Salvation to the ends of the Earth

Kostenberger, A. J.

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NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 11

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Salvation to the ends of the earth

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSION

Andreas J. Köstenberger
and
Peter T. O’Brien

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Chapter Ten

Concluding synthesis

It is now time to draw together the various strands of mission teaching in Scripture and to conclude the present investigation with some final observations.

Summary of findings

The following biblical-theological sketch on mission shows the multifaceted yet unified nature of the scriptural teaching on this vital motif. There is an inherent dynamic and progression in the unfolding of the divine mission to save humanity from a profound spiritual predicament. At the same time, all aspects of this mission in its various dimensions can be traced back to the heart of a loving God and his redemptive initiative in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament

There was no 'mission' in the Garden of Eden and there will be no 'mission' in the new heavens and the new earth (though the results of 'mission' will be evident). From the first glimmer of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 to the end of this age, however, mission is necessitated by humanity's fall into sin and need for a Saviour, and is made possible only by the saving initiative of God in Christ.

Genesis

Once fallen, humanity lies under the wrath of God. Adam's relationship with God, his mate and others is severely affected, while the exercise of dominion over creation through work and procreation is characterized by frustration and pain. The increasing spread of sin is depicted in the narratives following the fall. Yet God remains faithful to his creation, entering into covenants with Noah (9:9–13) and Abraham (12:1–3; cf. 15:1–8; ch. 17). The latter is summoned to leave his native country on the basis of God's promise of a land, seed and blessing. Ultimately, this blessing extends not merely to Abraham's physical descendants but to
all who are 'children of Abraham' through faith (Gal. 3:6-9, 26-29; Rom. 4:16-17). The Abrahamic covenant provides the framework for God's dealings with humanity for the rest of biblical history, which culminates in the new covenant instituted by Abraham's 'seed', Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16).

The exodus and Israel's role among the nations
Once the Israelites have been delivered from bondage in Egypt, they are to be God's treasured possession out of all nations, 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod. 19:5-6). Israel is called because the whole earth belongs to Yahweh. His people, who are set apart to serve him as a holy God, are to mediate his presence and blessings to the surrounding nations. This does not mean that Israel is enjoined to engage in intentional cross-cultural mission. Rather, as the recipient of the divine blessings, the nation is to exalt God in its life and worship, attracting individuals from among the nations historically by incorporation and eschatologically by ingathering. Thus Rahab and her family and Ruth the Moabitess become part of Israel. Also, the Mosaic legislation makes special provision for the ger, the alien residing in Israel (cf. Exod. 12:48; 22:21). But intermarriage with foreigners is frequently limited, particularly in the post-exilic period (Neh. 13:23-27; Ezra 9 - 10). Overall, incorporation in Old Testament times related to a small number of individuals, while a large-scale ingathering of Gentiles was not expected until the end times (cf. esp. Is. 56:8).

The Davidic kingship and the eschatological pilgrimage of the nations
In 2 Samuel 7:13, David is assured by God that his kingdom will be established for ever. The establishment of the Davidic kingship is crucial for an understanding of Yahweh's rule over the nations and the fulfilment of his covenant promises to Abraham. During the reign of David's son, Solomon, various promises to Abraham and David are fulfilled: the Promised Land is fully conquered, Israel becomes a great nation, and the Jerusalem temple is built (cf. Deut. 12:5-11). Jerusalem becomes a world centre, epitomized by the Queen of Sheba's visit to the city. This visit serves as a paradigm for the eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Zion in later prophecy (Is. 2:2-4; 60 - 62; cf. Mic. 4:1-5; Pss. 36:8-9; 50:2). Zion, in turn, is depicted in some Old Testament apocalyptic passages as the centre of the new creation (Is. 35:1-10; 65:17-18).

In the last days, the nations will flock to Jerusalem to learn about
Yahweh and his ways (Is. 2:2–3; cf. Zech. 8:20–23; Mic. 4:1–2). As they come, they bring the scattered children of Israel with them (Is. 60:2–9). In an amazing reversal, the nations submit to Israel (v. 14), bring their wealth into the city (vv. 11–22) and join in the worship of Yahweh, whose people they have now become. Thus the prophet’s admonition, ‘Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth’ (Is. 45:22), is fulfilled. Significantly, this ingathering of Gentiles is depicted as an eschatological event, effected by God, not Israel. Moreover, the mode of this ingathering is attraction (the nations come to Israel), not active outreach (Israel going to the nations). In addition to the anticipation of the universal scope of eschatological salvation, several prophetic books envision the restoration of a remnant of Israel, including the inauguration of a new covenant (cf. esp. Jer. 31:31–34).

