Short Studies in
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY



THE MISSION OF GOD

AND THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

JUSTIN A. SCHELL

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The Mission of God and the Witness of the Church

Justin A. Schell

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To
the mission mobilizers
who remind us that the harvest is plentiful
but the laborers are few

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Series Preface

Most of us tend to approach the Bible early on in our Christian lives as a vast, cavernous, and largely impenetrable book. We read the text piecemeal, finding golden nuggets of inspiration here and there, but remain unable to plug any given text meaningfully into the overarching storyline. Yet one of the great advances in evangelical biblical scholarship over the past few generations has been the recovery of biblical theology—that is, a renewed appreciation for the Bible as a theologically unified, historically rooted, progressively unfolding, and ultimately Christ-centered narrative of God's covenantal work in our world to redeem sinful humanity.

This renaissance of biblical theology is a blessing, yet little of it has been made available to the general Christian population. The purpose of Short Studies in Biblical Theology is to connect the resurgence of biblical theology at the academic level with everyday believers. Each volume is written by a capable scholar or churchman who is consciously writing in a way that requires no prerequisite theological training of the reader. Instead, any thoughtful Christian disciple can track with and benefit from these books.

Each volume in this series takes a whole-Bible theme and traces it through Scripture. In this way readers not only learn about a given

theme but also are given a model for how to read the Bible as a coherent whole.

We have launched this series because we love the Bible, we love the church, and we long for the renewal of biblical theology in the academy to enliven the hearts and minds of Christ's disciples all around the world. As editors, we have found few discoveries more thrilling in life than that of seeing the whole Bible as a unified story of God's gracious acts of redemption, and indeed of seeing the whole Bible as ultimately about Jesus, as he himself testified (Luke 24:27; John 5:39).

The ultimate goal of Short Studies in Biblical Theology is to magnify the Savior and to build up his church—magnifying the Savior through showing how the whole Bible points to him and his gracious rescue of helpless sinners; and building up the church by strengthening believers in their grasp of these life-giving truths.

Dane C. Ortlund and Miles V. Van Pelt

Abbreviations

BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
EBC	The Expositor's Biblical Commentary
NAC	The New American Commentary
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTC	New Testament Commentary
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

Introduction

The Mission of God

There is a renaissance of scholarship and teaching on the mission of God today. Popular authors and speakers are attempting to help Christians live *on mission*. Mission agencies and church planting networks are training new gospel ministers to start *missional* churches. Missiologists and biblical scholars are exploring *missional readings* of the Bible along with the concept of the *missio Dei*—that is, the mission of God.

Despite all the discussion of mission, a cloud of confusion has descended on the church and academy about what exactly the mission of God is and what the church's role is in it. This stems in part from the fact that *mission* is a slippery word. It has become a catchall word for Christian activity of any kind. When an important word like *mission* becomes so elastic that its meaning is cloudy, significant questions arise.

One such question is, What is the relationship of proclamation ministries such as evangelism, discipleship, and church planting to mercy ministries and efforts to serve the poor, the orphan, and the widow? Even more complex is the question of whether God's mission

is just about redeeming mankind or perhaps something larger, even as large as restoring the entire cosmos. This confusion demands that we go back to the Scriptures for answers.

Defining *Mission*

The English word *mission* is not much used in the Bible.[1] That should not, however, lead us to think that the concept and practice of mission are absent in Scripture.

For our study, I will use the following definition for the mission of God: *God's revelatory work intended to establish a divine-human communion within creation*. Or, as the apostle John puts it in perhaps the most well-known and shared verse in the Bible, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God reveals himself in sending his Son, the Savior, in time and space (i.e., creation), so that mankind might have eternal life, which John defines as knowing God (John 17:3). All of this radiates from God's love for the world. Let's look more closely at the three key terms in our definition: *revelatory work*, *divine-human communion*, *within creation*.

Revelatory Work

First, notice that God's mission includes an activity: *God's revelatory work*. Mission is first and foremost something in which God engages: it is from God, through God, and for God. He—not society, government, or even the church—is the primary definer and actor in the *missio Dei*. Before humanity is ever invited into mission, God is at work, revealing himself in revelatory word and saving deed.

