

## HOW CAN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE CARRY OUT THE *MISSIO DEI*?

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### *Introduction*

The following phrases summarize centuries of Christian mission: “All were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4b). Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> “There is only one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which no one is safe.”<sup>2</sup> “*Deus vult!*” (God willing!) was the cry of the crusaders.<sup>3</sup> Calvin said, “Doctrine without zeal is like a sword in a fool’s hand.”<sup>4</sup> “When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible.... When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible.”<sup>5</sup>

The church started out well, but it married political power and armed its soldiers to fight Jews, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Indians in distant lands. Even during the Reformation, they saw it better to correct doctrines than to announce God’s love to a lost world; and, when they awoke to their responsibility, they ended up with new lands and empires. There is good reason in claiming that the mission is from God, because neither the Jews in the Old Covenant, nor we, the church, can do it well.

### *The Biblical Basis of the Missio Dei*

Christopher Wright, a specialist in the study of the Old Testament, writes in the epilogue to his book on God’s mission: “He is the initiator of this story, the one who tells the story, the main actor in the story, the one who devised and directed the play, he is the sense of the story and the one who finally completes it. He is its beginning, its center and its end. It is the story of God’s mission, of this God and no other.”<sup>6</sup> From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible reveals God’s redemptive plan to reconcile all creation to himself. In the “cultural mandate,” God entrusts his creation to Adam and Eve as representatives of humanity, who are given the mission of caring for it.

Sadly, human beings disobeyed, and as a result, God set out to redeem all of creation from the effect of sin and evil, setting the ultimate goal of the restoration of the entire created world. In Genesis 12:3, God promises Abraham that through him and his descendants “all the families of the earth will be blessed.” This promise established Israel’s pivotal role as mediator of God’s blessing to all nations.

In Exodus 19:6, God declares that Israel will be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” As priests, the Israelites were to represent the nations before God and God before the nations,

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<sup>1</sup> From the Apologeticum, circa 197 A.D.

<sup>2</sup> Fourth Lateran Council (1215).

<sup>3</sup> Called to the First Crusade by Pope Urban II after the Council of Clermont in 1095.

<sup>4</sup> The original sentiment comes from his commentary on Acts 18:25.

<sup>5</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Wright, *God’s Mission: Discovering the Bible’s Great Message*, ed. (United Certainty, 2009), 509.

serving as a living testimony to Yahweh's holiness and power. Prophets, such as Isaiah, articulate Israel's role as a "light unto the nations," whose purpose was to manifest God's glory and salvation to all the nations of the earth (Isaiah 49:6; 60:3). Sadly, the biblical narrative shows that many Israelites did not value their faith, nor were they interested in sharing their message with neighboring nations. They did not act justly or righteously. This failure is repeated throughout Israel's history.

Jesus is the linchpin of the New Testament; he is the Son of God who came to live among us (John 1:14). Jesus proclaimed and embodied the coming of the Kingdom of God, preaching the good news, healing the sick, freeing people from evil spirits, and showing compassion for the marginalized (Mark 1:14–15). His life, miracles, cruel death, resurrection, and ascension reflect "the very image of what God is" (Hebrews 1:3). God is a missionary God, and at the same time, he is the King.

The *missio Dei* in the New Testament is based on the activity of the "sending" Trinity: The Father sends the Son (John 3:17, 20:21); the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit to equip the disciples in the work of mission (Acts 1:8, Luke 24:49). Jesus commissions the church to participate in this mission by promising them the gift of the Spirit to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21).

Acts chronicles how the early church participated in the *missio Dei*, moving from Jerusalem to Rome and demonstrating the cross-cultural character of the gospel. The mission of God's people is to unite and participate in God's mission, reflecting his justice and redemptive love toward all creation. It is not about the mission of the church per se, but about the church's participation in God's mission.

