

THE GOD OF THE MISSION

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Introduction

I am the fruit of the love and dedication of many servants of the Lord who anticipated the mission of God in me with passion. I was never happier than the day I met my Redeemer. Today, after 28 years walking with Jesus, I am amazed at how he continues to use others so I do not lose my crown. And the Lord does not rest in his purpose to reach us for his Kingdom. Therefore, I cannot find another way to reciprocate such kindness than by trying to fulfill your responsibility faithfully. There is no greater honor than that of being part of a people that has a divine mission on which the destiny of humanity depends.

In his book *Mission in Transformation*, David Bosch states, “Christian mission expresses the dynamic relationship between God and the world...”¹ This same author explains an interesting and new concept of *missio Dei* (mission of God): “The self-revelation of God as the one who loves the world; the very commitment of God in this world and with this world; the nature and activity of God that encompasses the church and the world, in which the church has the privilege of participating.”²

From this definition derives an attribute of God that is not widely understood: the Lord is a missionary. This nature flows from his love and mercy and has been evident since the creation of the world. It becomes palpable in the history of the people of Israel and assumes its highest expression in the sending of his Son and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Today God’s mission is centered in the church. She is the instrument called to interpret the missionary will of God for all humanity, so that it may be reconciled with its Creator. It is well outlined in Matthew 28:18-20. The body of Christ finds its purpose in participation in the *missio Dei*. What the church does without the intention of impacting the world to reach them is not mission.

The Lord’s support and commitment to the mission led him to become a man and die on the cross. It is so important that the mission is for God and that each believer pursues it with urgency and due diligence. It is not just doing it but doing it well. Both the biblical support for the mission and the historical legacy of faithful missionaries help us not to lose heart in the face of such an arduous task.

I. Biblical Foundations of the Mission

In the book of Genesis, we see the mission's starting point. In his sovereignty as Creator, Jehovah decides to grant human beings lordship over all creation on Earth (Genesis 1:28). For humans, this meant taking on a commitment and responsibility to care for the planet. It is very important to understand that, in the Bible, nothing and no one can stand between the relationship

¹ David J. Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, 24.

² Bosch, *Mission in Transformation*, 25.

of representatives of Jehovah on earth. It is a privilege, but it is also a mandate: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying...” (Genesis 2:16). It was a mission of stewardship. mission

Already in chapter 3 of the same book, we appreciate that the relationship between God and humans is not harmonious. Disobedience and sin have obstructed the essence of the mission. But in Genesis 12:1–3, the command of Jehovah to Abram and his family appears: “Leave your country and your relatives, and your father’s house, and go into a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” In this passage, we see the Lord demanding obedient action that will result in reconciliation and eternal promises. The salvation of humanity came in the seed of Abraham.

In the Pentateuch, we observe a creator who does not give up working with his most beloved creation, even with his fallen nature. He thus outlines a missionary plan through the election of the people of Israel. Now, the mission's objective is to demonstrate, through all the traditions, that life can only be victorious through Jehovah.

With Exodus, not only was Israel born, but it also allowed the whole world to know that Jehovah delivers people from slavery and servitude. In this book, the missionary proclamation of the universal and singular character of Jehovah begins and excludes other gods as existent. He reveals himself as a unique deity.

These people were not called to have an external mission expressly, but to be a community of witness, a light to the nations, to draw the Gentiles to the living God. Jehovah chooses them to worship, love, and serve him. Its survival as a monotheistic nation was not only for its benefit but for that of all humanity. The Lord’s plan of redemption is implemented through the preservation of Israel and through the sharing of his love (Jeremiah 31:3).

God’s command to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6 reflects a demand for obedience from his chosen people and promises that they would be his special treasure above all nations. He gives them the place of priests. It was a mission of holiness and consecration to the Lord (Deuteronomy 26:17-19). That is the way the world would know God. There was also a divine purpose that all should exalt them.

Willing not to lose heart in his missionary and saving plan, Jehovah chooses people to prophesy to Israel and to remind them of their calling. They also transmit a prophetic and redeeming message.

