

# Towards a Biblical Theology of Mission

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The word Mission is derived from a Latin word meaning sending; and the English word send is used in our English versions of the Bible to translate the Hebrew word *shalach* and the Greek words *pempo* and *apostello*. Any Biblical Theology of Mission must begin therefore with an examination of the ways in which these words are used in the Bible.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

Our Old Testament material may be divided into three answers to three questions: Who is the sender? (Or, who initiates the mission?) Who are sent? (Or, who are the missionaries?) and Why are they sent? (Or, what is the purpose of the mission?) The answers to these three questions will of course find their final concentration in the New Testament.

Examination of a concordance will reveal how often God is said to send; for example, out of the twenty-three times in which the word *shalach* is used in the Book of Psalms in no less than twenty-one the subject of the sending is God Himself. Sometimes this reference is to a sending of God in the past, as in Psalm 105:26: 'He *sent* Moses his servant, and Aaron whom he had chosen'; sometimes it is a reference to the future as in Psalm 57:3: 'He shall *send* from heaven, and save me, when he that would swallow me up reproacheth; God shall *send* forth his mercy and his truth'; and sometimes it is a prayer to God to send in the present situation, as in Psalm 43:3: 'O *send* out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me: and let them bring me unto thy holy hill'. Although in no other book of the Old Testament is the proportion of divine sendings to human sendings so high, none the less it remains true that sending or mission is, according to the Old Testament, a prerogative which belongs especially to God Himself; the initiative in 'mission' belongs with God.

It should also be noted that, as scholars tell us, the word *shalach* suggests not merely that God sends, but that whatsoever or whomsoever He sends He sends as His instrument or as His agent officially authorized to act on His behalf; in fact generally the word lays more stress on the sender than on the person sent.

When we ask the Old Testament, Whom does God send? Who are God's missionaries? we find that we are given four main answers:

(a) God sends various kinds of troubles, plagues, pestilences, sword, hornets, serpents and the like. There are some fifty such references in the Old Testament; Amos 4:10 may serve as an example: 'I have *sent* among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt. . . Yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord'. The significance of these passages will be considered later in this article.

(b) God sends judges (1 Samuel 12:11) like Gideon (Judges 6:14), and kings like Saul (1 Samuel 9:16), and even foreign rulers like Nebuchadrezzar (Jeremiah 43:10; cf. Isaiah 10:6); but especially do we read of God sending Moses and Aaron (Exodus 3:10-15; Micah 6:4).

(c) God sends prophets (Jeremiah 7:25 etc.), for example Samuel (1 Samuel 16:1), Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1), Elijah (Malachi 4:5), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:7), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 2:3), Haggai (Haggai 1:12), Zechariah (Zechariah 2:8-11) and of course Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8-8).

(d) Judges, kings and prophets are all regarded as God's specially authorized agents sent by Him to perform some special work for Him. There are passages however which speak of God sending not just human agents but as it were something of Himself. For example we are told that God sends His angel to deliver Daniel from the lions' den (Daniel 6:22), and to protect the Hebrews in their wanderings (Exodus 23:20); here we should remember that in the Old Testament the angel is regarded as an extension of God's personality among men. Almost as frequent too are passages which speak of God sending His word, especially Isaiah 55:10f which runs as follows: 'For as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, and giveth seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I *sent* it'; this passage is of singular importance for it suggests both a going out from God and a coming back to Him. Other passages which speak of God sending something from His very self are Psalm 110:2 (His strength), Psalm 104:30 (His spirit) and Exodus 23:27 (His terror). In all these passages we are to think of God Himself accomplishing His mission through as it were an extension of His personality.

If we ask, Why does God send? the Old Testament answers that the purpose of God's sending is seen in the types of things and people whom He sends. Thus the first purpose of God's sending is redemptive and saving. This is seen in the sending of judges and kings: so Saul is sent 'to save my people out of the

hand of the Philistines' (1 Samuel 9:16); Moses and Aaron are especially sent as the agents of God's redemptive purpose (1 Samuel 12:8); Joseph was sent by God to preserve His people in a time of famine (Genesis 45:5-8); the angels are sent to protect and defend God's people in their time of need (Exodus 23:20). God sends to deliver, and this can be seen especially in Isaiah 61:1: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath *sent* me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound' (cf. also Psalm 57:3).

