Explain the thinking behind mission as *missio Dei*. Bosch says that in the light of this understanding, "The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and re-conceived". What new thinking is therefore necessary in order to do mission in the 21st century?

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**Introduction**

*Missio Dei*, literally meaning “Mission of God”, is a concept that has been much discussed over the past 60 years as theologians and missiologists have rethought the concept of mission. The main emphasis of the phrase is the idea that mission originates from and is primarily the responsibility of the triune God, rather than emanating from the church.

While there has been broad consensus on the general principle of *missio Dei* there has also been a great deal of diversity in how the *missio Dei* has been understood to relate to the *missio ecclesiae*, the mission of the church.

In this essay I will firstly cover the broad historical developments of *missio Dei* in the last 60 years, exploring briefly the various understandings of it as it relates to the church's mission. I will then suggest how the 21st century church might view the *missio Dei*, and hence how the mission of the church could be renewed and re-conceived. As the church discusses these matters the conclusions reached will have major consequences for the way the church interacts with the world, and the identity, purpose and structures of the church itself.

**Development of Missio Dei**

The first known use of the phrase *missio Dei* was by Augustine in the fifth century, but it is only in the last century that the term has been used to refer to the mission of...
God in relation to that of the church. The first explicit use of the phrase *missio Dei* in modern times appears to be by Barth in a paper published in 1932. Bosch (1991, p390) asserts that Barth's influence was crucial in the early development of *missio Dei*, although Flett (2010, pp11-17) questions whether Barth ever actually used the phrase in relation to mission.

The idea of *missio Dei* was prominent at the 1952 Willingen conference, where the conventional understanding of mission in soteriological, ecclesiological or cultural terms (c.f. Bosch, 1991, p389) was replaced with a theology of mission that was grounded in the activity of the triune God. Hartenstein's report from the conferee states that

> Mission is not just the conversion of the individual, nor just obedience to the word of the Lord, nor just the obligation to gather the church. It is the taking part in the sending of the Son, the missio Dei, with the holistic aim of establishing Christ's rule over all redeemed creation (Hartenstein, quoted in Engelsviken, 2003, p482).

Goheen (2001, p117) suggests that there are two important implications of this view. Firstly, mission originates from God, not from the church, and is primarily carried out by God himself to restore his creation and his people to himself. Any understanding of the church's mission must be within this overall frame of reference. Secondly, *missio Dei* means that God's mission is understood as being fundamentally part of his triune nature, so any understanding of the church's mission must have a thoroughly trinitarian foundation. Engelsviken suggests that this trinitarian emphasis that emerged at Willingen is 'even more important than the somewhat ambiguous phrase *missio Dei*', concluding that a trinitarian basis of mission 'should form the foundation of any understanding of *missio Dei*’ (Engelsviken, 2003, p482).

We should not make the mistake, however, of assuming that mission was never thought of as originating from God in previous times, as Jongeneel suggests that the rise of *missio
Dei should be seen more as a reaction against the anthropocentric mission of the Enlightenment and the modern missionary movement than the discovery of an altogether new concept. A return to missio Dei was necessary precisely because for the first time in history the church during the enlightenment ‘did not regard mission as God’s very own work but as a purely human endeavour. Thereafter, a very anthropocentric theology emerged, which intentionally severed the... strong link between mission... and the doctrine of the Trinity...’ (Jongeneel, quoted in Goheen (2001, p116)). While I would agree with Bosch (1991, pp341-345) that the severing of this link was not intentional but merely the natural response to the cultural forces at work during the 18th and 19th centuries, the end result of a highly anthropocentric approach to mission during the Enlightenment is clear.

Ducker (2008, p5) agrees that the understanding of mission as originating from God rather than from the church was at least in some ways present in the centuries leading up to the 20th, citing Carey in this regard. He sums up the developments well by suggesting the real innovation in missiological thinking came firstly in the deeper trinitarian understanding of God, and hence the idea that mission is at the heart of God’s nature rather than simply one thing that he does, and secondly in a wider appreciation of the extent of God’s mission outside of the church. The actual scope of this mission outside of the church has been the subject of much disagreement since the Willingen conference, and to this we now turn.

