648, 649.

<sup>50</sup>Daniel Sinclair, *A Vision of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting in Teams* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005), 4; Alan R. Johnson, *Apostolic Function: In 21<sup>st</sup> Century Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009); and Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).