The second purpose of God's sending according to the Old Testament is to bring God's people back to Himself. This purpose is seen especially in the sending of the prophets whose function it is to make Israel repent and turn back to her God. Thus Nathan is sent to David to make him repent of his sin with regard to Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1); Ezekiel and Jeremiah are both sent to bring home to God's people their sinfulness and turn them back to God (Jeremiah 1:7; Ezekiel 2:3, 4). The famous 'sending' of Isaiah has the same import: 'And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I *send*, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I; *send* me, And he said, Go and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not . . ." (Isaiah 6:8f).

It is in this connection that the sending of plagues, pestilences and the like is best to be understood; generally speaking these are regarded as sent by God to punish His people for their sinfulness (so for example the sending of the lions in 2 Kings 17:25, and of the locusts in Joel 2:25), but the underlying purpose is deeper, namely God sends these afflictions not just as a punishment but in order that His people may recognize their sinfulness and return to Him (so the sending of the serpents in Numbers 21:6-7).

This brief survey of God's sending in the Old Testament thus gives us the following conclusions:

(i) It is God who sends; the initiative in sending or mission lies with God;

(ii) The purpose in sending is twofold, first to deliver His people from their enemies both spiritual and material; second to bring back His people to Himself;

(iii) Those whom God sends are always related to this twofold purpose, that is, kings, judges and leaders, to deliver His people, prophets and afflictions to bring them back to Himself;

(iv) There is little or no suggestion that God's sending extends beyond His own people; it is to Israel that God sends His judges, prophets and afflictions, either to deliver or to bring back to Himself. Nor is there any suggestion that Israel is herself sent by God to deliver the other nations and bring them to God, except perhaps in the famous servant songs of Isaiah.

(v) Of primary importance are the passages in which God is said to send something from His own self, His word, His angel or His spirit. The passage from Isaiah 55:11 which we have already quoted suggests that God's sendings reflect something in His very character, namely going out from Himself and a coming back to Himself; as we shall see later, this outgoing and incoming is of significance for our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we turn to the New Testament, we shall find our material to be somewhat similar to that in the Old Testament, but with a very significant change, for the central figure here is of course our Lord Jesus Christ, who is both the sent and the sender.

The New Testament, as distinct from the Old, knows two senders. Predominantly, as in the Old Testament, the sender is God, so at least in ninety cases where the words *pempo* and *apostello* are to be found. But there are some eighteen cases in which Christ Himself is the sender. This usage reflects the gradual attribution of the prerogatives of God to Christ Himself.

So far as those sent by God are concerned, the material sorts itself out into three main groups. First there are some twenty passages in which God's sendings are very similar to those of the Old Testament; for He sends prophets such as Elijah (Luke 4:26) and John the Baptist (Mark 1:2; John 1:6; cf. Matthew 23:34); He sends angels like Gabriel (Luke 1:19, 26) and rulers like Moses (Acts 7:34, 35); here we are clearly moving in the same circle of ideas as in the Old Testament and all these people sent by God have their place in God's purpose of either delivering from evil or recalling men back to Himself.

But the major group of passages, secondly, speaks of God sending our Lord Jesus Christ. Some fifty-seven passages make Jesus the object of the sending of God, mostly of course in such phrases as 'the Father who sent me', a phrase which is found no less than forty-three times in St. John's Gospel. As is well known, two Greek words are used by our Lord in St. John's Gospel, for send, *pempo* and *apostello*. According to Rengstorff (*Bible Key Words: Apostleship*) the difference between them lies in the fact that 'John regularly uses *pempein* to indicate God's sharing in the work of Jesus, and *apostellein* to assert Jesus' divine commission'. Whichever is used, clearly the emphasis is laid on the sender rather than on the sent, either as sharing in the work of Christ, or as authorizing Him to work on His (God's) behalf.

