

Foundation

Advanced

Character

Bible & Doctrine

Church

World

Keeping it Missional



Porterbrook
Network

Unit 1.

Keeping it missional



Reflection

- What are God's purposes for his creation?
- How does the local church fit into those purposes?

Church: the goal and the agent of mission

Jesus is Lord: the plans and purposes of God

Jesus is Lord! This is the triumphant witness of the New Testament. The gospel proclaims that our Creator entered our world. It is a world enslaved to sin and opposed to him. And yet by grace he did not come to destroy it, but to redeem it — to provide a means for the forgiveness of sins, adoption into his family, and the restoration of all that he has made (John 1:1–14; cf. Romans 8:20–21). By his death, Jesus defeated God's enemies, and ours: sin, death, and the devil (1 Corinthians 15:25–26, 54–57; Colossians 2:14–15). His resurrection is an indisputable witness to his victory, and the sure promise that all who believe in him can share in his triumph (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). It also declares him to be the judge of all the earth (Acts 17:30–31). He has ascended as ruler of the universe, and he will return to destroy his enemies and to bring his people into the fulness of a new creation where we will live with him, face to face, forever (Revelation 21–22).

So Jesus is Lord in creation, in redemption, in judgment, and in the renewal of all things. He is reigning now! And the purposes of God are “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, that is, Christ.”

(Ephesians 1:10; cf. Colossians 1:15–20) That is the culmination of God’s plans for this creation — to see all things brought under the headship of Jesus. That is his mission. So now by grace he is redeeming for himself a people from every tribe, language, people, and nation. (Revelation 5:9–10)

This is what lies at the heart of God’s character: he is a God who saves. After the first sin in Genesis 3, God promised that he would bring about salvation (Genesis 3:15). Although all of humanity deserved condemnation, he made a covenant with Abraham in which promised to send a saviour in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1–3). He foreshadowed that salvation in the nation of Israel — a people he redeemed for himself, not because of anything they had done, but out of his gracious loving-kindness and for his own glory (Deuteronomy 7:6–8). Most spectacularly, we see the heart of our God in the person of the Lord Jesus: the one who was willing to give up all, to humble himself, to be reviled, to bear in himself God’s wrath against sin. Our God is the prodigal Father who meets us in his Son and brings us home to be his people. This is the character of our God — he is a missional God!

God’s people in God’s plans

We said before that by grace God is redeeming for himself a people from every tribe, language, people, and nation. By that same grace, this people is to serve as a kingdom and priests (Revelation 5:9–10). We are a kingdom and priests: this is how we are swept up in God’s grand purposes for his creation. As a *kingdom*, we live under God’s rule: we are the place where God’s will should be done on earth as it is in heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to “live in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27); we lead lives of godliness, informed by the truth of the gospel (Titus 1:1; 2:11–12); we are people of light (1 John 1:5–7). And we are also *priests*: we mediate God’s gospel blessings to those who do not know him. We do this as we love in concrete ways those who do not know Jesus — as we care for widows and orphans and all who are in need (James 1:27; Galatians 6:10). We do this as we lead quiet, godly lives. And we fulfil our priestly role and mediate God’s blessings as we bring to others that same gospel message that Jesus is Lord. We “hold out the word of life” (Philippians 2:16); we proclaim the “word of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:17–24); we are witnesses to Jesus to the very ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8).

But the roles of kingdom and priests are closely related and can never be separated from one another. For as we live in God’s kingdom, we show the watching world that his reign is good. We are not just people of light; we are a light to the world, a city on a hill (Matthew 5:14). Our light-filled lives expose the darkness of the world (Ephesians 5:8–14; cf. John 3:16–21). Sometimes this leads to opposition; sometimes it attracts people — those who see through our lives that Jesus offers something desirable (Titus 2:1–10; cf. 2 Corinthians 2:14–15). In any case, all who see our good deeds will glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:12)

None of this should be controversial. What we must remember, however, is that these things are not just true of us as individuals. They are also true of us corporately. That is, we should encourage *one another* to maturity in Christ, and we should present Christ *together* to people who do not know him. God has not just redeemed individuals, but *a people* for himself. We are individuals-in-community.¹ So when we talk of living in line with God's mission, we must think about what that looks like for a church.

Sharpening it up: the role of the local church in God's mission

Lesslie Newbigin described the local church as “the hermeneutic of the gospel.”² The language is technical, but the idea is simple. The life of the local church shows people in the surrounding culture what the gospel means. It takes the gospel out of the realm of abstract ideas or propositions, and grounds it in the reality of everyday life. Jesus says, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35) The way Christians love one another in the nitty-gritty of normal life shows others what it means to follow Jesus. And since our love is a reflection of his love, people who see our life together should get a glimpse of the love of God for his world.