You may wonder whether the word *revelation* adequately explains all that God does in creation and redemption. That may be because

1. It appears only four times in the English Standard Version, for instance.

we have too low a view of divine revelation. When God speaks, the cosmos is born (Gen. 1). The good news proclaimed is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16), and faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17) the word of Christ. When we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus, we are changed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4–6). Truly, all that God says and does can be summed up in the word *revelation*—so much so that Jesus declares that his very glory is revealed in his death on the cross (John 12:23–25). God's revelation, in fact, creates and redeems.

This revelatory aspect of God's mission is often connected in mission studies with the Greek verb *apostellō*, which means "send." An apostle (noun: *apostolos*) was literally a "sent one." The Latin verb *mittere* corresponds to *apostellō.* The noun form is *missio*, from which we get our English word *mission*. *Apostellō* captures the idea of *sending* on mission. English speakers might talk about sending an ambassador on a diplomatic mission. For our purposes, throughout Scripture we will see God actively revealing himself through sending. He sends the Son to create and redeem the world by the Spirit, whom he likewise sends. He sends his people, from our first parents to the prophets to the apostle Paul, into the world, as witnesses to his revelation. Each sending is meant to reveal who God is and what he is like. This naturally begs the question, Why is it so important for God to reveal himself?

Divine-Human Communion

If revelation is the activity of mission, *communion* is the aim of mission, specifically a loving communion between humanity and the living God. This is mission's goal. Perhaps a second Greek word, a noun, will help us understand this aspect of God's mission: *telos. Telos* means the desired end. *Telos* tells us why something is done, why it is important, or what we want to achieve. When coupled with

what we have already seen, this helps us recognize that all sending (*apostellō*) has a purpose (*telos*). A king sends an ambassador for a reason. A humanitarian mission seeks certain outcomes. This is true, likewise, when God sends.

God reveals himself for communion both in the work of creation and in redemption. At creation, before the fall, the Spirit hovers over the waters to breathe life into the world, and the Word of God speaks everything into existence. Why? The triune God intends to bring humanity into communion with him as children and co-regents. This is also the aim of God's mission in redemption. The cross of Christ is ground zero of a new creation where restored fellowship is made possible as the Spirit of God breathes new life into humanity.

This relational goal of mission is critical to remember. The sending dimension of mission is often the sole focus of missional readings of Scripture. As a result, what is highlighted is simply the church's activities in the world. We truncate God's mission, however, if we neglect the relational heart that undergirds God's sending. This results in two problems.

First, an overly weighted focus on the sending dimension of mission explains why some sections of the Old Testament appear not to apply to God's mission. We clearly see the sending activity in the book of Jonah as missional but fail to see how the Song of Solomon or Hosea, declaring God's plan for communion with humanity, fits into the *missio Dei*. The relational dimension of God's mission helps us make more sense of genres like wisdom and poetry in our biblical theologies of mission.

Second, when we neglect the relational dimension, we don't know what to do with the church beyond involvement in missional activities. But, if God's very aim in his mission is to establish divine-human communion, then the church cannot be reduced to a sending agency.

Some twentieth-century scholars contended that the church has no special role in God's mission; instead, God may fulfill his mission through government and popular uprising more than through the church. Even evangelical scholars have made statements like "it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission."[2] In this way of thinking, the church exists for mission, not the other way around. I will argue the opposite. The revelatory activity of God (and those he sends) is to create and redeem a people for communion.

Within Creation

The final part of our definition alerts us to the fact that there is a *setting* for mission. Nonhuman creation has a role in the mission of God. Whether in the garden (Gen. 1–3) or the garden city (Rev. 21–22), the Lord has never intended a bodiless, noncontextual existence for humanity. The cosmos was God's idea; it was to be where his mission would unfold. It has served as the stage on which the great drama of creation, fall, exile, and restoration take place. In eternity future, the new creation will be the everlasting dwelling place of the Lamb and his bride.

The cosmos, whether Edenic, fallen, or renewed, is not the ultimate end of the mission of God; nevertheless, it is the context. Scott Hafemann unpacks this order of relationship when he writes, "Mankind is not created to provide for the world; the world is created to provide for mankind."[3] The creation is good, it is from God, and it exists to host God's designed communion with humanity.

2. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 62.

3. Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 28. We will see in chap. 2 that this does not grant us the right to abuse creation. Thus Hafemann continues, "Created in the King's image as his vassals or

So the *missio Dei* has an activity, a purpose, and a context: revelation for communion in creation. These three key terms and their amplifications will become clearer as we move through the narrative of Scripture. If what I have said is correct, we should see this theme naturally emerge from the text as early as the creation narrative (Gen. 1–2), carry right on through into the new creation (Rev. 21–22), and appear everywhere in between.

One facet to our theme that we should prepare for at the outset is that early in the Scriptures we encounter an enemy to God, a being opposed to God's mission. In fact, we encounter three enemies: Satan, sin, and death. While God's mission as I have defined it existed before the fall, much of the narrative focuses on the post-fall restoration necessary to reestablish (and surpass) what has been lost. So the relational purpose remains the same despite the need for new revelatory action on the part of God in the world.

The Mission of the Church

We have begun to unpack the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. Here I want to take just a moment to ask, what is the role of God's people in his mission? The answer, in short, is that we are his witnesses. God accomplishes his mission, and his people bear witness to what he has done. This may seem to belittle the role of humanity in the mission of God, but perhaps that is because we misunderstand what is meant by *witness*. Much like the word *revelation*, *witness* in the biblical sense points to an awesome reality.

It is through the witness of God's people that the invisible God becomes knowable. Of course, God is most clearly revealed in the incarnation of his Son and in the testimony of Scripture. Our part in the drama is to witness to that revelation in word and deed. We are

servants, we thus reflect his character and manifest his glory when we exercise dominion over all he has provided for us with the God-given wisdom and care that characterize God himself" (29).

called to speak lines that will reveal the great author of the universe and the redemption he has wrought. Similarly, we are called to act out our part in a way that reveals his heart and intentions.

How our words and actions work together has been the source of much debate in mission studies. Space limits our ability to fully explore the key positions, but let me speak into the debate briefly. How ought Christians to think of these things? Consider this: Humanity contributed nothing to the work of creation. Just so, God's people supply not one iota to the work of redemption. He has done all. We are his witnesses. We cannot save, but we witness to his saving work. We do not bring the kingdom, but we pray for it, witness to its inauguration, and wait for its full consummation. Do our good works play a role in this? Certainly. We let our good deeds shine so that our neighbors give glory to God (Matt. 5:16).

Our words and deeds reveal truths about God, but in differing ways. When we speak of the doctrine of revelation, we often differentiate between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation includes the ideas, attributes, and concepts about ultimate reality and God that anyone may discern simply by what has been created. For instance, Romans 1:19–20 says: "What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." Anyone, believer or unbeliever, can see the truth of a powerful Creator if he or she looks at creation without suppressing that truth. This kind of revelation is clear to humanity *in general*.

Special revelation, however, describes the unique revelation God has given us in the gospel and written in Scripture. No amount of general revelation can save a sinner. No one can reason his way from creation to the cross. No, God had to intervene for humanity by the

substitutionary life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and communicate it *specially*, so that people might be saved.

In the mission of the church, the proclamation of the gospel saves sinners. Proclamation is the heralding of God's special revelation. Good deeds, in contrast, serve like general revelation. When Christians live lives of love and righteousness, the watching world sees something of God, perhaps his kindness, generosity, provision, or love. But what they learn of God is only a generic, a general revelation. This alone cannot save. No, proclaiming the gospel—the revelation about what God has done through Jesus—is indispensable to our mission. Because of this, in the church's witnessing mission we prioritize proclamation even as we recognize the call to live lives that holistically reflect the truths we believe.

To summarize, God's mission is to reveal himself to humanity throughout the world in order to draw women and men into communion with himself. The role of God's people in this mission is to witness to the revelation of God in word and deed, with priority placed on witnessing to those things revealed by God for salvation, found only in his word.

The Approach I Am Taking

"Missional" readings of Scripture are multiplying. What is meant by the phrase differs, sometimes wildly, from study to study.[4] While we do not have space for a survey of the missional hermeneutic movement,[5] it is important to share the presuppositions with which I am working and say a few words about how that may differ from others.

4. George R. Hunsberger, "Mapping the Missional Hermeneutics Conversation," in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael Goheen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 45–67.

5. Michael W. Goheen, "A History and Introduction to a Missional Reading of the Bible," in Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 3–27.

The approach I am taking may be characterized as an evangelical and redemptive-historical reading: we read the Scriptures as the inspired, inerrant word of God, unfolding a single narrative centered on God's redemptive work in Christ. In doing so, we are following the example of Christ and the apostles (e.g., Luke 24:44–48; Acts 28:23).