The book of Isaiah is like a determining link in the *missio Dei*. It is known as “the gospel of the Old Testament,” since within the prophetic books, it is the one that most clearly presents the message of redemption and the atonement work of the Messiah, focused on the fact that Yahweh was always the Emmanuel, God with us (Isaiah 7:14; ch. 53). Isaiah proclaimed the glory of the LORD among the nations as well as his uniqueness. He made emphatic warnings against religious syncretism, idolatry, and religiosity. He enunciated hope based on God’s grace and mercy. He also condemned social injustice. The book of Isaiah presents great missional challenges and prompts us to refocus our perspective on the integral mission of God (Isaiah 58:6-7)

We can see that Israel fulfills its mission by living in accordance with the divine project rather than by traveling to distant lands to announce it. The Church of today, as a part of its commission, has the same call to obedience and holiness as the Hebrew people. These two elements are indispensable for the world in which we live to know the God we preach.

In the New Testament, I would like to address the missionary ministry of Jesus presented in the Gospel of Luke. In this Gospel, the author draws the attention of readers to the interest that the Lord takes in the poor and socially marginalized (publicans, Samaritans, lepers, women, children, and the sick) in a very complex cultural context. Not only did he meet their need, but he also freed and redeemed them from sin.

This Gospel shows the universality and completeness of the Messiah's mission. It shows a ministry full of inclusive and all-encompassing love, a love that crosses geographic, religious, cultural, social, political, and economic borders. This book reveals a Jesus who came to bring salvation not only to the people of Israel but to all humanity. Very importantly, the book repeatedly refers to the fulfillment of the Scriptures as a means of demonstrating the relationship between the promises made by the Lord to the people of Israel and to the church (Luke 4:17–21).

In passages such as Luke 24:44–49, Jesus clearly explains the nature of the mission of his disciples, highlighting their status as witnesses. He speaks of their being sent and invested with the power of the Holy Spirit—very important theological elements for the realization of the great commission.

Jesus was an excellent communicator—the best. He was part of the culture he lived in and managed to influence it. He had an appropriate message for each person, tailored to their needs. She looked for simple words and viable methods so that she could convey her speech. He showed us how to carry out the mission on earth, with love and authority.

Early in the book of Acts, the primitive church is described as eminently missionary (Acts 2:43–47). Without the word “mission” being mentioned, the first Christians lived for it, risking their lives and glorifying the Lord with their witness and faith.

That first speech of Peter on the day of Pentecost is a proclamation of God’s mission for the Church. He and the other apostles focused primarily on preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem and nearby areas. In turn, Paul addressed the Gentile world (Galatians 2:7). His calling as an apostle led him to undertake a wide missionary task, from Jerusalem to Illyricum. Many others participated in evangelizing the Gentiles, but none had a global strategic plan like the one that Paul conceived and executed with the support of the Holy Spirit. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God has given growth and growth.... for we are co-workers with God” (1 Corinthians 3:6, 9). This text illustrates the vision of this great servant who did not seek his glory but the exaltation of the Lord of the work. When Paul spoke of collaboration, he was manifesting a clear perception of the *missio Dei*.

The entire New Testament constitutes a training manual for mission. No part of it fails to evoke, in one way or another, the priesthood of the people, acquired by God and endorsed by him (1 Peter 2:9). Not even the prophetic book of Revelation escapes the missionary vision. Its Christocentric emphasis, the proclamation of the victory of the kingdom of God, and the description of the new heaven and the new earth reaffirm the veracity and power of the message we preach. This book is an exhortation to the faithfulness of the church, in any circumstance, as it is called to maintain its tenacity and faith in the midst of every trial or adversity, giving great importance to the testimony of the bride of Christ (Revelation 21:1, 2).

It is incumbent upon us today to search the Scriptures and seek biblical and hermeneutical foundations for Christian social responsibility. The objective of all this is to

identify interpretive principles in the texts and relate them to the ethical and social dimensions of the church's mission, in order to obtain a contextualized projection.

It is time to reform the dogmas and stereotypes that flood the minds and actions of missionaries. We need to eradicate practices that are not written in the Bible but that we have adopted from generation to generation and accepted as part of an inherited tradition. We need to eradicate practices that are not wrong but are viable for transformation.

II. Background History

Our ancestors have bequeathed to us a missionary history full of lived experiences. Each age has been characterized by the expression of its own vision and biblical basis for the mission. The influence of context, history, social relations, culture, and politics has been decisive in shaping the church's understanding of the world and, consequently, its missional action.