Because of this, we might say that the Spirit-filled local church is both the goal of God's mission and the agent of God's mission. We are the *goal* of mission, because God is redeeming a people for himself. The church appears where the gospel is preached — it is as we repent and believe the gospel message that we enter the people of God. And we are the *agent* of mission, because we are the ones who proclaim and show forth God's kingdom. We have the incomprehensible privilege of being called God's “fellow workers” and “ambassadors” (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:20). If you like, we are God's mission strategy for his world. The life of the local church, as it earths the gospel and lives it out within its own culture, is God's means of reaching people with his gospel. That is what the church is there for: it exists for mission.

Here is what Scott Thomas of Acts 29 has written:³

A church that is not missional is not really a church. A church exists by mission as the sun exists by burning. When the sun loses its burn it ceases to be the sun. When a church loses its mission, it ceases to be a church.

He goes on:

‘Missional’ is an adjective describing all of the activities of the church body as they are brought under the mission of God to proclaim the good news of salvation through His Son Jesus Christ. Being on mission very easily becomes one activity in church among many others vying for attention. Over time churches allow meetings, programs, traditions and other good things to cumulatively move the church from missional mode to maintenance mode.

¹ See the Foundation Year Porterbrook module *Doctrine in Missional Perspective*, Unit 1.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (SPCK, 1989), 222-233

³ <http://www.acts29network.org/acts-29-blog/what-is-a-missional-church/>

Keeping it missional

Our contention for this module is that the local church should be properly caught up in God's mission. We should delight in God's extravagant grace shown to us. And we should be captivated by the vision of bringing all things under the headship of Christ the Lord. If we think this way, then mission is not one activity among others; it is fundamental to our identity. Mission is not something we do; it is what we are as the people of a missional God.

Let me illustrate this idea: The grown-up son of one of the church families turns up for a Saturday morning men's breakfast. He is visiting his family, and his dad has invited him along. He is a Christian and is known by most of the other men at the breakfast. Yet no one speaks to him beyond a cursory, "Hi, how are you?" At one level, nothing is lost. He is a Christian. He does not need to be persuaded to return. No one needs to build a friendship with him. Everyone knows that had it been a non-Christian son who turned up, then it would have been a different story.

What is wrong with this picture? In the above scenario, mission is a strategy rather than a culture. It is something you do when opportunity presents; it is not something that you are. It does not define you as an individual or a community of God's people. A welcoming community is indiscriminately welcoming because the gospel which has captured our hearts is an expression of God's prodigious welcome of sinners like us. We do not need to find out if a person is a Christian first before we work out if we need to be welcoming to them or not. (Otherwise, the welcome you give to a non-Christian is a disingenuous and manipulative welcome.) This does not mean that you will jump on every visitor you see, but you will always be looking out and making sure someone is talking to him or her so that they are not left stranded in the corner and feeling isolated. We have been welcomed, and so we are welcoming: it is evidence that we recognise that profound truth. Welcoming is not simply a task we do and tick off our list. It is an integral part of our character.

It is the same with forgiveness. We forgive because we are the forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). In Christ, our sins have all been dealt with, and this truth has so captured us and renewed us that our new heart is a forgiving heart. Forgiveness is not something we merely *do* in response to the gospel; it is something we *are* because of the gospel. Because we are the forgiven, we are then the forgivers! If we do not forgive, it raises questions as to whether we are forgiven. It raises questions as to whether or not the gospel has won our hearts (Matthew 6:14-15).

Above, I used the language of 'kingdom and priests', but there are other ways we could express our identity and role. We might say that if we are adopted into God's family, we should bear the family likeness (as we grow more like Christ) and be in the family business (of seeing people saved). We might talk of the church being built up (that is, believers growing in maturity) and built

out (that is, people trusting in Jesus for the first time). In the language of Colossians 2:6–7, we might speak of people receiving Christ Jesus as Lord, and then continuing to walk in him. One shorthand summary I like is to say that a church should be a blessing to be in, and a blessing beyond itself.⁴ That is, church members should love one another in a host of ways — sharing money and possessions; babysitting; visiting people in hospital; reminding one another of the truths of the gospel when our lives show that we have ceased to believe them (at least at a functional level). In these ways, a church should be a blessing to be in. But a church must also be a blessing beyond itself. Again, this will happen in myriad ways — performing the same loving actions for unbelievers; joining the local council; litter-picking; tipping generously; being the kind of neighbours people want to live near; identifying our friends’ ruling desires, and showing them how Jesus alone can offer them satisfaction.