The commitment to tracing our theme of the mission of God along the narrative arc of Scripture will help us discern the right emphasis. Another way to say this is that it guards us against turning minor ideas into major issues. This is especially important with a theme like mission, which has a tendency toward atomistic and moralistic readings of Scripture. As the Pharisees made the tithe of dill and cumin more important than the weightier matters of the law, mission studies can sometimes isolate individual commands and then read the rest of Scripture through that lens. Instead, we need to see the big picture of what God is after in the world and allow that to set the agenda.

Seeing God's mission emerge from the biblical narrative also helps guard against reading personal or cultural ideas and agendas into the text. Again, while this may not be a major concern with a theme such as covenant, it can be a strong temptation for the theme of mission; for with mission we often come to Scripture desiring to articulate a biblical foundation for the particular vision or methodology of our organization or institution. And as mission is a global enterprise, undertaken in a dazzling array of nations and ethnicities, we must be extra careful to allow Scripture to be the lens through which we view and judge culture, and not vice versa.

Finally, we are further guarded against these sorts of missteps by reading Scripture intertextually. Later Scripture often sheds light on earlier Scripture, helping us to see with greater clarity. The Old Testament will also inform the New, providing the necessary foundational

information on which New Testament authors were building. We therefore read backward and forward. We read Paul to better understand Genesis, but we also read Isaiah to better understand Luke. In this way, we have the clearest vista from which to view the single, unified, unfolding narrative of Scripture that starts in the garden and ends in the garden city, always climaxing in Christ.

To summarize, redemptive history is the mountain range along which the trail of God's mission runs. Is this approach missional? If missional means a way of describing God's purpose and sending in his mission, then I would argue yes. It is a reading that pays attention, first, to God's *telos* as it is expounded throughout the Bible and, then, his sending/work to fulfill that goal.

So we do not read mission into the text. No, we observe what God does and says through the narrative of Scripture so that we see his mission emerging organically from the pages of the Old and New Testaments. When we do this, we will discover a theology of mission with texture and depth, not simply a to-do list or a justification for the missional activity *du jour*.

The Structure of This Book

It has been said that the whole Bible is about God's mission.[6] In one sense that is true, for the Lord reveals himself and his will to us on every page of Scripture. In another sense, key passages serve as markers along the way that are intended to help us understand the mission of God more explicitly. These key missional passages, intriguingly, overlap with the great sweep of redemptive history running through Scripture (often summed up in the outline of creation, fall, exile, redemption). We will focus on such passages, even while situating them into their surrounding contexts and into the wider narrative.

6. Wright, *Mission of God*, 22. See also Richard Bauckham, "Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation," in Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 28.

As we proceed in this manner, we will see our theme develop. More specifically, chapter 1 will introduce us to the *God of mission*. Biblical theologians are increasingly aware of the need to clarify who the God of Scripture is before launching into a thematic study from Genesis to Revelation.[7] Further, we want to explore the purpose behind God's own sending, particularly, the Father's sending the Son in the power of the Spirit in creation and redemption. Our understanding of mission must begin with God—who he is and what his purposes are. John's Gospel, so committed to revealing the Father through the sent Son, will serve as our guide.

Building on chapter 1, the second chapter will then explore how the creation narrative further illuminates the *purpose of mission* I have discussed above—namely, the gathering of men and women into fellowship with God in the newly formed world. In chapter 3, while exploring the patriarchs of Israel, we will see God reveal his *means for mission*, that his purposes will be accomplished by a person, one through whom salvation will come—Abraham's promised seed. Then chapter 4 will reveal, through the picture of the exodus, how the Lord accomplishes his mission. That picture or prototype of salvation will be employed by the rest of Scripture to point to the ultimate rescue to be accomplished by the long-awaited Messiah.

As we will see, these first four chapters give us all we need to understand the mission of God. We will know at that point the God of mission, the purpose of mission, the one through whom the mission will be carried out, and how the mission will be accomplished. These ideas will be further developed in later Scripture; nevertheless, they are clear and meant to be understood very early on in the Pentateuch.

7. In fact, Ben Witherington, *Biblical Theology: The Convergence of the Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) spends the first section (112 pp.) exploring the character of God through all of Scripture before returning to Genesis to unpack the Bible's narrative.