The epistles of Paul and others develop the theology of mission in practice by responding to the concerns of the incipient churches. Mission, for Wright, is holistic and integral. It encompasses both evangelization and loving service, the pursuit of justice and care for creation, as part of Christian responsibility in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Revelation shows the final vision of the *missio Dei*, with a multitude of people from "every nation, kindred, people, and tongue" praising God (7:9). This eschatological vision confirms that God's mission for the redemption of all nations will be fully fulfilled. Wright argues that the biblical basis for the *missio Dei* is not limited to specific verses such as the Great Commission, but that the entire Bible, from creation to new creation, is fundamentally missional. God's mission is the central narrative that unifies all Scripture.<sup>8</sup> God is a missionary God; he is the King, and he is also the Creator.

### *The Concept of Missio Dei*

In Western medieval Christendom (between the sixth and fifteenth centuries), there was a strong identification between the church and the kingdom of God, where the church was the visible representative and manifestation of God's government on earth. This justified the immense power of the church, which was not limited to the spiritual, but extended to the temporal, with the Pope and other clerics exerting considerable influence over rulers and society,

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, *God's Mission*, 286-295.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *God's Mission*, 20.

affirming the belief that both the spiritual and temporal sword were in the hands of the church. *The mission was of the Roman Catholic Church.*

When the great expansion of Protestant missionary societies began in the 19th and 20th centuries, churches were seen as the primary agents of world evangelization. Mission was understood as the propagation of the faith, the conversion of souls, and the establishment of new denominational outposts. The mission was seen as an enterprise of the churches, which organized and executed missionary campaigns for global evangelism. This view was often intertwined with colonialism and the idea that Western civilization was superior. *The mission was of denominational and interdenominational missions.*

David Bosch, in his excellent book on *Mission in Transformation*, devotes a section to “mission as *missio Dei*.”<sup>9</sup> Bosch explains that Karl Barth was one of the first theologians to speak of mission in terms of God’s activity, first at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932, and then at the Willingen International Missionary Council Conference in 1952.<sup>10</sup>

Barth argued that God is intrinsically a missionary God. The existence of missions is due to God’s own nature, which is a being of love that extends outward. Barth augmented the doctrine of the mission of the Trinity where God the Father sends the Son, and the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit, by including one more movement, *the Triune God sends the church into the world*. The church exists because the mission exists.<sup>11</sup> Since Willingen, the concept of *missio Dei* has been widely accepted.

Neill states, “The age of missions has come to an end; the era of the mission begins.”<sup>12</sup> This implies that it is necessary to distinguish between mission and missions. Now we can speak of missionary activities (*missio ecclesiae*). The task of missions can no longer be simply to plant churches or win souls for Christ, because missionaries are agents who represent God in the world. At the end of the section Bosch writes:

Mission is born in the heart of God. God is a source of love that sends. This is the deepest meaning of mission. It is impossible to penetrate further; Mission exists simply because God loves people. To recognize that the mission belongs to God represents an astonishing discovery with respect to previous centuries.... It is inconceivable that we could ever retreat to a narrow ecclesiocentric perspective.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Bosch argues that all local churches in the world must possess several characteristics to be an authentic missionary community of God: (1) to be a true community of worship; (2) welcoming visitors and making them feel at home; (3) have a horizontal structure; (4) be composed of members who recognize their social vocation; (5) have a flexible and innovative structure; and (6) not supporting any specific interest group. Bosch argues that these

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<sup>9</sup> David Bosch, *Mission in Transformation: Paradigm Shifts in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan Challenge Books, 2000), 475-479.

<sup>10</sup> Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, 476.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Anna Marie Aagard, *Missio Dei in katholischer Sicht*, *Evangelische Theologie* vol 34, 1974, 423; in Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, 477.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* 1966a, 572, in Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, 477.

<sup>13</sup> Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, 479.

characteristics allow the church to engage in missions beyond its walls, such as spreading the true gospel and ministry for justice and peace.<sup>14</sup>

### *Controversies Surrounding the Concept of the Missio Dei*

If the mission is from God, what is included in it? Is God at work in the world beyond the doors of our churches and institutions? We hear about Muslims who have received God's message in dreams and visions, and what about the phenomenal growth of the Christian Church in places like Iran, Afghanistan, and China, where missionary work is difficult to do?<sup>15</sup> Could it be that God works in creation and societies, even without the church being his agent? What is the link between the Kingdom of God and his missionary action? There seems to be an ambiguity in the definition of the word "mission" giving rise to a debate between "Christological *Missio Dei*" and "Cosmocentric *Missio Dei*."