**Missio Dei in relation to Missio Ecclesiae**

While there was wide agreement amongst missiologists of the need to move towards the more theocentric approach offered by missio Dei in the years after Willingen (Verkuyl, 1978, p203), it soon became clear that when it came to understanding the role of the church within God’s mission there were significantly differing interpretations. Broadly speaking there were two strains of thinking, which Goheen (2001, p117) calls
Cosmocentric-Trinitarian and Christocentric-Trinitarian. Hoekendijk was the main proponent of the first understanding, which saw God at work in society, politics and history, bringing his kingdom about through justice, peace, development, technology and social reform. Any human advance was to be seen as part of *missio Dei*, with the church very much marginalised to the role of 'witness to or a participant in the realization of the kingdom, but... not the primary or sole actor' (Engelsviken, 2003, p483).

The second understanding was in many ways 'an enlargement and development of the Christocentric mission theology that dominated the former decades' (Goheen, 2001, p117) in that it saw *missio Dei* as the advancement of God's Kingdom in the world through the redemption offered by Jesus' death and resurrection. In this view mission was seen in terms of the salvation and renewal of creation through the unique and unrepeatable act of Jesus, with the church being central in bringing about this Kingdom in the world.

Critics of the Christocentric-Trinitarian view (e.g. Hoekendijk, 1952) argued that it was still too church-centred and didn't go nearly far enough in acknowledging the work of God outside of the church, whereas opponents of the Cosmocentric-Trinitarian perspective saw it as not doing justice to the problem of sin and the need for redemption and renewal in the world, seeing it ultimately as a 'Trojan horse through which the (unassimilated) 'American' vision was fetched into the well-guarded walls of the ecumenical theology of mission' (Rosin, quoted in Bosch, 1991, p392). The fact that these two views, which could be used to justify mutually contradictory ideas, were both prominent in the 1960s led some to question the value of the entire concept of *missio Dei*.

While these two views are still in evidence today, Bosch is right in defending the validity of the term *missio Dei*, concluding that the 'recognition that mission is God's mission represents a crucial breakthrough in respect of the preceding centuries... It is
inconceivable that we could again revert to a narrow, ecclesiocentric view of mission' (Bosch, 1991, p393). In summary, while there is significant debate as to how the *missio Dei* relates to the *missio ecclesiae*, it is generally agreed that mission originates in the triune God and proceeds from God to his world, and that the church has the privilege of, in some way, participating in this fundamentally trinitarian mission.

**Missio Dei and the 21st Century Church**

Before turning to the question of how the church's mission must be renewed and reconceived in light of the *missio Dei*, we must first make some observations about the relationship between *missio Dei* and the church.

I would generally agree with Engelsviken (2003, p484) and Kirk (1999, p36) that the Cosmocentric-Trinitarian view is hard to reconcile with the overall witness of Scripture that the world is fallen and can only be renewed through the unique and unrepeatable death and resurrection of Jesus, with the church playing a central role in witnessing to this reality. The Cosmocentric-Trinitarian view was understandably popular in Europe in the 1960s as a reaction to the way the church had been associated with colonial expansion and exploitation, and the complicity of the church in the atrocities of Nazi Germany, and also in North America around the same time where it resonated with the general confidence in technological and social advances. However, Arthur (n.d., p8) is right to point out that the 'idea that God’s kingdom is being inaugurated through a continual improvement in social and ethical conditions' has become this view's biggest weakness in recent decades, as the assumption of continual progress has been generally acknowledged to be illusory.

While the continuation of evil and the recognition of the illusion of secular progress have cast a large shadow over the Cosmocentric-Trinitarian view, the evangelical church which
has generally favoured the Christocentric-Trinitarian understanding must take seriously the notion that mission is fundamentally originating from the triune God, is directed by him wherever and however he chooses, and is not restricted to the work of the church. What is needed is an understanding of missio Dei that takes seriously the emphasis of the Cosmocentric-Trinitarian view that God and only God can decide what direction his mission will take, but still retains the biblical emphasis of the Christocentric-Trinitarian perspective that whatever God decides to do, he intends the death and resurrection of Jesus, and a community that lives in light of this resurrection, to be central to the outworking of it. As Bosch (1991, p381) suggests, the two views should not be mutually exclusive, but rather the church needs to hold both realities in tension.