Chapter 5, then, will explore how the life of Israel was meant to be one of participation in and witness to God's mission. Unfortunately, we are going to see that, because of the unconverted nature of the majority of the people, the very blessings that were intended to draw more and more men and women into relationship with the God of Israel—the law, the kingdom, and the temple—were going to be co-opted and employed primarily for Israel's own desires. But we will see how, despite Israel's failure, the missional message of the prophets to a people in exile was a repetition and escalation of those truths explored in our first four chapters.

We will then spend two chapters seeing the mission *fulfilled* in Christ and *witnessed to* by the church (chaps. 6–7). Finally, we will conclude by exploring the Epistles and the book of Revelation, marveling at the *consummation* of God's mission.

Mission Critical

This introduction began by recognizing the abundance of mission teaching and scholarship of late. This abundance is due to the fact that the mission of God is the fulfillment of his purposes in the world. Mission needs to be talked about, studied, and written about. It is critically important. And because of that, we must take extra pains to speak faithfully and clearly about it. Therefore, let us ask the Lord to bless us as we go to his word now so that we might work as master builders, using gold, silver, and precious stones (1 Cor. 3:10–15). And may the Lord be glorified in it all.

1

The God of Mission

In this opening chapter, we want to zero in on the aim of God's mission. Why did he create the world? What is his plan for humanity? Why send Jesus? We must start with these foundational questions before exploring how God accomplishes his mission and what role the church may have in it. Doing so, as I have suggested in the introduction, will be a safeguard for us, ensuring that our theology of mission has God as its foundation. And to do this, let us turn to the Gospel of John.

The Revelation of God

John's Gospel helps us understand God's mission because he is writing it in order to advance that mission. John says he has "written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). John is writing so that men and women would be drawn into relationship with God. How does John go about that evangelistic work? By revealing

the character, the very glory, of God.[1] For John, revelation is the only thing that makes communion possible.

John's prologue prepares the reader to see how God's revelation opens the door for divine-human communion (1:1–18). Jesus is the Word, the Logos, of God (1:1), the one who will help us understand (the logic of) God. The very God who "in the beginning . . . created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) is now being revealed by the one who was "in the beginning with God" (John 1:2). Jesus is God and was with God, and he is now revealing the glory of God to the world in his incarnation.

In this way, Jesus is the true light coming to help humanity see God (John 1:4–5, 9). We read that the Word took on flesh in such a way that men could "see his glory" (1:14). It is likely that John expected his readers to know the book of Exodus, for this enfleshed one came and "tabernacled among us" as the one who is "full of grace and truth" (1:14). Indeed, Jesus is "the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love and faithfulness*" (Ex. 34:6).

Jesus's mission, according to John's prologue, is to reveal God the Father. John 1:18 seems to imply that humanity needs the incarnation, not only to make possible the sacrifice of the Lamb of God but more fundamentally because humanity needs to see the Father: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." How can humanity come to the invisible God? In the Old Testament, the Lord appeared in fire in the bush and at night, in smoke behind the veil, and in lightning on the mountain. He may even have taken on angelic or human form as the angel of the Lord (e.g., Gen. 18, Judg. 13), but he was always veiled. But now the Son has

1. So D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 90–95, who argues that John's Gospel is an evangelistic document aimed at Jews, calling them to respond to "God's gracious self-disclosure in Jesus" (93).

revealed the Father. "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), his "exact imprint" (Heb. 1:3). In Christ, the glory of God is stamped onto humanity, the Father engraved in the person of his Son for all to read; or as D. A. Carson says, "Jesus is the exegesis of God."[2]

Not only in John's prologue but throughout his ministry, Jesus is disclosing God to mankind. He does this through his *teaching and ministry*. He says that he is speaking the Father's words and wielding the Father's authority (John 7:17–18; 8:28; 12:49–50; 14:10). He reveals the Father through his works. "I can do nothing on my own," says Jesus (John 5:30). His signs reveal the glory of God (2:11; 11:4, 40). With every action Jesus is simply doing what he sees the Father doing (5:19).