The Isaiahic Servant of the Lord
The Servant of Yahweh, who features in the four ‘Servant songs’ of Isaiah (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13 – 53:12; cf. 61:1–3), is one of the most important Old Testament figures whose ministry pertains to both Israel and the nations. While the Servant’s work is in the first instance related to the redemption of Jerusalem and Israel’s return to the holy city, his work will affect the entire world. The sequence of the Servant’s ministry, directed initially to Israel but resulting in blessing for the nations, follows a pattern similar to the Abrahamic promises and constitutes a partial fulfilment of these. The Servant’s death, which is clearly set forth in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, will not be the end of his career. God adds his ‘Amen’ to his work by raising and exalting him (53:10–12). The Servant will be satisfied with the results of his sacrifice and bring many into a right relationship with God (v. 11). His ministry was for pagans (52:13–15) and Israelites (53:1–6), witnesses and hearers, insiders and outsiders. Ultimately, however, it is for one group: ‘transgressors’—many of them. The Servant is the instrument of God’s grace to sinners and the key to the extension of the divine salvation to the ends of the earth.

The paradox concerning the identity of the Servant will not be resolved fully until the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, who is both the expected Messiah and the one who fulfils Israel’s destiny. In the Gospels, Israel’s role of world mission, which was forfeited through disobedience, is transferred to Jesus.

The nations in the Psalms
The nations represent the great mass of humanity in rebellion against
God and subject to divine judgment (Ps. 10:16). Yet they are still within the Creator's plan of grace, since he intends to bring blessing to the nations of the world. Fundamental to this inclusion of the nations is Israel's role as the people of God in whose privileges the nations will be invited to join. In the enthronement psalms (Pss. 47; 93; 96–97; 99), Zion is the permanent centre of the worship of Yahweh in Israel. Like the tabernacle and Mt Sinai before it, Zion is holy because of Yahweh's presence, and if his people are 'holy' because of Yahweh's presence in Zion, then Israel is separated from the nations (cf. Ps. 78). Salvation for them must therefore involve their coming out of the world to Zion in order to worship the Lord in the end times (Pss. 72:8–11; 102:12–22).

The second-temple period
Traditionally, the view largely prevailed that second-temple Judaism engaged in mission. If that were the case, the early church's mission would have operated within the parameters already established by Judaism. However, if mission is defined as a conscious, deliberate, organized and extensive effort to convert others to one's religion by way of evangelization or proselytization, it is doubtful whether this kind of activity was characteristic of second-temple Judaism. For while the Jewish religion was doubtless successful in attracting converts or proselytes, the initiative in such instances usually lay with Gentiles who desired to join Judaism; conversions were not usually the result of intentional Jewish missionary efforts. This is not contradicted by Matthew 23:15, where Jesus censures the Pharisees for their misguided zeal in proselytization.

Second-temple Judaism, therefore, should therefore not be regarded as a missionary religion. The operative paradigm was one of attraction rather than intentional outreach. While Jews did allow sympathizers and proselytes to participate in their religious practices to a certain extent, they were primarily preoccupied with national or sectarian concerns. The inclusion of Gentiles in the orbit of God's salvation was not expected until the end times as a special work of God, a view that prevented intertestamental Jews from actively reaching out to Gentiles. The missions of Jesus and the early church thus did not merely build upon Jewish precedent but replaced the old paradigm of mission with a new mode of outreach.

The New Testament
If Mark was the first to write a Gospel, mission gradually moves to the forefront of the Gospel tradition. Nevertheless, the Gospels are
transitional in that they portray Jesus as still focused on his mission to Israel. It is the death and resurrection of Jesus together with Pentecost and the subsequent events recorded in the book of Acts that open the floodgates and render the Christian mission a truly universal phenomenon. Here Paul's teaching and practice take centre stage.

Mark

Mark focuses his message on the mission of Jesus, the Son of God (Mark 1:1). While Jesus' ministry is directed primarily to the Jews (cf. esp. 7:27a), he does have occasional contact with Gentiles, albeit always at their initiative (5:1-20; 7:24-30). Towards the end of the book, reference is made to the future proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles (13:10; 14:9) and the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of the temple as a house of prayer for all nations (11:17, quoting Is. 56:7). The Gospel's climactic christological confession is uttered, not by a Jew, but by a Roman Gentile (Mark 15:39).

Despite portraying Jesus as open to minister to individual Gentiles who approach him and as envisioning a future mission to the Gentiles, however, Mark does not show Jesus as embarking on a 'Gentile mission'. Rather, he presents him as following the pattern of Old Testament (and intertestamental) Israel, whose presence was to attract the surrounding nations to her God without going out of her way to reach them. While Jesus is shown to send out the twelve as part of their preparation for ministry (6:7-13), there is little sustained emphasis on their mission. Rather, they are portrayed as grappling, often unsuccessfully, with understanding who Jesus is (e.g. 6:49-52).

Matthew

Matthew's Gospel, while generally cohering with Mark's portrayal, transcends the latter by ending his Gospel with the Great Commission, the risen Christ's command to his followers to disciple the nations. Also, he grounds the missions of Jesus and of his disciples more explicitly in the Old Testament antecedents. According to Matthew, Jesus the Messiah fulfilled Israel's destiny as the representative, paradigmatic Son of God, with the result that God's blessings to the nations, promised to Abraham, are to come to fruition through Jesus in the mission of his followers.