Once we cautiously accept that the church has a central role to play in missio Dei, a second observation that must be made is that over the last 2,000 years mission has become largely detached from the central purpose and identity of the church. There is much truth to Guder's (1998, pp5-6) assertion that neither the structures nor the theology of established Western churches are missional, but are rather derived from centuries of living within a Christendom model whereby Western society considered itself Christian. Scherer (1964, pp41-45) contrasts the way that mission was in the 20th century often seen as one activity of the church with the situation in the first few decades of the New Testament church where mission was apparently spontaneous, the natural response to the sending, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit. While the book of Acts should be seen as descriptive of a less than perfect church, rather than prescriptive for Christians of all time, the present-day church could still learn much from how in the first generation the church's mission was seen as the inevitable and natural consequence of the mission of a sending God.

Bosch (1991) takes a detailed look at how mission has been perceived throughout
different eras of Christianity, and is more hesitant than Scherer to criticise expressions of mission that are significantly different to those of the early church. He presents mission throughout the ages as the natural response of the church to the culture in which they were living at the time, for example defending the desire of the church to collaborate with the state to create a Christian society when the opportunity presented itself in the fourth century (ibid., p237).

While Bosch is right to stress that we should be hesitant in criticising past forms of mission in times when the church was living in a very different culture and situation, he also, like Guder, recognises the importance of the present-day church not simply taking on the structures and principles of mission from previous centuries without question, and applying them to a scenario in which they do not fit. Indeed this may be seen as the underlying theme of his magnum opus Transforming Mission, and the assumption behind the question he poses about the mission of the church being renewed and re-conceived (ibid., p519) which is the subject of this essay.

In this light, whereas in the past the church has largely seen itself as an institution, with mission being defined as bringing people into the existing church, the present-day church is increasingly seeking to turn this thinking on its head, with the church being defined in terms of its mission, and not vice-versa. Kirk, for example, asserts that the church 'is by nature missionary to the extent that, if it ceases to be missionary, it has not just failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased being church' (Kirk, 1999, p30). In this way the 21st century church must continue to realise that the model of Christian institutions inviting others to come and join them is not fundamentally central to the missio Dei, but rather a cultural response of previous centuries that may no longer be appropriate in the 21st.

Thirdly, and linked to the second observation, we must agree with Guder (1998, pp81-82)
that the scope of the renewing and re-conceiving of the church’s mission must encompass the entire life of the church, not simply one part of the life of the church labelled “mission”. It's not enough for the church to simply try to bring its mission in line with the *missio Dei*, if this mission is seen merely as one thing that the church does. When considering how the mission of the church needs to be constantly renewed and re-conceived, the church must ask how its entire identity, purpose and structures might be affected in light of the *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* is not a challenge to mission practitioners to line up their practices with God, but a challenge to the whole church to know the missional triune God and to live lives that are consistent with him.

**The Mission of the Church, Renewed and Re-conceived**

The remainder of this essay will look at how, in light of the *missio Dei*, the mission and life of the church must be renewed and re-conceived in the 21st century. In many ways it is impossible to suggest what the church's mission might look like in the future if it is living in light of the *missio Dei*, since by definition God's mission is whatever God wants it to be. However, as the church seeks to join in with the mission of the triune God, we will make some observations and seek to suggest attitudes that will enable the church to be open to what God is doing, and able to reflect his mission.

**A Missional God**

Bosch points out that in recent centuries the protestant church has generally engaged in mission in response to its belief that mission to all the world is commanded by God in the Bible (Bosch, 1993, pp438-440). While this appeal to parts of Scripture is no doubt legitimate, the fact remains that this can lead to a distorted mission that is overly dependent on some parts of the Bible and of God's revelation to the exclusion of others.
Bosch rightly laments that this approach often leads to an assumption that 'we already know what "mission" is and now only have to discover it in Scripture' (Bosch, 1993, p440, c.f. C. Wright, 2006, p36).