He also discloses the Father through his *person*. Christ's "I am" statements in John's Gospel reveal that he is the one who provided food in the wilderness (6:22–59), light for the world (8:12–20; 9:5; 12:46), the God of Abraham (8:58), the way to God (10:7, 9; 14:6), the shepherd of God's people (10:11, 14), the Son of God (10:36), the life-giving God (11:25), the sustainer (15:1–5). He is elsewhere revealed to be the true sacrifice for the sins of the world (1:29), the giver of the water of life (4:7–11; 7:37–39), the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, and the high and lifted-up Lord of Isaiah 6 (John 12:38–41). Each title and metaphor corresponds to the Yahweh we see in the Old Testament.

Perhaps nowhere is the glory of God more clearly displayed than in Jesus's journey to the cross. In his sacrificial death—in falling to the earth and dying like a grain of wheat—Jesus is the revelation of the glory of God (John 12:23–24). While certainly Christ could have intended his resurrection, ascension, and glorification

2. Carson, *John*, 135. Exegesis is the approach to biblical studies that seeks the truth of Scripture from within the text, with meaning shining out of its pages, as opposed to an approach that reads our own meaning into it.

in heaven to be included in the statement "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," the immediate context suggests that his atoning death is central, as does the parallel of John 13:31–32. Of course, these glories do not need to compete. Richard Bauckham argues that they complement each other. The cross, he writes, is "the *climax* of the revelation of God's glory in the flesh." Nevertheless, he says, "it is the degradation and the death, in the light of the resurrection, that constitute the ultimate manifestation of God's glory to the world."[3] And what will be the twofold effect of this victorious sacrifice? First, "the judgment of this world" in which "the ruler of this world [will] be cast out" (John 12:31). And, second, salvation for mankind: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32).

We would have to repeat John's entire Gospel to chronicle all that it reveals about God. In short, John's Gospel reveals Jesus, for to know Jesus is to know the Father. To see Jesus is to see the Father. As Andreas Köstenberger has argued: "Revelation is the overarching category for John in describing the work of the Son."[4] And the design of this divine revelation is that we might believe and be saved and so experience genuine communion with God.

Communion with God

In Jesus's high priestly prayer (John 17), situated at the end of the intimate Upper Room Discourse, we overhear a conversation (if only one side of it) between God the Father and God the Son. In this prayer, Christ carries us to the very heart of the Father, where we are exposed to some of the clearest truths about who God is, what he is after, and what that means for humanity.

3. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 60–61 (emphasis added).

4. Andreas Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 178.

Eternal Love and Glory

In John 17:5, Jesus prays, "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." Before there was a cosmos, before there was a world to care for and rule, God the Father and God the Son were sharing glory with one another. In John 17:24, Jesus prays further, "You loved me before the foundation of the world." Before creation was founded, God the Father was loving his Son. The Upper Room Discourse, and especially this prayer, reveals God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit eternally existing in a happy communion of mutual *love* and *glory*.

United in Love and Glory

Jesus's prayer in John 17, however, not only tells us about the nature of God; it also tells us about the plans of God for humanity. We read here of God's desire for not only those in the upper room but all who would believe in Jesus through the witness of the disciples (v. 20). In short, God's plan for humanity is union: that we would be one with Father, Son, and Spirit in their communion of love and glory.

Jesus prays, "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one" (v. 22). The very glory that has been eternally shared within the Godhead is now being shared by Christ with his people. Jesus summarizes his hope for such a stunning union when he prays in the next verse, "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (v. 23). Notice that final phrase. Not only are men and women now shareholders in the eternal glory of God, but they are also recipients of the eternal love between Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father loves his people "even as" he loves his eternal Son. So much will we share

the love of God that we will love Jesus with the very love of the Father (v. 26), and he will love us in the same way (John 15:9).

The Greek word translated "even as" is *kathōs*.[5] John uses it repeatedly in his Gospel to link something that is true about Jesus to those who are his followers. Sometimes the emphasis is on how Jesus brings us into an experience, a relational reality, with the Father that he already has. Sometimes it is on how he mediates to us his own experience or an analogous experience with the Father. Here are just three examples:

- "*As* the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me" (6:57).
- "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, *just as* the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep" (10:14–15).
- "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. *As* the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you' " (20:21).

While scattered throughout the Gospel, *kathōs* is used in the prayer of John 17 an astonishing eight times. Through this rich cluster of comparative statements, Jesus's prayer is meant to show us how what Father and Son have shared for all eternity is now, in some sense, being shared with his people. Remember, this is God's plan *before creation*.