The emergence of humanism and the Renaissance movement during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century sparked a revolution in how missions were viewed. For the first time, salvation is seen as a divine gift, accomplished by God's grace alone through the redemptive work of Christ, and completed by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. It states that sacraments and merits do not justify or save people. It explains the decisive value that faith has in the life of a believer. It highlights the importance of individual participation in the Lord's redemptive work. With respect to missionary work, he makes all believers responsible for it since it includes all in the priesthood. It advocates that every Christian is a partner in God's mission in the world. Never before has the mission of God played such a prominent role, with goals so well focused. For Protestants of the Reformation, the objectives of mission were the glory of the Lord, the conversion of people, the establishment of the church, and the extension of the kingdom of God.

It is very significant that the decisive turn in history, which produced the Protestant Reformation, is not only in religious terms, but in the future of the Western world. It was enshrined in the founding doctrine of the oldest democracies, in modern public law, and in particular in the theory of fundamental rights. Protestant thought is a significant link in the history of humankind.

A. John Wesley and Missions

You cannot talk about the history of the church and missions without mentioning John Wesley. He was born in England on July 17, 1703, into an Anglican clergy family. He tried to serve the Lord from an early age. But it was after his second birth in the Spirit in 1738 at Aldersgate that he was able to understand and fulfill God's mission until his death. He began preaching the good news from every pulpit he could. But when they denied him access to these, he held that the world was his parish.

At his partner's suggestion, George Whitefield decided to preach outside despite being a priest of the High Anglican Church. In this way, he realized how many people were willing to hear the gospel and react to the faith. Thus began a great revival in England in the seventeenth century, especially among humble people: workers, miners, peasants, and even the homeless. A movement of the Spirit began to manifest itself in the most unexpected people. The emphasis of his preaching was Christian perfection. The growth in his numbers forced him to use laypeople in the ministry. He was characterized by traveling long distances on horseback, regardless of the weather, for days and nights throughout England, often on dangerous roads.

He gave concrete expression to his love for social justice: visiting prisoners, publicly denouncing the state of the prisons, speaking out against the slave trade, and opposing corruption. He contributed to the education of the most disadvantaged and to the biblical training of believers.

Wesley placed great importance on small groups. Through them, he encouraged discipleship and the renewal of the church. Wesley placed special importance on small groups; through them, he fostered discipleship and church renewal—what he termed “Christian meetings.” They had different levels; they were divided into societies, classes, and bands. They all responded to the spiritual needs of the believers. For example, penitence bands were created as a way of rehabilitation. They were designed for those who were struggling with serious personal problems of addiction or other deeply rooted moral or social dysfunction in their lives. “When Wesley died in 1771, he had traveled 250,000 miles, preaching in 40,000 meetings, and saw 14,000 people enter the membership of the Methodist church.”³

B. Origins of the Church of the Nazarene and the Mission

The Church of the Nazarene was founded by North American Reverends Phineas Bresse and Joseph Pomero Widney on October 20, 1896. Since its beginning, it has been committed to the most needy and marginalized. In the minutes of the organizational assembly of the First Church of the Nazarene of Los Angeles, California, dated October 30, 1895, we read the following:

The field of work to which we feel especially called is in the neighborhoods of cities that have been abandoned and wherever ruins and souls that seek forgiveness and cleansing of sins may be found.... Our goal is to carry out this work through missions in the cities, evangelistic services, and house-to-house visits. We also take care of the poor and comfort the dying.⁴

As small groups that later became our Denomination began to merge, there were already two missionary visionaries in the East who belonged to the Pentecostal Church of America: Hiram F. Reynolds and Susan Fitkin. So, there were already the first fruits of a work of global reach.

In 1913 and 1914, Reynolds, already serving as General Superintendent of the Church of the Nazarene, traveled around the world, visiting all mission fields. In addition to the superintendency, he served as secretary of Foreign Missions for 17 years. He was a strong and dedicated advocate for global missions. Their work laid the foundation for the Church of the Nazarene to become a global church.

Susan Norris Fitkin was an ordained Canadian minister with a strong missionary spirit. She applied to join a missionary ministry abroad but was rejected due to health problems. However, far from stopping, she became a great mobilizer for world missions. For three decades, she led the financial support and prayer ministry, an unpaid position. She was the founder and

³ Dorothy Bullón, *Holiness and Revivals: John Wesley and William Wilberforce, Apostles of the Integral Mission (Compassionate Ministry Region MAC-Church of the Nazarene, no date)*, p. 15

⁴ Minutes of the Organizational Assembly of the First Church of the Nazarene of Los Angeles, California, dated 30 October 1895, quoted by David A. Busic, *The City: Urban Churches in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition* (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2020), p. 24.

president of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society from September 2015 until her retirement in 1948. She served on the General Board of the Church of the Nazarene for 24 years. She and her husband founded and funded the Fitkin Memorial Hospital in Manzini, Swaziland, in 1924. They also funded Nazarene Bible schools in China, Beirut, and Lebanon. She used much of her personal income to fund mission projects outside her country.