The *Christocentric missio Dei* emphasizes that the core of God's mission resides in and through Jesus Christ: his incarnation, death, resurrection, exaltation, and the sending forth of his people. Mission is understood as participation in the redemptive work of Christ, under the command of the Triune God. The church becomes the essential vehicle for carrying out this mission, which fundamentally involves evangelism, discipleship, and church planting. The evangelical missionary movement largely supports this position.<sup>16</sup>

The *cosmocentric vision* underscores the fact that God's mission extends not only to people, but to the entire cosmos: creation, society, the environment, culture, and future creation. It promotes a holistic Christian mission, which integrates the proclamation of the gospel with actions that seek social justice, care for the environment and the integrity of creation, as part of Christian responsibility in the world. The church participates in this cosmic mission by reflecting God's justice and love toward all creation, not just in proclaiming the salvation of souls and church planting.<sup>17</sup>

Interpreters of the cosmic view in the debate argue that a holistic biblical view needs to be recovered, while its critics, often from conservative evangelical circles, warn against the risk of diluting evangelism and the urgency of human salvation. A consequence of these discussions on the theme of the *missio Dei* resulted in the establishment of the Lausanne evangelical movement with more emphasis on God's mission through the lens of Christ and the ecumenical movement of the World Council of Churches with support for a cosmocentric approach to the *Missio Dei*.

### *The Mission Objectives of the Church of the Nazarene*

The 2023 *Manual* states:

**The mission** of the Church of the Nazarene is to make Christlike disciples in the nations.

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<sup>14</sup> Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, 456.

<sup>15</sup> Why is the Church in Iran growing so fast? | BITE  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao\\_UCdg9dnM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao_UCdg9dnM).

<sup>16</sup> The Willingen International Missionary Conference, 1952.

<sup>17</sup> This approach is taken by theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Johannes C. Hoekendijk, David Bosch, among others.

**The core values** of the Church of the Nazarene are these: “We are a Christian, holiness, and missional people.”

**The seven characteristics** of the Church of the Nazarene are meaningful worship, theological consistency, passionate evangelism, intentional discipleship, church development, transformational leadership, and purposeful compassion.

**The primary purpose** of the Church of the Nazarene is to carry forward the Kingdom of God through the preservation and propagation of Christian holiness, as set forth in the Scriptures.

**The fundamental objectives** of the Church of the Nazarene are “holy Christian communion, the conversion of sinners, the entire sanctification of believers, their edification in holiness, and the simplicity and spiritual power manifested in the early New Testament church, together with the preaching of the gospel to every creature.”

**The Church of the Nazarene exists for the purpose** of serving as an instrument for the advancement of God’s kingdom through the preaching and teaching of the gospel throughout the world.

**Our** well-defined commission is to preserve and propagate Christian holiness as set forth in the Scriptures, through the conversion of sinners, the restoration of apostates, and the entire sanctification of believers.

**Our goal is spiritual**, that is, to evangelize in response to our Lord’s Great Commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19; cf. John 20:21; Mark 16:15).<sup>18</sup>

In essence, the role of the Church of the Nazarene is to be a Christian, holiness, and missional people who embody and proclaim the kingdom of God through words and actions in today’s world. In this, the Church of the Nazarene is working on the missionary project of the triune God.

### *Considerations for the Mission of the Church of the Nazarene*

*God’s Christ-centered mission* emphasizes salvation and discipleship, and the church knows where to focus its missionary work. It bases the mission on the work of the Son and the sending of the Spirit, avoiding reducing it only to social programs. The church understands that it has been sent by Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church of the Nazarene fully complies with carrying out a Christ-centered mission.

However, there is a risk of privileging individual salvation and neglecting systemic concerns, such as poverty, ecology and the lack of social justice in society. The church may focus too much on membership growth and new points where the denomination is established. The success or numerical growth of the Church of the Nazarene should not be the sole focus of God’s mission.