It is important also to notice that the significance of this sending lies in the fact that it is nearly always in the context of the Father-Son relationship; this is of course obvious in the Fourth Gospel, but St. Paul also associates God's sending of Christ with the Father-Son relationship in for example Galatians 4:4 and Romans 8:3. The fact is that the suggestions in the Old Testament that God sends something of His own self, an extension of

His own personality, find their fulfilment in the sending of His beloved and only Son (Mark 12:6), the effulgence of His glory, the very image of His substance (Hebrews 1:3).

A careful reading of the passages in the Fourth Gospel which speak of God's sending of His Son shows that the main emphasis is on the fact that the Son is sent as the representative of the Father, authorized to do the Father's will (John 5:23; 12:44f; cf. Matthew 10:40), and that Christ's work is in fact the work of the Father through Him (John 8:16, 18, 26, 29).

If we ask the purpose of this sending, there is no doubt that Christ is sent to redeem. Again and again this is expressly said to be the purpose of the sending: so Matthew 15:24; John 3:17; Romans 8:3; Galatians 4:5; 1 John 4:9f; we can in fact sum up the purpose of the sending of Christ in 1 John 4:14: 'The Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world'. Here our Lord fulfils the Old Testament picture of the judge or the king sent by God to redeem His people from their foes, both spiritual and material. But the second purpose of God's sending, as we saw it in the Old Testament, was to bring His people back to Himself; this purpose also is to be seen in the sending of Christ by God into the world. So his opening message was, according to Mark 1:15: 'The hour is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe in the Gospel' (cf. Luke 5:32; 15:7, 10—we may note here that the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin both stress not only the redemptive work of Christ but also the necessity of turning back to God). Thus our Lord may be said to fulfil the Old Testament picture of the prophet or teacher, sent by God to recall and bring His people back to Himself. None the less, although both purposes are to be found in the Gospels, the predominant purpose, as our New Testament writers understand it, of God's sending of Christ is redemptive.

Why did God send the Holy Spirit? Two passages are of importance in answering this question, namely John 14:26, where the Father is to send the Comforter in the name of Christ, to 'teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you'; and Galatians 4:6, where we read: 'And because ye are sons, God sent forth the spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father'. Here it is clear that by the sending of the Son God has made all men His sons in the Son, and by the sending of the Holy Spirit God enables those who are made sons in Christ's redemptive sending to respond to God as sons and call Him Abba, Father. The Holy Spirit is sent not to rescue and to redeem but to enable men to come back to God as redeemed sons. Thus God's sending of the Holy Spirit corresponds roughly to God's sending of the prophets and teachers of the Old Testament, while God's sending of the Son corresponds roughly to God's sending of judges and kings.

The two sendings are of even deeper significance, for they reflect something of God's character in Himself. For we see

first the outgoing love of the Father to man expressed in the sending of the Son, and second the incoming love of the Son (who includes all men in Himself) for the Father expressed in the sending of the Holy Spirit, who enables men to respond as sons to the Father. This is something of what we mean when we speak of the Holy Spirit (Love) proceeding from the Father (to the Son) and from the Son (to the Father).

We have already noticed that there are some eighteen passages in which Christ is described as the sender; to these we must now turn. It is first significant that in the New Testament God's sending is virtually confined to the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit; there are almost no references at all to God sending anyone *after* the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, an indication that God's purpose of redeeming His people and bringing them back to Himself has been in principle fulfilled in the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Yet this would not be an entirely true understanding of the New Testament teaching about 'mission', for it is not possible for the New Testament writers to speak about either Christ or the Spirit, without speaking about the Church; say Christ, and you have to say 'in Christ' or 'the Body of Christ'; say Spirit, and you have to say 'the temple of the Holy Spirit' or 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'. The meaning of this is clear; to describe the Church as the Body of Christ is to say that God's purpose in sending the Son to redeem and to save has been accomplished and is being accomplished; the Church is the redeemed community. And to describe the Church as the temple of the Holy Spirit is to say that as the object of God's redemptive sending in Christ she is able to offer back to Him the worship and service appropriate to Sonship through the Holy Spirit; as St. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:5f: 'Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ our Lord'.