Like the other evangelists, Matthew portrays Jesus' mission as proceeding along salvation-historical lines: first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. While Jesus' disciples prior to the resurrection are instructed to limit their mission to Israel (10:5-6; 15:24), the Great Commission
extends their summons to all the nations. Occasionally in Matthew Jesus ministers to Gentiles, but never at his own initiative (cf. e.g. 8:5–13; 15:24–27). Towards the end of his Gospel, Matthew refers to the preaching of the ‘gospel of the kingdom’ as a witness to all the nations (24:14; cf. also 26:13; Mark 13:10).

Like Mark’s Gospel, Matthew’s account focuses on Jesus’ mission, which includes the preparation of his followers for ministry. But unlike Mark, Matthew does not end on a note of doubt and fear; rather, he shows Jesus on a Galilean mountain, surveying the territory like a conquering general, assuring his followers of his unlimited authority in heaven as well as on earth, and commanding them to spread the victorious, glorious news of the gospel to all the nations. Matthew thus ends on a note of triumph and joyous expectation: the community of Jesus, with its conquering general at its side, is sent on a worldwide mission.


Luke’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus and his salvation; the book of Acts traces the movement of that salvation to the Gentiles. The first volume begins with a summary of God’s promises to Israel about to be fulfilled in Jesus. This sets the stage for the second volume which presents the regathering of ‘Israel’ and her mission as a light to the nations. The infancy narratives of Luke 1 – 2 indicate that Israel’s hopes for a Saviour of David’s line are about to be realized (1:30–35; cf. 2 Sam. 7:12–13). Through the birth of Jesus, God will restore Israel and fulfil his purposes for Abraham and his descendants. The Abrahamic promises, however, are brought to fulfilment in those who fear God (1:50–55), not in national Israel. Further, according to the third evangelist, the Lord’s Messiah accomplishes the role of Yahweh’s Servant (2:32; 4:18–19; cf. Is. 42:6; 49:6–9; 61:1–2).

In comparison with Mark and Matthew, Luke portrays Jesus’ mission in more overtly universal terms, that is, as ultimately directed also towards the Gentiles. But like his Synoptic counterparts, Luke maintains the historical fact that Jesus did not actively reach out to Gentiles during his earthly ministry. Unlike the other Synoptists, however, Luke composes a second volume, and there makes clear that the boundaries still in place prior to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection are removed subsequent to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Luke’s second volume presents what ‘Jesus continued to do and teach’ (cf. 1:1) by his Spirit through the early church led by the apostles. This establishes the subtle but vital point that Jesus, even after his ascension, has not disappeared from the scene; rather, from his exalted position at the Father’s right hand, he continues to direct and oversee the divine mission. Luke’s account traces the progress of gospel proclamation from Jerusalem – the centre from which the word of the Lord goes forth – to Judea and Samaria, and even ‘to the ends of the earth’ (1:8). In a major paradigm shift from a centripetal movement (men and women coming to Israel) to a centrifugal one (God’s people going out to others), the twelve are to function as ‘witnesses’ to Israel and subsequently Paul as a ‘witness’ to the Gentiles.

Events with major significance for the mission recorded in the book of Acts include Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2), Stephen’s martyrdom (ch. 7), the spread of the gospel to Judea and Samaria (8:4–40), Paul’s conversion and commission (9:1–31), Cornelius and the Gentiles (10:1 – 11:18), Paul’s first missionary journey (13:1 – 14:28) and the Council of Jerusalem (15:1–35). The last has been depicted as ‘the most crucial chapter in the whole book’ since it describes the turning point in Luke’s story. The threat to the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles is turned around so that the Christian mission now extends to Western Asia and Europe.

Nothing can hinder the irresistible progress of the gospel, and God’s people, through his Spirit, overcome all obstacles. Paul and Barnabas continue the ministry of the Servant, for they are now the ‘light for the Gentiles’ (13:47, quoting Is. 49:6, a passage applied to Jesus in Luke 2:32), and while proclamation still begins with the Jews (3:26; 13:46; 18:5; 28:25–28), no distinction is now made between them and Gentiles concerning salvation and reception into God’s people: faith in Jesus as Lord is all that is required (e.g. 16:31). The conclusion of Luke’s second volume describes an open-ended mission to Jews and Gentiles (28:17–31). This reminds readers of an unfinished task and the urgency of being identified with the ongoing advance of the gospel of salvation.
Paul

From the time of his conversion and calling on the road to Damascus, the gospel, that is, the authoritative and gracious message of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, became the determinative focus of Paul's whole life (Acts 9). His encounter with the risen Christ led to a 'paradigm shift' in his thinking: he came to understand that Jesus is at the centre of God's saving purposes, and that he is Israel's Messiah, the Son of God and Lord of all. As the crucified and exalted one, he bore the curse 'for us' and brought the law to an end as a way of salvation. It was God's plan that 'the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Jesus Christ' (Gal. 3:13–14).

The apostle understood his missionary activity to Gentiles within the context of an Old Testament expectation in which the nations would on the final day partake of God's ultimate blessings to Israel. Paul knew that he was entrusted with God's 'mystery', the eschatological revelation that now Jews and Gentiles alike were gathered together into one body, the church (Rom. 16:25–26; Eph. 2:1–3:13; Col. 1:25–27).