Reflection

Think about your local church. How is it a blessing to be in and a blessing beyond? You may wish to spend some time giving thanks to God for the work of his grace among you.

Mission and training for mission

These two spheres of being (a) a blessing to be in and (b) a blessing beyond are distinguishable, but never separable. So we will find that many activities perform both functions. (For example, I might go to a football match and have a meal with both Christian and non-Christian friends.) But we may notice that some of our activities fall more into one category than the other. The Porterbrook training you are doing, for example, is more of a ‘blessing to be in’ activity. There is much in these materials that would be difficult for an unbeliever to grasp — they are spiritual meat rather than milk (see 1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12–14). But we trust that by doing this training, you will grow in your love for Jesus and in your knowledge of how to serve him, his people and his world. It is very clearly training for mission. By the same token, if we are preparing an evangelistic talk, for example, it will be more towards the ‘blessing beyond’ end of the spectrum. It can be wonderfully refreshing for a believer to rehearse the basic truths of the gospel, and we must never despise a simple gospel presentation. But such a talk is more specifically designed to help people respond to Christ Jesus with repentance and faith for the *first* time rather than the *thousandth*.

I mention this because the thrust of this module will be to foster an openness to outsiders and a to hone a ‘missional edge’. Not all our activities will be equally friendly to unbelievers. For example, a prayer breakfast at 7am is unlikely to be someone’s first point-of-contact with a church. But what we pray for at that breakfast must express our missional identity. And if we hold such meetings regularly, we should be open to the possibility of unbelievers

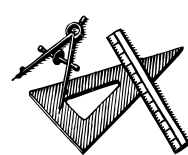
⁴ This phrase is from Tim Adeney. See, for example, <http://timadeney.wordpress.com/2009/12/04/a-blessing-to-be-in-and-a-blessing-beyond/>

joining us. So we must be ready to shape such meetings accordingly — for example, to use accessible language. We will explore this in more concrete detail in the relevant units, but it is worth flagging the principle at this point: we can easily have a bias towards ‘blessing to be in’ activities, but the humble and redemptive heart of our God should teach us to have a bias towards being ‘a blessing beyond’!

Mission and comfort

Different churches will in different ways fall short of the ideal we have outlined in this unit. All of us continue to sin as individuals, and so as a group we will never manage to live perfectly in line with God’s mission! But one sin to which many of us are particularly prone is idolising comfort. This might be expressed in our church structures: we have our routines and our programmes, and we just maintain those because it is easy and convenient. We cease to ask how those structures help to live as a kingdom and priests. More broadly, we very easily slip into a ‘zone of cosiness’, where we are ‘nice’ to one another, but fail to speak the truth in love or to go out of our way to love ‘difficult’ people. We put up a veneer of respectability, and so we fail to live properly as members of God’s kingdom. And we falter in our priestly duties for the same reason — that we love our own comfort more than others’ good. We might take a deep breath and invite a unbelieving colleague to come to an evangelistic event, but that is just asking them to come onto our turf where we feel comfortable. If God the Son left the ‘comfort’ and glory of heaven for the sake of us sinners, then we must have the same attitude (Philippians 2:5–11). We must be willing to leave our comfort zone to show and proclaim God’s kingdom. We have to learn to put off our own preferences and our own pride, in order to love people in a genuine way. Sometimes this will mean crossing socio-economic boundaries (how many of us are really friends with ‘prostitutes and tax-collectors?’);⁵ sometimes it will ‘merely’ mean letting the gospel shape existing rhythms of our everyday lives — thinking how the gospel should inform our words and deeds in the home, at the shops, at work, at the hairdresser’s, and so on.⁶

For this module, however, we will focus primarily on those structures which are part of most ‘traditional’ church models. For many of us, when we think about how to encourage our churches to live in line with God’s mission, we are not starting with a blank slate. Our task is not to tear everything down and start again, but to think about how we can reform our existing practices to reflect our missional identity. We will begin in the next unit with a discussion of Sunday gatherings and prayer meetings.



Exercise

Make a list of activities that you are involved in with your Christian community. How many of them are directly a blessing to unbelievers? How could you increase that quota?

⁵ See the Advanced Year Porterbrook module *Engaging with the Urban Poor*.

⁶ See the Foundation Year Porterbrook modules *Missional Community Life* and *Evangelism*.

SAMPLE