

Kingdom Mission—A Task to Finish?

Recovering the Relational Narrative of Mission

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In 30+ years in mission, mostly church planting in West Africa, I have encountered an array of mission methods. Ten minutes of remembrances yielded: bonding, tentmaking, missions to the greatest response, indigenization, homogenous unit principle, people group focus, 10/40 Window, contextualization, power encounter, incarnational ministry, short term missions, anti-dependency, holistic mission, emerging missions, cell church, orality, business-as-mission, justice action, insider movement. This list is somewhat chronological, but certainly not exhaustive.

More recently, the issue of missiological priority once again arises with the growing emergence of socially-oriented mission methods. For the most part, the fault line rests on whether or not the social action arena is ‘mission’ in the same way that evangelism and church planting are considered ‘mission’. Some contend that to label anything notable that a Christian does as ‘mission’ dilutes its meaning.¹ Whereas, others claim that “everything a Christian and a Christian church is, says and does should be missional in its conscious participation in the mission of God in God’s world.”² Ultimately, this is a discussion at the intersection of biblical theology and missiology. Rather than weigh into this debate directly, this paper will present a related realm of mission which does not get the attention it deserves.

Mission methods reside in the functional *doing* dimension of mission; in other words, the realm of activities and accomplishment. The debate mentioned above, despite the differing perspectives, operates in this functional dimension revolving around the nature and extent of ‘doing’ that ought to be considered ‘mission’. Likewise, when we think of ‘mission’ or ‘missions’ we imagine *doing* something, just as our missions terminology bears out this common narrative: task, assignment, trip, methods, best practices, strategy, objectives, movement, finishing, reach, mobilize, target, engage, mission work, spread the gospel, etc.

There is a nagging sense, though, that the methods themselves become the focus, the driver, or even the master of missions. Like the proverbial tail wagging the dog, methodology feeds the tendency toward: activity over substance, the quest for impact, outcome presumption, business models, the charity syndrome, attention to legacy, etc. The preponderance of *mission-as-task* is not only the dominant narrative; it has become its own industry, as though churches are merely a “delivery mechanism” for the gospel.³ Often, what we are doing, how we are doing it, and what it feels like seems more important than those among whom we are engaged. It is as though mission has become more agenda than story, more about problem-solving than a narrative of reconciliation and relationship. However, missional activity toward kingdom expansion is not the only mandate of mission.

Comprehensively understood, mission also involves the relational connections which redemption and reconciliation bring, intimately bonding us in divine and human relationship in Christ. Here the imperative of kingdom character and community shapes God’s people into the living gospel before the watching world. This is the realm of *mission-as-relationship*, the witness of life connections, the dimension of mission which has suffered neglect.

Mission methods are essential. We need continual reflection and innovation regarding the way we engage missionally in the world; but, the degree to which we value the nature, context and

character of relationship will determine the enduring strength of our mission endeavors. This paper will explore some abiding concerns about mission-as-task, discuss humanity and relationship, present the dual nature of kingdom mission and end with some implications of the relational dimension of mission. This paper asserts that ‘mission’, for God’s people, his Church, is best described as a *role*, which incorporates both the functional and the relational

Concerns Regarding Mission-as-Task

Recently, a missions mobilizer took two North American pastors on a vision trip to a remote region of West Africa, an area familiar to this writer. He related that their objective on this trip was to answer the question, “*What does it take to reach a nomadic people?*” Naturally, it is thrilling to hear of such an uncommon display of vision and commitment to seek insight directly from the context. All too often pastors are only interested to travel to ‘mission fields’ if they can teach and preach. Even so, there is a subtext in the vision question for this trip, “*What does it take [for us] to reach a nomadic people?*” Commendable vision can flow from a particular presumption about the task, leading congregations assume they have the role of principal player in this mission endeavor. In other words, they tend to view this opportunity as a mandate for **unilateral involvement**.