Paul was totally committed to and involved in the advance of the gospel. He had been set apart for this divine kerygma and so he served God wholeheartedly in this gospel of his Son. So great was Paul's passion that his readiness to proclaim it knows no limits (Rom. 1). He is convinced that it is utterly reliable, for God himself is the author of it. At the centre of the apostolic gospel is the unique Son of God, the mediator of salvation between God and man, who was in his earthly life the seed of David, the Messiah. By his resurrection he has become the powerful Son of God — Jesus Christ, our Lord (vv. 3–4). The saving power of the gospel is spelled out in the light of humanity's dreadful predicament outside of Christ. The world comprising Jews and Gentiles stands under judgment (1:18 – 3:20), but this apparently weak and foolish message, the content of which centres on Jesus Christ, mediates the almighty power of God that leads to salvation (1:16–17).

The purpose of Paul's missionary endeavours, as well as that of his apostolic gospel, is 'for his [Jesus'] name's sake ... to call people from among the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith' (Rom. 1:5), that is, in the fullness of time, to bring the nations into captive obedience to himself. Jesus Christ now rules over the new people of God. The first task included within the scope of his missionary commission was primary evangelism. Paul's ambition was to go where the gospel had not yet been preached (Rom. 15:20–21). His strategy focused on preaching and evangelizing Jews as well as Gentile
proselytes and God-fearers in local synagogues. The apostle proclaimed the gospel and, under God, converted men and women.

But he also founded churches as a necessary element in his missionary task. Paul's aim was to establish Christian congregations in strategic (mostly urban) centres from where the gospel could spread further to the surrounding regions. Conversion to Christ meant incorporation into him, and thus membership within a Christian community. Furthermore, through his practice of residential missions and his nurture of churches by teaching and admonition, it is clear that Paul sought to bring men and women to full maturity in Christ. He anticipates that his converts will be his joy and crown as they stand fast on the final day, so demonstrating that he had not run in vain in his ministry (2 Cor. 1:14; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19). In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul emphasizes that God is the Saviour of all (1 Tim. 2:3-4; 4:10; Titus 2:10-11; 3:4) and provides the post-apostolic church with a pattern of organization and qualifications for its leadership.

While Paul was called and commissioned to be the apostle to Gentiles (Rom. 11:13), he ardently prayed for the salvation of his own people. He recognized that although there has been a temporary and partial hardening of Israel which led to the extension of the blessings of salvation to the Gentiles and ultimately the whole world, God intends to bring his saving grace to Israel. There is a fundamental equality of Jew and Gentile in the saving plan of God. At the end of Romans 9 - 11, then, the apostle bursts into joy and admiration for God’s merciful plan in which Jew and Gentile alike participate in salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ (11:33-36).

The apostle’s writings stand in close relationship with those of Luke, his associate in travels and ministry (see the 'we' passages in Acts). Both are united in their focus on reaching Gentiles. Both also share a strategic mindset that seeks to promote Christianity in ever-widening concentric circles, in Paul’s case all the way to Spain (Rom. 15:24).

Paul’s writings wrestle in particular with Jewish unbelief; the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the church; the nature of the gospel in relation to law; and the implications of Christ’s death and resurrection for the life of the believer.

With regard to mission, it is evident that this motif is not equally predominant in all of Paul’s letters. It seems that in certain instances Paul had to focus primarily on internal struggles or believers’ lack of maturity so that he could not develop the theme of mission more fully (e.g. Gal. or 1 - 2 Cor.). In other instances, however, Paul involves his recipients more directly in mission work, such as in the case of the
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Philippians, whom he calls ‘partners’ in ministry (Phil. 1:5, 27; 2:16; 4:10–19), presenting himself as a model for his converts to follow (1 Cor. 9:19 – 11:1). In relation to the spiritual warfare in which all Christians are engaged, he urges his readers to stand firm against the onslaughts of the evil one and his powers, and this involves resisting temptation (see Eph. 4:27) and announcing the gospel of peace in the power of God’s Spirit (Eph. 6:10–20, esp. 15, 17). Overall, the Pauline mission takes centre stage in Paul’s epistles, with the Pauline churches being expected to do their part to spread the gospel within their sphere of influence.

John

John shares with Luke the conviction that the mission of the earthly Jesus is continued in the mission of the exalted Jesus through his followers. However, while Luke writes two programmatic volumes, John accomplishes the same purpose in one: His teaching on mission focuses on Jesus who, as the sent Son, fulfils his redemptive mission in complete dependence on and obedience to the Father ‘who sent’ him (e.g. 4:34). While the first part of John’s Gospel shows Jesus’ rejection by his own people Israel (1:11), the second part focuses on his preparation of his new-covenant community to continue his mission following his crucifixion and resurrection (chs. 13 – 17).