In 1940, during World War II, some Nazarene missionaries managed to enter the Philippines and China. Among them was Mary Scott. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, there was an explosive boom in missionary work, with a notable growth in 1990. In the year 2001, at the General Assembly, there was a Nazarene presence in 138 countries.

We cannot forget the names and stories of self-giving of men and women like Leona Gadrner (1902-1927) in Cuba, Roger and Esther Carson in Peru (1918-1948), Ora Lovelace in Africa (1919-1944), Lyle Prescott (1945-1957) in Cuba, Harmon Schmelzenbach (1960-1994) in Africa, among many missionaries.

I want to offer a brief overview of the Church of the Nazarene's missionary history in Cuba, which has served as an inspiration for my own ministerial life. This history begins with Miss Leona Gardner, an American missionary who arrived on the island in 1902. For 25 years, she preached the Gospel in the Casilda and Trinidad area, located in the former province of Sancti Spíritus. Although she did not succeed in planting a recognized or formally instituted church, her perseverance and dedication remain truly admirable. The General Superintendent of the Church of the Nazarene, Hiram Reynolds, visited the island in 1916; he met Gardner and preached in Trinidad and Casilda. In 1945—eighteen years later—the American missionary Lyle Prescott and his family arrived in Cuba. Assigned by the Church of the Nazarene's World Mission as the director of the work, he carried out a truly commendable missionary ministry. On May 26, 1946, the first Sunday School was held in a private home in Santo Suárez, Havana—a date now recognized as the founding date of the Church of the Nazarene in this country.

From then on, Prescott continued planting churches in Havana and other provinces, together with missionaries John Hall, Spurgeon Hendrix, and Ardee Coolidge, until the number of churches reached 18. Prescott founded a Bible Institute on May 17, 1950. He was sent to Puerto Rico in 1957, where he died.

The last missionaries left the country in 1960, following the revolutionary triumph and the tension between the state and religious institutions. The Cuban church was in the hands of lay pastors. Guided by God, they did not let the work that was bequeathed to them die.

There was no further contact with the Nazarene Headquarters until 1979, when a visit was received from a General Superintendent, the Canadian George Coulter. He received the first report from the Cuban District Superintendent, Hildo Morejón.

Currently, the support that the Cuban missionary work receives from Nazarenes in the United States and Canada is very valuable, providing donations and financial resources for the construction of churches and other missionary purposes. Rev. Robert Prescott, son of the founder of the Cuban church, is one of the instruments the Lord has used most to extend the Kingdom throughout the island. He brings Work and Witness groups interested in expanding missions in Cuba. In 2024, the District Assemblies reported 150 organized churches, 33 missions, and 3 organized districts.

III. God's Mission in These Times

These are difficult times for the effective execution of the mission for the contemporary church. We are in the postmodern era, where disbelief prevails, and the people's faith has been lost. Concepts and institutions are secularized and more balanced and realistic. Relativity prevails: several truths, and each assumes the one that satisfies it. Subjectivism prevails. There is no interest in knowing reality; people are satisfied with what the senses perceive. People worry only about the present, obviate, and try to forget the past. They are not interested in the future because they consider it uncertain. Feelings have been revalued, and reason has been devalued. There is a death of ethics and a reign of aesthetics and beauty. There is a tendency to lack guilt, since it is difficult to distinguish between good and evil. There is an individualistic mentality; human beings live for themselves. People are not at the service of the community. They aspire that society serve them. There is a loss of faith in history.

This is an epoch of cultural decentralization, and cultural diversity is recognized. There is an exaltation of narcissism, where the progress of humanity is not important but the fulfillment of the person. Effort is devalued, and pleasure is valued. Conformism is the predominant attitude since the impossibility of changing reality is accepted. It is the preferences and feelings of the "I" that determine morality. Homosexuality and transsexuality are approved and promoted. Postmodern humans are vitiated by consumerism. The generations are equal in behavior. Adults tend to behave like adolescents. Today, people go more to platforms like YouTube and Facebook than to watch television programs, and much less to read any literature. More credit is given to any information that goes "viral" than to that of an expert in any subject. Children dream of being movie stars or stars of the most popular music genre.