This sharing of glory and love is repeatedly described as oneness by Jesus. Jesus and the Father are one, united in shared love and glory. And we are invited into that oneness to share it with them. Consequentially, this spills over into oneness between believers. Or as Bauckham has argued:

5. Though translated "even as" in v. 26, we'll see that it may also be rendered "just as" or simply "as."

> The general sense . . . is that from the loving communion between the Father and the Son flows the love with which Jesus loved his disciples, a love that enables them to enjoy an intimate, "in-one-another" relationship with Jesus and his Father, and it is from this overflowing of divine love into the world that the oneness of believers among themselves stems.[6]

What the Godhead has known for eternity, a oneness or in-one-another-ness characterized by shared love and glory, is now through the work of Christ made available to humanity. In being united to Christ in fellowship with the Father by the Spirit, we experience redemption, for eternal life is knowing God (v. 3). That is the Christian hope for mankind.

Notice too the missional impact of this in-one-another-ness. What happens when men and women are swept up into this rich fellowship with the triune God? It has a witnessing effect in the world. In John 17:21–23, Jesus twice says that our oneness with God and with each other testifies to the world that Jesus is the one sent to reveal the Father. Just as this sort of salvation explains the transformative power of the Spirit in the life of a believer, for who can truly share in eternal love and glory and not be changed, it also explains the missional compulsion within true Christianity. For as the love of the Father for the Son cascades into the life of the believer by the power of the Spirit, it cannot help but overflow as well into the world. In both senses, we become like the one to whom we are united.

What Is God's Mission?

And that brings us to the point of our book. What is the triune God after in the world? He has revealed himself in time and space in order to bring many sons and daughters into his family (John 1:12).

6. Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 36.

You were made for communion with the living God, to share in his glory and love. The Scriptures are given to us for this reason (John 5:39–40). Jesus desires that we be with him (John 17:24). He desires that we would know the one true God and have life (John 17:3). However else we may define the mission of God, if we miss this, we miss everything because we will miss God himself.

William Hendriksen summarizes this mission, so clearly articulated in Christ's prayer, when he writes, "The Son is looking forward to the glory of rejoicing in the joy of his saved people, the very people whose salvation he (together with the Father and the Spirit) had planned from eternity, before the world existed."[7]

Let us consider one more verse, John 20:21. What does Jesus mean when he says, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you"? Or asked differently, in what way is our being sent by Jesus similar to the Father's sending of Jesus? We have seen that Jesus was sent to reveal the glory of God (John 1:14) so that people may know God as Father (John 1:12, 18) through Christ's redemptive work (John 3:16–18). Further, we have seen that believing what has been revealed is what saves lost men and women (John 20:31), allowing them to share in the very communion of the Trinity (John 17).

If that is true, then our sent-ness must likewise be revelatory. The cry of desperate humanity is "We must see God." And so the church declares what God has done in Christ. We declare the glory-soaked, bloodstained cross (John 12:23–26) and provide proof that Jesus is from the Father through our love for God and one another (John 17:20–23). In short, we witness to what God has done in Christ so that many more would believe through us (John 17:20).

And as we transition to the creation narrative in the next chapter, we want to keep God at the center of our discussion. For much of

7. William Hendriksen, *John*, NTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 352.

the history of evangelicalism, discourse on the mission of God has tended toward anthropocentrism—that is, a focus on the needs of humanity. So the lostness of man has been the driving force for mission—or perhaps attempts to understand and engage human culture or to repair evils within society. While these are important conversations within mission, we must not start with man or society—with lostness, sinfulness, or brokenness.

More recently, cosmocentrism, the care and cultivation of creation, has been the focus of much reflection on the mission of God. While we should note the importance of creation in the mission of God, we must remember that God's mission flows from eternity past. The cosmos is a subsequent reality to the love and glory shared within the Godhead. We should not discourage Christians who foster human flourishing of all kinds in this age; on the contrary, we must applaud and support them. We also look forward with delight to the renewal of the cosmos we will experience in the age to come. Nevertheless, we do not give these things the place of God in the mission of God.

When we start with mankind or creation in our reflections on mission, we often forget to include God. But if we begin with God and keep him central to our discussions, asking, "What is God after?" the many needs of humanity, society, and even the cosmos find their rightful place within his plan of redemption. So, now that we have fixed our eyes on the nature and subsequent plan of God, let us look at Genesis 1–3 to see God's mission as it enters time and space.