Anticipating his exaltation to the Father, Jesus promises to send ‘another helper’ (14:16) and to answer prayer in his name (14:13–14). He calls on his followers to glorify him by ‘going’ and bearing fruit (15:16) as they bear witness together with the Spirit (15:20–26). Love and unity are to be characteristic of these believers (13:34–35; 15:12, 17; 17:20–26). In the Johannine commissioning narrative, the crucified and risen Lord, the Sent One, now turned sender, breathes his Spirit on the disciples and charges them to proclaim forgiveness of sins in his name (20:21–23). The wording of Jesus’ commission, ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’ (20:21), makes his own relationship with the Father the basic paradigm for the disciples’ relationship with Jesus in the pursuit of their mission. Finally, the Gospel’s declared purpose is that many might believe (that is, come to first-time faith) in Jesus (20:30–31).

1 In the Pastoral Epistles Paul combats false teaching by encouraging behaviour that is consistent with the standards of the gospel (1 Tim. 1:11). A godly life-style is pleasing to ‘God our Saviour, who wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth’ (2:3–4). Such behaviour provides an example for mission-minded Christians in all generations who, in a desire to win many, seek to make the doctrine of God more attractive (Titus 2:10).
CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS

Of all the Gospels, John attempts the most conscious theological reflection regarding the relationship between the mission of Jesus and that of his disciples. However, John does not teach an ‘incarnational model’. To the contrary, he portrays the Word-become-flesh as unique in every respect (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). While Jesus’ mission was tied up with the final, decisive revelation and redemption, the disciples are to serve as his representatives, proclaiming him as the Way, the Truth and the Life, and as the one through whom forgiveness of sins and eternal life are now available. John also offers a profound reflection on the way in which Jesus’ followers remain connected with their Lord after his exaltation. They are linked with him in a living relationship which enables them to bear fruit (ch. 15), and they are joint witnesses with the Spirit who mediates Jesus’ presence to them (15:26–27).

The General Epistles

In their struggle with heretical teaching, Jude, 2 Peter and 1–3 John display an essential prerequisite for mission: zeal for the ‘faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints’ (Jude 3). John’s second and third epistles deal with the issue of extending or refusing hospitality to false teachers. But it is Hebrews and 1 Peter that contribute most to a biblical theology of mission. Addressing a congregation in danger of reverting to Judaism, the author of Hebrews contends that God’s final revelation occurred in his Son, Jesus (1:1–3), and that his readers neglect ‘such a great salvation’ at grave peril (2:3; the ‘warning passages’). Christians are portrayed as running a race following their forerunner, Jesus, into heaven (6:20; 12:1–3, 12–13). They are cast as pilgrims and exiles in search of a homeland, a better country and a ‘city prepared by God’ (11:13–16; cf. 12:22). As followers of the one who endured great hostility from sinners (12:3), believers are not to be afraid to suffer and to identify openly with their crucified Lord (13:13; cf. 10:25–26).

Like the author of Hebrews, Peter describes believers as sojourners and ‘resident aliens’ in this world (1 Pet. 1:1, 17; 2:11; cf. Heb. 11:9, 13). He exhorts his readers to view their suffering from an eschatological perspective: they are to be mindful that an imperishable inheritance awaits them in heaven and that they are shielded by faith through God’s power until their salvation will be revealed on the last day (1 Pet. 1:4–5). The believing community is shown to fulfil the calling of Old Testament Israel which was to ‘declare the praises’ of God as a mediatorial body (2:5–9; cf. Is. 43:21). Believers’ mission is to take on the form of verbal witness (1 Pet. 2:9; 3:15), undergirded by
a holy, spiritually separated life (1:13 – 2:10), a God-glorifying response to suffering (esp. 2:13–25; 3:8–18b) and proper submission to earthly authorities (2:13, 18; 3:1; 5:1, 5).

Revelation

The book of Revelation depicts the result of mission: people from every tribe and nation gathered in heaven to worship God and the Lamb (1:7; 4:10–11; 5:9; 7:4–17; 14:1–5). This marks the fulfilment of God’s covenants with Abraham (all nations are blessed in his seed, Christ) and David (the exalted Lord is the eternal ruler of his people). The entire book, including the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3, challenges believers to renewed spiritual zeal and commitment and exhorts them to persevere in their suffering (cf. 14:12). The seer’s apocalyptic visions depict an eternal state free from pain, suffering and death (21:4). This indicates that creation has come full circle, with the Edenic state not merely restored but superseded. God’s vindication of the righteous (martyrs) and his judgment of the wicked are shown to serve the purpose of theodicy. John’s visions are cast in terms of the pervasive evil influence of the Roman Empire (‘the whore Babylon’, chs. 17 – 18), a precursor of the Antichrist. The concluding chapters depicting the ‘new Jerusalem’ and the new heavens and the new earth portray the restoration of God’s created order and the fulfilment of the divine purposes for his chosen people.