In the midst of this panorama, the church must urgently and effectively continue executing the mission of God. Often, we are not properly oriented or prepared to reflect on the responsibilities we have in our contexts in light of biblical and theological principles. The Body of Christ must assume a role well aligned with that of the Holy Spirit, so that it can be inserted into the community with the same gospel but appropriate to a renewed society. The current depressing situation of humanity is an opportunity to break into the gospel. I will quote a phrase from the theologian René Padilla that illustrates the above: The whole world is a mission field, and every human need is an opportunity for missionary action.⁵

It is the moment when, seeking to develop strategies for prompt and truthful solutions, we, as Christian leaders, must engage the various multidisciplinary disciplines. They will complement our theological and biblical knowledge, always with careful, accurate analysis. All this for the analysis and transformation of reality, capable of overcoming ties and prejudices of the religious system, which need to be unmasked in each generation. We need to assume the projection of Guillermo Cook, who replaces the term "contextualization" with "incarnation," both of the Son of God and of his word. He states that the ministry of incarnation does not allow for a decontextualized gospel, but it is possible to make it incarnate in all cultures and societies.

We are called to implement God's comprehensive mission. It is a term that goes beyond a mere tendency sported by the servants of God who are committed to missionary work. It is a need today. We have to become local church agents of transformation. We must be believers capable of showing this hopeless world a Jesus not only interested in the salvation of people but

⁵ Carlos René Padilla, *What is Integral Mission?* (Ediciones Kairós, 2006), 17.

in their welfare as social beings. We must lead people to a quality of life that returns them to God's original purpose.

The key is to be the integral church, ready for the integral mission. Our congregations must commit to embodying the values of the Kingdom of God, bearing witness to the love and justice of Christ, but also seeking to impact and transform individuals both personally and socially. For this, we must carry out a detailed study of our mission field. This will allow us to make a correct diagnosis, which will help us develop strategies and programs appropriate to people's real needs.

I humbly believe that seminaries and Christian universities should prepare students with a range of knowledge, not only theological and biblical, but also other subjects. They should also provide them with useful skills to take on the enormous missionary challenge before us.

I consider it important that, for these social purposes, the church maintain a favorable relationship with other institutions. In this way, we will be able to project ourselves as a body that works for the integral good of humanity. It is necessary to achieve this, not only locally but with a more comprehensive vision. We work towards projects with a greater geographical and social reach. With the Lord, we can do wonders!

It is essential that, as people of God, we do not ignore the issue of poverty as a social stigma. We must assume it with a biblical position, far from indifference and well committed. It should be a challenge to be assumed at different levels, from the personal to the community. I also believe that environmental issues must be taken seriously by the church, recognizing that we are stewards of creation.

I conclude with this definition of the role of the church, as presented by Brian MacLaren and quoted by René Padilla in his book, *What is Integral Mission?*: “To equip and mobilize men and women for the mission of God in the world—not exclusively in the temple—which may or may not exist but in all fields of human action: in the home, in business, in the hospital, at the university, in the office, in the workshop... in short, in every place, since there is no place that is not within the orbit of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.”⁶

Will we work as a church to fully assume the mission entrusted to us by our Lord? Will we be distracted by other activities that are not the essence of *missio Dei*?

Lessons Learned

God is love; hence, God's missionary nature. This nature is materialized in God's dynamic relationship with the human race, in pursuit of recovering its original purpose. In the Bible, we have sufficient foundations for God's eternal mission. The history that has been built, and that which is built day by day, also speaks of the missionary will of the Lord.

I believe that the *missio Dei* for the church involves three elements:

1. The stewardship of everything that God has placed in our hands: nature, family, goods, gifts, and even our lives under the conviction that he is the Lord of everything and everyone.

⁶ Padilla, *What is the Integral Mission?* 16-17.

2. It is also the case that, as the spiritual Israel that we are, we should live in holiness, consecrated to the Lord, so that the world may believe in the one true God that we worship.
3. We must preach the gospel and make disciples like Jesus, breaking down, with the help of the Holy Spirit, all geographic, social, and cultural barriers of any kind that affect every area of their lives.

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