In one sense then God's sendings of the Son and the Spirit have fulfilled His purpose, for the Church as the Body of Christ is His redeemed people, empowered by the Holy Spirit to offer back to God the filial response of worship.

This would suggest that the Church has no mission, but is simply the sphere in which the purpose of God's sendings have been and are being fulfilled. But such an impression is altogether false to the New Testament teachings. For there are some dozen or so references to Christ's sending of the disciples and it is to these that we must now turn, in order to understand the mission of the Church.

We will note first that our Lord is said to have sent His disciples out from Himself several times in His own lifetime on earth. For example Mark 3:14 tells us how 'He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that he might *send* them forth to preach and to have authority to cast out devils'. Such a sending forth is recorded in Mark 6:7-13; Matthew 10:5-42 (see

especially Matthew 10:16); Luke 9:1-6; and Luke 10:1-20. In all these passages our Lord authorizes His disciples to act as His representatives, so much so that He can say: 'He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that *sent* me' (Matthew 10:40). This sending has a twofold purpose, similar to that of our Lord's, namely to heal and to cast out devils and to preach repentance (Matthew 10:7-8; Mark 6:12, 13; Luke 10:9; 9:2).

These sendings of the disciples by our Lord occurred in His own lifetime and were of a temporary nature. They reach their climax in the Upper Room on Easter Day when Christ not only gives the assembled apostles, that is the Church in embryo, the gift of the Holy Spirit, but also authorizes them to act as His representatives to carry on His work: 'As the Father hath *sent* me, even so *send* I you' (John 20:21; cf. John 13:20; 17:18). Here the sending is more permanent in nature and in fact this incident in the Upper Room constitutes the Church's missionary charter.

All this makes it clear that we can only think of the mission of the Church as an extension of God's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is in one sense, it is true, no such thing as the mission of the Church; we can only speak of the mission of God who sent His Son to redeem and His Holy Spirit to bring back the redeemed to Himself. The Church as the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit is both the sphere in which these sendings have fulfilled and are fulfilling His purpose, and also the body through which today God is sending His Son to redeem and the Holy Spirit to bring back. The mission of the Church has no meaning apart from her being the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit; and these things she is, not in her own right, but because God's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit have so made her. It will be clear too that God's mission through the Church is simply the completion of His mission through the Son and the Holy Spirit; it is, as someone has remarked, the mopping-up operations after the major victory has been won; these mopping-up operations will continue until God completes fully the purpose which in principle He has already completed in the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit, namely the redeeming and bringing back of mankind to Himself.

We may conclude with a quotation from Dr. Andersen's valuable little booklet, '*Towards a Theology of Mission*' (page 47), which provided the original stimulus for this article and which our Biblical research has amply confirmed: 'The triune God Himself is declared to be the sole source of every missionary enterprise. Essential in the missionary purpose of God are the sending of the Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit. God did not cease to participate in the missionary enterprise with the sending of the Son once for all in the flesh. He did not make a beginning, which must then be carried forward by human efforts; He did not lay

down a pattern, after which men were to develop their missionary enterprises. With the sending of the Holy Spirit—who proceeds from the Father and the Son—He has made it evident that He retains the missionary enterprise in His own hands and does not surrender it to any human authority. Therefore God is, and remains till the last day, the One who alone carries on the missionary enterprise, the One of whom alone such terms can with propriety be used.

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The passages quoted on pages 9, 20, 28 and 32 are taken from *The Suffering God*, by C. S. Paul, published by the C.L.S., Madras, in 1932.

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*It may be strange to speak of suffering love as power ; but it is just that power that is conquering the world. The law of love is the law of the universe. Thus God in suffering is not betraying His helplessness against mightier odds, as it is supposed, but is conquering and establishing His reign in a moral world in the only way that is going to be ultimately and permanently successful. The path of love is no easy one. The greater the love, the greater the sacrifice and suffering ; it is the path that was trodden by Jesus ; it is the path that is trodden by God through all eternity in relation to His sinful creatures. Our belief is that God Almighty does and can suffer in relation to His sinful creatures. Such love is the only Omnipotence.*