To sum up, Revelation is not primarily concerned with exhorting believers to engage in mission. Its purpose is rather to put believers’ present suffering in eternal perspective. The eternal state will witness a radical reversal of power and worship: while currently the perverse and corrupt Beast wields control and exercises its seductive influence, Christ at his coming will judge the evil world-system and lead his saints to triumph. Even unbelief and stubborn rebellion are shown ultimately to serve the purpose of bringing glory to God. For in light of the world’s committed refusal to accept God’s salvation, God is shown to be justified in pronouncing its final condemnation. All mission has come to an end, and it becomes clear that mission is in fact a means to an end, the end being a total focus on the worship and the glory of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Some concluding observations and implications

God’s saving plan is the overarching message of the Bible

Our study of the biblical revelation has demonstrated clearly that the
divine plan of extending salvation to the ends of the earth is the major thrust of the Scriptures from beginning to end. If the first indications of God’s purposes for the world appear in the creation account of Genesis 1, and subsequently in the call of Abram (Gen. 12) which is profoundly related to God’s dealings with the nations, then the Bible ends with a vision of ‘a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb’ praising in a loud voice and saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’ (Rev. 7:9–10; cf. 14:6). God’s saving plan for the whole world forms a grand frame around the entire story of Scripture. His mission is bound up with his salvation which moves from creation to new creation. Its focus is on God’s gracious movement to save a desperately needy world that is in rebellion against him and which stands under his righteous judgment. The Lord of the Scriptures is a missionary God who reaches out to the lost, and sends his servants, and particularly his beloved Son, to achieve his gracious purposes of salvation. In the final paragraph of Isaiah 66, which describes an eschatological vision of staggering proportions, the Lord himself is the missionary who gathers and rescues people from all nations in order that they may see his glory (vv. 18–24).

The appropriate response of those who have come to understand and experience the saving grace of God in his Son should be one of wonder, awe and gratitude to him, our mighty God. And since the ultimate goal of the divine mission is the glory of God – that he might be known and honoured for who he really is – then what better way to express this than in Paul’s doxology of Romans 11:33–36?

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
   How unsearchable his judgments,
      and his paths beyond tracing out!
‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?
   Or who has been his counsellor?’
‘Who has ever given to God,
   that God should repay him?’
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
   To him be the glory for ever!
Amen.

The mission of Jesus in God’s plan
At the centre of God’s saving purposes is Jesus the Messiah, in whom
the Old Testament Scriptures have been fulfilled. In his Son Jesus, whom he has sent to this world, God has confirmed his earlier promises to Israel and brought the nation’s history to a climax. The salvation which the Lord Jesus Christ brings is in fulfilment of the divine promises made to Abraham and the fathers, to Israel and to the house of his servant David. Through the Saviour’s birth, the divine word by which Israel would be a blessing to the world is brought to fruition (Luke 1 – 2). As God’s Son, Jesus is Israel’s Messiah who replays the story of the nation’s experience in the wilderness, in what amounts to a new exodus (Luke 4:1–13). At the same time his relationship to all humanity is as their representative, since he is the ‘Son of Adam, the Son of God’ (Luke 3:38).

So within the divine saving plan the basic and foundational mission is that of Jesus who has been sent by God to Israel (Luke 4:16–30), and subsequently, through his witnesses, to the Gentiles (Luke 24:45–49). Anointed by the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18–19), Jesus is conscious that he has been sent from heaven for his mission to ‘preach the good news’ of God’s rule, and to proclaim ‘release’ to the captives, a release which is first and foremost ‘the forgiveness of sins’. In other words, it is a picture of total forgiveness and salvation just as the expression had become in Isaiah 61.

According to John’s Gospel, Jesus is a unique person who is both fully divine (John 1:14, 18) and fully human, and therefore perfectly qualified to carry out his unique mission. This culminates in his ‘exaltation’ and ‘glorification’. For the fourth evangelist God’s action on behalf of humanity is centred in Christ’s work on the cross (John 3:13–17; 4:34; 6:51–58; 10:11, 15, 17–18), and in his revelation of God himself in word and deed (cf. 1:14, 18). In accordance with the divine purpose, Jesus’ mission leads to suffering and death. What is written in Scripture about him finds fulfilment (cf. Is. 53): he is numbered with the transgressors, and dies in Jerusalem, rejected as Messiah and Son of Man on earth, but vindicated in heaven. His death, resurrection and ascension are the climactic events of history.

Contemporary Christians need to recognize that Jesus’ mission is the fundamental mission in the Scriptures. He is the Messiah and Lord who has fulfilled the purposes of God through his coming, and especially in his death and resurrection. Our own great indebtedness to him is obvious. He is the one who has announced to us the good news of God’s rule, and on the basis of his death he has brought forgiveness of sins and salvation to needy men and women.
The mission of others: Jesus sends his witnesses to continue his mission

Although the foundational mission during his earthly ministry was Jesus, being sent by God to Israel (Luke 4:16–30; cf. 20:13), the twelve disciples and the seventy-two are intimately involved with Jesus in his mission to Israel and play a key role within it (Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–24). They are sent by the one who is himself sent from God. Jesus did not embark on a universal mission during the course of his earthly ministry, but there are hints and anticipations throughout that his saving work will have worldwide repercussions (Matt. 8:5–13; 15:24–27; Mark 5:1–20; 7:24–30; Luke 4:24–27; 13:28–30; 14:23–24).