What is needed is not simply a biblical basis for the church's mission, but as C. Wright says, an understanding of the missional God of the Bible. 'Mission is not just one of a list of things that the Bible happens to talk about, only a bit more urgently than some. Mission is, in that much-abused phrase, “what it's all about.”' (C. Wright, 2006, p22). In relation to the mission to the Gentiles, Bosch contends that

There would have been a post-Easter Gentile mission even if Jesus had never been in contact with non-Jews and never said anything about them. That he did meet non-Jews and did say some surprising things about them should not be interpreted as a motive for the Church to engage in a Gentile mission but as a consequence of the essentially missionary dimension of God's revelation in him. (Bosch, 1993, p446)

Reading the Bible with a missional hermeneutic is something that has started to become popular in the last decade, with the term being used in various ways (see e.g. Hunsberger, 2009), relating roughly to the missional work of the Spirit in the textual narrative, through the text to its original hearers, and through the text to the modern-day community. Each of these hermeneutics originates from the fundamental assumption that God is essentially missional in his nature, and that his Spirit is working in all ages to witness to and equip his people for the missio Dei. In this way, the whole Bible, including parts referring to ethical living, care for the poor, justice and righteousness, and stewardship of creation, is seen in light of the God who sends himself into the world to reconcile his fallen creation to himself (c.f. C. Wright, 2006 and 2010).

A church that sees mission as one thing that God does, and one thing that the Bible talks about, will devote some of its time to studying this biblical mission and trying with some of
its resources to reproduce it in its own situation. But a church that reads the whole Bible understanding that the triune God revealed in it is essentially missional will build its whole foundation, identity and purpose on this missional God, resulting in a natural and spontaneous witness as they understand themselves as the people sent into the world to live and serve alongside the God who has sent himself into that same world.

**Trinitarian Mission**

Ever since the early days of the church there has been the temptation to revert to gnosticism or platonism (Bosch, 1991, pp199-200), whereby the church sees its hope as being saved from the physical world into a separate spiritual realm. This dualism has been a strong theme in Enlightenment culture especially, as religion was viewed as private and separate from the realm of the physical world. Another strong emphasis in western culture over the last few centuries has been on the individual, with the gospel often being reduced to the act of God saving individuals into a personal relationship with himself, to the detriment of the bigger picture of what he is doing in the world.

Roxburgh helpfully suggests that a trinitarian view of *missio Dei* confronts both platonic dualism and individualism, as it forces us to see God, and thereby his mission, as fundamentally loving and social, to the extent that he enters his world to redeem and renew it.

If missiology is about our contextual witness to the revelation of this [triune] God in Jesus, then the old battles between personal salvation and social action are deconstructed. They are seen for what they actually are – reductionistic expressions of a gospel below the true gospel, that miss the profoundly social nature of the God who enters and redeems all of creation (Roxburgh, 2000, p187).

God’s mission is not rescuing people out of his creation, but quite the opposite. He has tied himself to his creation, entering into it, committing to redeem and renew it, and to draw
it into right relationship with his triune self. Countering the platonic dualism that has often characterised mission since the Enlightenment, N.T. Wright argues that heaven and earth are made for each other ‘in the same way... as male and female. And when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that a wedding is’ (N.T. Wright, 2008, p105). While the exact relationship between God and his creation is unable to be fully defined in a single metaphor, Wright is certainly correct in placing heaven and earth not in opposition but as complementary parts of God's good creation.

The fact that the church’s mission is part of the mission of the relational triune God to his world means that it must be fundamentally relational, societal and creational, pointing not just individuals but also families, communities and creation itself towards the redemptive work of God, made possible through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The Mission of the Father

While the decline of Christendom in the West has all but removed the centuries old distinction between Christian and non-Christian lands, the related idea that mission is about bringing people into the established church is still very strong in many circles. This, combined with the pragmatic emphasis of the Enlightenment on efficiency and the ability to link cause and effect, has led in many cases to mission that is characterised by strategies that are dependent on human strength and focused on bringing the maximum number of people into existing church structures (c.f. Bosch, pp341-345).

Understanding the church’s mission as part of the missio Dei which originates from the Father profoundly challenges these practices however. The Father sent the Son into the world because he loves the Son, and because he loves the world, and the Son sends the church in the same way (John 20:21). Köstenberger (2005, pp15-19) shows how
throughout the gospel of John we see Jesus repeatedly speaking of his mission in relation
to being sent and loved by the Father, understanding his sending not in terms of abstract
goals or targets, but as obediently doing what he sees the father doing, in the context of a
deep and intimate relationship.