What does it mean that the Church of the Nazarene has “a spiritual purpose”? (see last sentence from the *Manual* quoted above). David Bosch warns, “The missionary commitment of the church suggests more than calling individuals into the church as a waiting room from

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<sup>18</sup> *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene (Nazarene House of Publications, 2023), page 3 of the Prologue.

beyond.”<sup>19</sup> God offers salvation as a spiritual process, but at the same time material. Jesus sat at table with Zacchaeus, chief tax collector, and his family declared: “Today salvation has come to this house...” (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus promised to return the stolen money multiplied by four.

*God’s cosmos-centered mission* places evangelization, social justice, ecology, culture, and care for creation within God’s mission. Cosmos-centered mission connects the gospel to life in its entirety, it becomes less compartmentalized. It affirms that God acts in the whole cosmos, not only in the ecclesial sphere. By emphasizing creation as a whole, the church is perceived as a participant, not as the sole agent. The Church of the Nazarene does care about people in society who suffer; one of the characteristics of the Church is “Compassion with Purpose.”

However, Christ’s specific saving work may be less defined or lose prominence. Mission could lose its center or identity, becoming too general or vague, ending up in “everything is mission.” The central proclamation of Christ could be relegated to the background among many other concerns, with the risk that mission will become a social work with Christian overtones instead of an evangelistic and transformative work.

| DIMENSION                     | CHRIST CENTRED MISSION                                                  | COSMOS CENTRED MISSION                                                                             |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Main Focus</b>             | The person and work of Christ, the sending of the Church through Christ | God’s Mission in and for All Creation, Culture, and Society                                        |
| <b>Mission Scope</b>          | Individual salvation, discipleship, church formation                    | Care for creation, justice, culture, systemic transformation, gospel                               |
| <b>Strengths</b>              | Clarity of the gospel, solid theological foundation                     | Holistic relevance, broad engagement with global issues                                            |
| <b>Weaknesses</b>             | Neglect of structural/ecological issues                                 | A risk that if “everything is mission, nothing is mission.” The work of Christ may lose prominence |
| <b>Practical Implications</b> | Focus on church planting, evangelism, and discipleship                  | Broad programs: justice, ecology, culture, integration of faith and life. <sup>20</sup>            |

### *Suggestions for the Church of the Nazarene*

1. **The *missio Dei* and holiness** are at the heart of the mission objectives of the Church of the Nazarene. Wesley said, “The gospel of Christ knows no religion but the social; it knows no other sanctity than social sanctity. Faith working out of love is the

<sup>19</sup> Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, p.462.

<sup>20</sup> Table made with the help of Chat GPT.

essence of Christian perfection.”<sup>21</sup> In his book *Holiness and the Missio Dei*, Andy Johnson argues from Scripture that both corporately and personally, participation in the *missio Dei* molds believers through the Spirit, transforming them into the image of Christ and thereby restoring them to the image of the holy God (*imago Dei*).<sup>22</sup> The church can study the concept of corporate holiness further.

2. **In the cultural mandate** of Genesis 1:26-28, God entrusts the administration and care of creation to human beings. Churches have a responsibility to act as stewards of God’s creation, which entails a moral duty to care for the environment through actions such as promoting sustainable development, reducing consumption, and adopting sustainable lifestyles.
3. **Integral mission** is a Christian concept that encompasses the proclamation of the gospel and social action in a unified way. It means that there is no dichotomy between evangelizing and serving those in need, but that the two are inseparable parts of the same task. Integral Mission is a way to fulfill **the Great Commandment** (Matthew 22:36-40).<sup>23</sup>
4. **The mission of the church includes social justice**, which is understood as an integral part of the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and establishing the Kingdom of God. This involves promoting human dignity, defending the poor, seeking the common good, and transforming social structures to make them more just and equitable. The church is to be a prophetic voice in the community.<sup>24</sup>
5. **The church and restorative justice**: The church promotes core values such as reconciliation, forgiveness, and reparation for harm, which are the foundation of restorative justice. The church has an important role in fostering reconciliation in all spheres of discord such as in the family, community, society, or among other religious groups and ethnicities.
6. **Eschatology and mission**. We must be clear about the relationship of what the Bible teaches about the Kingdom of God and the *missio Dei*. We must be alerted to false creeds in a world where a section of evangelicals proposes that God has commissioned His people to have “dominion” over the world, seen as political power for all of us to enjoy what they call “the Kingdom now.”
7. **As Nazarenes we believe in preemptive grace**: God is working by his Spirit to draw and call people who are sometimes out of reach, demonstrating that the *missio Dei*, and the Kingdom of God have a cosmic reach. The *missio Dei* is universal in its nature and essence. The church forms an important part as an agent of our Missionary God, we marvel at his sublime grace. It should come as no surprise that God is at work, calling people to follow Him without the actions of the church as their agent.
8. **Contextualization and dialogue**. The call for contextualization and humility in mission emphasizes the faith’s connection to local cultures through dialogue, not imposition. This approach involves humbly understanding a people’s values, history,