Likewise, after his death and resurrection, with the way now open for repentance and the forgiveness of sins to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations (Luke 24:47), the sending of Jesus by the Father is still the essential mission. There is now, however, a major development within the story as to how God’s saving purposes for Israel and the nations are to be realized. Jesus’ universal mission, which is grounded in his death and resurrection (v. 46), is to be effected by his disciples as witnesses to the gospel after he returns to the Father (v. 49; cf. Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; etc.). They have been chosen by him, and are to be equipped by the Holy Spirit for this task (Luke 24:49; cf. Acts 1:4–5, 8). The twelve are to be his witnesses ‘in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8, 22). They will bear testimony to Israel (2:22; 13:31; cf. 10:36–39), while later, Paul, who is included among the number of witnesses, takes the testimony to the ends of the earth, that is, to the Gentiles (9:15; 22:14–15; 26:16).

God sent the risen Jesus, his servant (Acts 3:13, 26; cf. Is. 53:12), to bring blessing to ‘all peoples on earth’, in the first instance to Israel (the ‘heirs of the prophets and of the covenant’, v. 25), then to the Gentiles (v. 26). It is through the witness of the apostles that God sends his Son (note Peter’s own testimony in Acts 3). By listening to this witness, the hearers can now respond to Jesus, the prophet like Moses (v. 22). The mission of Jesus, in which he is sent first to Israel and then to the Gentiles, takes place in and through the testimony of the twelve and later Paul’s witness, with the result that Jesus is received by those who hear and believe.

The same fundamental points, in different terms, are made in Matthew 28:18–20, where the disciples are commissioned by Jesus to make disciples of all the nations, and in the Gospel of John, where the mission of the disciples derives from the mission of Jesus. They are
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called (John 1:35–51), trained and commissioned (20:21–23) by Jesus, and their task is described from beginning to end as ‘following Jesus’ (1:37; 21:22).

Several implications flow from the fact of Jesus' foundational mission leading to others being sent by him to engage in his mission. First, contemporary Christians need to recognize that the mission which really matters in God's sight is not ours but that of Jesus. Matthew, Luke and John conceive of the mission of God's people as ultimately the mission of the exalted Jesus carried out by his followers in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Son who has been sent has not relinquished the ultimate control and direction of this mission (cf. Matt. 28:18–20). Accordingly, at the turn of the millennium we need consciously to identify ourselves, both individually and corporately, with Jesus' mission and gracious saving purposes for men and women in our day.

Secondly, recognizing the foundational nature of his mission should lead to a greater humility on our part as God's people in the tasks we undertake in his name. The church does not operate alongside, or even as a replacement for, Jesus. We are God's people under orders. Our proclamation of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name should be accompanied by a humble spirit (cf. John 13:1–5), mutual love (cf. 13:35; 15:13) and unity (17:21, 23, 25).

The sovereignty of God in mission

Given that the divine plan of salvation reaching the ends of the earth is the major thrust of the Scriptures, moving from creation to new creation, it is not surprising that the same Scriptures assert from beginning to end God's lordship in mission and salvation. This dimension clearly has been evident throughout each of the preceding chapters, from God's creation of the world through to the climactic events surrounding the breaking in of his kingdom in the ministry of Jesus and his apostles. God has mightily and powerfully sent his Son to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10; cf. 4:18–10), and intimately involved in this mission of salvation were Jesus' apostolic witnesses.

Several related aspects of God's sovereignty in mission have important implications for our ongoing and contemporary mission, particularly in a context where pluralism has made rapid gains.

First, God's sovereignty in mission is especially evident in the progress of the word of the gospel. In the book of Acts, this theme, which has already been anticipated within the broad scope of Jesus' ministry in Luke's Gospel and set up in Acts 1:1–11, is a major motif
and ‘provides the main story-line of Acts’. It is confirmed throughout Luke’s second volume at critical points in the narrative by summaries which stress how impressive and far-reaching this advance of the gospel is. Yet this is no triumphalistic advance, for the word of God and its messengers encounter hostility and persecution that are pervasive and constant. In spite of the opposition, however, nothing can ultimately hinder the irresistible progress of the gospel, for God is the one who is sovereignly at work. He has ordained, planned, guided and supported this dynamic advance. Throughout Acts the ‘word of God’, the content of which is the ‘kingdom of God’ and the ‘salvation of God’, depends for its progress on the purpose, will and plan of God. And this word does not return empty. Like God’s word in Isaiah 55, it will accomplish what he desires, and achieve the purpose for which he sends it (v. 11). Similar points, as we have already seen, are made about God’s sovereignty in mission by the apostle Paul in relation to the saving power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16–17; 3:21–26) and its dynamic advance (Phil. 1:14–18; Col. 1:6, 10; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13; 2 Thess. 3:1–2).

Secondly, and related to the first implication, the mission of God in this world cannot be thwarted. The rejection of Jesus by his own people, a rejection that culminates in the cross, occurred within the predeterminate counsel of God. Sinful human resistance to the divine plan of salvation is overruled and used by the sovereign Lord of history to achieve his own purposes. The world’s rejection of God’s people and their mission in Christ’s name is not the final word. Believers should not respond in like manner and reject the world. Instead, we are to be firm in our resolve to proclaim the gospel as we bear testimony to Jesus (cf. John 15:18–27), knowing that the sovereign Lord draws people to himself. As believers carry out this mission, we are assured that all the resources needed for this outreach will be provided, and God’s purposes finally will triumph.