In many ways this requires a subtle but profound realignment of the Enlightenment
perception of God as a rival to humanity (Bosch, 1991, p343). Whereas the natural
inclination of the world would be to ask what God expects of the church, a trinitarian
understanding of God challenges the church to turn the question around, to ask what God wants for the church, and how he wants to involve the church, humanity and the whole of
creation in his loving existence. This is a challenge not just to the church's understanding
of its relationship with God and its own mission, but also to the motivation of the church to
partner with others not simply to accomplish a task more effectively, but to echo the love
and intimacy of the triune God who chooses to partner with his people.

The Mission of the Son

The mission of the Son also fundamentally challenges the way the church has often
sought to attract non-believers to itself, or even to compel them to come in (c.f. Luke
14:23, Bosch, 1991, pp236-238) to receive salvation. In contrast, the Son was sent by the
father into the world, taking on a particular culture and language, becoming just like those
he was reaching out to. Walls states that

Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated
into humanity, as though humanity were a receptor language. Here was a clear
statement of what would otherwise be veiled in obscurity of uncertainty, the
statement “This is what God is like.” (Walls, 1996, p27).

In this light the church's mission must not simply be about calling people into its own
structures, using its own language and culture, but must rather be incarnational, meeting
people where they are, becoming like them, taking on and communicating the gospel in their language and culture (c.f. Hirsch, 2006, pp133-139). Anything less denies the mission of the Son.

Fernando suggests that Jesus is both the message and the model of the *missio Dei*. His life, death and resurrection are the message that is to be proclaimed to all nations, but this must be done in a way that is consistent with himself. Fernando concludes that ‘the predominant themes presented to us to model from the life of Jesus are meekness, humility, and servanthood on the one hand and suffering and deprivation on the other’ (Fernando, 2000, p211). While some may disagree that authentic mission necessarily involves suffering and deprivation, it is hard to deny the fact that hardship appears to be a normal and expected part of life for believers in the New Testament.

**The Mission of the Spirit**

Bosch (1991, pp114-115) shows that despite the Spirit’s role in mission being largely ignored in the subsequent church until the 20th century, the Spirit is central to the missional thrust of Acts, inspiring and giving power to those witnessing to God’s good news. While the mission of the church in subsequent centuries is more measured and intentional, the coming of the Spirit seems to have led to highly spontaneous mission in the New Testament church.

Green points out that the inspiration, guidance and power of the Spirit is often in new and very unexpected directions, for example in strengthening Stephen to witness in new ways, inspiring Philip’s outreach in Samaria and to the Ethiopian eunuch, persuading Peter that Cornelius could receive salvation, and sending Saul and Barnabas out to the Gentiles (Green, 2004, pp77-78). One of the most difficult readjustments for the 21st century church
living in light of the *missio Dei* will be the realisation that the Spirit will work in ways that we cannot predict. In this sense it is impossible to say what the church's part in the *missio Dei* might look like in the 21st century, other than to suggest that humility, openness, and a listening and teachable heart must be key in being open to God's inspiration and guidance, and allowing his power to work in new and unexpected ways.

**Conclusion**

The rediscovery of the fact that the mission of the church finds its meaning and purpose in the overarching *missio Dei* should profoundly shape the church's mission in the 21st century. Just as mission is a quintessential expression of the loving relational nature of the triune God, so it should be the natural response of the church that is drawn into this communion.

The Father's love is the source of all mission, and should be both the motivation for and defining characteristic of the mission of the church. The incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son are both the message of, and the model for, this mission. And the inspiration, guidance and power of the Spirit are the means through which this mission should be carried out, with humility and openness, in whatever ways he leads.

Ultimately the mission of the church in the 21st century needs to be renewed and reconceived, not by missiologists or theologians, but by the Spirit of God as he guides the *missio Dei* along new paths. The church does not need mission practitioners trying ever harder to reproduce biblical models of mission, but rather it needs to become itself a community that knows and loves the triune God and intimately understands his missional nature.
Citations List


**Bibliography**