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<sup>21</sup> John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.

<sup>22</sup> Andy Johnson, *Holiness and the Missio Dei* (Cascade Books, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> René Padilla, *Integral Mission. Essays on the Kingdom of God and the Church*. Kairós Editions, 2015. Stam, Juan <https://juanstam.com/posts/mision-integral-en-el-antiguo-testamento>.

<sup>24</sup> John Stott and Christopher Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (InterVarsity Press, 2024).

and language so that the message is culturally relevant. By engaging in respectful dialogue, rather than a one-way transmission of ideas, missionaries can build relationships and demonstrate that faith can be expressed without renouncing one's cultural identity.

9. **The digitization of the *missio Dei* and artificial intelligence:** COVID demonstrated the usefulness of ZOOM and WhatsApp platforms in facilitating participation in worship and biblical teaching. The internet can assist the church in its mission by expanding its audience, facilitating evangelism and education, and enabling community connection and pastoral care regardless of physical location. The Internet is a valuable instrument for sharing the message of Christ even to peoples without freedom of worship. Pope Leo XIV has said that the church is facing another industrial revolution "in the field of artificial intelligence, which poses new challenges for the defense of human dignity, justice and work."<sup>25</sup>

The Church of the Nazarene must know how to point out both the possibilities and the risks, encouraging the faithful to use technology as a means of participation in the construction of the Kingdom of God on Earth.<sup>26</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The concept of *missio Dei* proposed by Barth and others helps us recognize the important role of participating in what God is doing. Discussions about mission dimensions can be enriching. We must affirm the centrality of Christ and the role of the church as sent. Keeping clear who Christ is and what the gospel means, along with the practical relevance of the contexts of suffering, creation, culture, and the environment.

Accept that God's mission is broad and includes creation, culture, society, and the hope of future creation. We must maintain our fundamental priorities of evangelism and discipleship, not excluding issues such as justice, ecology, and culture that are important as expressions of God's reconciliation and renewal of all things. Probably, our ideas about the *missio Dei* can integrate the strengths of both perspectives, being aware of the risks. Our task is to proclaim "His glory among the nations, his wondrous works to all peoples" (Psalm 96:3 NIV).

I leave this little poem to meditate on God's love and grace.

In God's mission we walk in wonder and humility;

His grace precedes us, his Spirit opens up reality

He sends us as witnesses of justice, truth and compassion, to proclaim Christ with life,  
service and prayer.

For his mission is broad, and his love embraces all creation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Symington, Marie (November 17, 2025) Artificial Intelligence and the Mission of the Church: An Analytical Contribution [https://www.fides.org/es/news/77031-Inteligencia\\_artificial\\_y\\_mision\\_de\\_la\\_Iglesia\\_una\\_contribucion\\_analitica](https://www.fides.org/es/news/77031-Inteligencia_artificial_y_mision_de_la_Iglesia_una_contribucion_analitica)

<sup>26</sup> In itself, much has already been written in recent years about the "digital church" referring to the need to adapt to the current context of communications and relationships in all spheres dominated by digital technology, lately moved by the issue of AI.

<sup>27</sup> Made in collaboration with Chat GPT.