**The advance of the gospel leads to the founding of settled Christian communities**

The New Testament makes it plain that the mission of Jesus, in which the apostles and others were engaged, was not concluded when men and women, Jews and Gentiles, were converted or brought into an initial saving relationship with God. We have already seen, particularly in Acts and the letters of Paul, that the advance of the gospel or the

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progress of the word of God leads to the founding of settled Christian communities. The apostolic documents of the New Testament bear witness to a wide-ranging series of activities that result in believers' being built up in Christ, and formed into vibrant Christian congregations. This is particularly evident in the case of Paul. He was engaged in primary evangelism and proclaimed the message of the grace of God so that men and women were converted, but he also founded churches and sought to bring believers to full maturity in Christ as a necessary element in his missionary task. Conversion to Christ meant incorporation into a Christian community. Paul anticipates his converts being his joy and crown, as they stand fast on the final day, thereby showing that he had not run in vain in his ministry.

Similarly, the theological instructions and warnings of the General Epistles, particularly 1 Peter and Hebrews, which urge Christians to view their sufferings from an eschatological perspective and so glorify God in their response, are intended to strengthen them in leading holy, separated lives as they bear witness and declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Pet. 2:9). Peter and the author of Hebrews were committed in their teaching and admonition to bringing believers to full maturity in Christ.

If the apostolic model is to be followed by missionaries in the contemporary scene, then the initial proclamation of the gospel and the winning of converts does not conclude the missionary task. Forming believers into mature Christian congregations, providing theological and pastoral counsel against dangers arising from inside and outside churches, strengthening believers both individually and corporately as they face suffering and persecution, so that they will stand fast in the Lord, all fall within the scope of what is involved in continuing the mission of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ.

Mission and the final goal

We have understood the notion of 'mission' (which, strictly speaking, is not a biblical term) as intimately bound up with God's saving plan that moves from creation to new creation, and as framing the entire story of Scripture. It has to do with God's salvation reaching the ends of the earth: that is, his gracious movement in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to rescue a desperately needy world that is in rebellion against him and stands under his righteous judgment. Clearly the notion of 'sending' is central to any treatment of mission, but by this we do not simply mean the instances of the sending terminology in both Old and
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New Testaments. Rather, our focus has been on the concept of sending, within the above-mentioned biblical-theological framework, and this has necessitated our looking at related issues, such as: who sends? For what purposes? What activities fall within the sphere of the sending? And what are the long-range goals of mission?

The Lord of the Scriptures is a missionary God who not only reaches out and gathers the lost but also sends his servants, and particularly his beloved Son, to achieve his gracious saving purposes. As many have rightly observed, the most important mission in the Scriptures is the missio Dei. Jesus Christ is the ‘missionary’ par excellence: the basic and foundational mission is his. He has been sent by the Father to effect forgiveness and salvation, especially through his death and resurrection (cf. Luke 4:18–19; 24:46–47), and then to announce it to Jews and Gentiles alike. In fulfilment of the Servant’s role his task is to bring (or, perhaps, be) God’s salvation to the ends of the earth.

The mission of the exalted Jesus is accomplished through the witness of the apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit. The one who is himself sent by God sends his representatives to bear testimony to his salvation, to announce the forgiveness of sins and to make disciples of all nations. In other words, his witnesses continue the mission of Jesus by declaring to men and women everywhere the glorious gospel of the grace of God. As the Father has sent him, so Jesus sends them. Moreover, this testimony to Jesus and his saving work involves a wide-ranging series of activities that result in believers being built up in Christ and formed into Christian congregations. It is not limited simply to primary evangelism and its immediate results. Conversion to Christ necessarily involved incorporation into a Christian community.

Contemporary disciples who follow in the footsteps of the apostles and first witnesses are caught up in God’s majestic saving plan, and because of their identity with Jesus they continue his mission. Its focus is the apostolic gospel which is proclaimed under the sovereignty of God, in full acknowledgment of the supremacy of the Lord Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit. This mission of God’s people within the world is to be understood within an eschatological perspective, that is, it is grounded in the saving events of the gospel and keeps an eye on the final goal – the gathering of men and women from every nation, tribe, people and language before the throne of God and the Lamb.

In this era between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ God’s people are a body of pilgrims and resident aliens. They suffer and are persecuted for the sake of Christ’s name, but in the midst of this they are to follow his
example, demonstrating patience and a gentle spirit and showing that ultimately they do not belong to the world. Moreover, the gospel must be preserved pure if it is to be proclaimed persuasively and with God’s saving power. And Christians should adorn that gospel with their godly lifestyle and proper relationships, if their spoken words are not to have negative effects on unbelievers.

Finally, continuing the mission of Jesus in the contemporary context will involve the nurture and pastoral care of men and women by feeding them with the word of God so that those who have come into a relationship with Christ will be brought to maturity in him and will stand fast before their Lord on the final day.