Unilateralism reigns widely in Christian mission, whether on the macro level, where nationalities (American, Korean, etc.) often display a singular focus, or the medium level (as in mission agencies, denominations and traditions), or through individual congregations. This is not to say that there is no thought or concern about collaboration or the impact of onsite circumstances, rather, it reflects the launching mindset which assumes key role status and minimal attention to wider realities. Even though ‘partnership’ has a contemporary buzz, it is often more about shared agendas than reciprocal relationship. Likewise, whether one’s missions agenda involves strictly ‘church work’, ‘missional action’, or both, the tendency toward unilateralism remains, because independence comes naturally.⁴

In the example mentioned above, a typical scenario plays out like this. Somehow a church learns of an unreached nomadic people group, they promote awareness and decide to ‘adopt’ this people group with the intention to ‘target them’. Plans are made to shape the vision (hence, the trip to Africa) and the insight gleaned from the visit contributes to mobilizing the congregation and developing a strategy to ‘reach’ this people group. While the intentions are commendable, the presumption is equally prominent. The main considerations are awareness, mobilization and strategy, all geared toward ‘making an impact’. This progression reflects the usual way the missions community and churches present the ‘missionary task’, and unilateral where-with-all plays a significant role in shaping attitudes, approaches and methods. Such unilateralism builds on the notion that mission is the West to the Rest, geographical expansion abroad by Christian initiative.⁵

However, one can’t help but wonder how the process would unfold if the vision trip posed a different question, “*How does God intend for his kingdom to flourish in this place?*” Such a question reflects different perceptions, recognizing:

> **the role of narrative**—What story does God want to tell about and through this place? Who will be the actors? What is the plot line? How will it unfold?

> **the importance of context**—‘place’ *does* matter, not just people group, because every context is unique, with its own dynamics, history, story, people(s), and destiny.

> **a God-ordained outcome**—there is no presumption about a particular outcome template, such as, a people group movement. We do not know how the Lord desires that his people emerge and flourish in a particular area, because we do not know the human connections his gospel intends for the people in that place to experience.

> **contextual inquiry as the primary driver of strategy**—What is already happening? Who is involved? Who else does God want to use? What relationships need to be cultivated?

> **a kingdom perspective**—expecting reconciliation and restoration to produce a convergent, transformational, multi-layered effect.

From this perspective, mission occupies a larger drama, an unfolding story in which God’s people, his Church, have an ordained *role*, envisioning more than *task*. Rather, we are part of the ‘cast’ of witnesses to which many more global ‘neighbors’ will yet join as our brothers and sisters in this kingdom family. In this sense, mission is not only inherently incarnational⁶, but inherently reciprocal, recognizing the essential contribution all bring to the story—past, present and future. Therefore, the reformulated question above recognizes that kingdom mission envisions more than this nomadic people ‘being reached’, it seeks that the reality of God’s restorative kingdom would shine through the people(s) in that place in order to transform their context and beyond.

A companion concern to unilateralism involves the pervasive influence of **incidental engagement**. Missions is increasingly perceived as ‘incidental’ in time and scope, a specific, specialized task to be realized in a specific, limited time frame. Such a perspective reflects the cultural context from which North American mission endeavor springs forth, a context which has grown accustomed to a short attention span, instant satisfaction, meaningful experience and where commitment is seen as series of passionate engagements. This is the climate which generates the short term missions juggernaut, an exponential phenomenon widely documented.

My intent is not to discuss the pros and cons of ST missions *per se*, rather, I focus on the task-oriented context which both produces this movement and is shaped by it. If one’s concept of missions orients toward accomplishing a task, spiked by a sense of urgency, coupled with conviction for personal engagement in cross-cultural missions, then the short term model affords the greatest involvement for the least outlay of resources in time and money . . . and attention. Such incidental trips provide an opportunity to express ‘love lite’, occasional love for those who occasionally get our attention. This is not to imply that all short term mission endeavors embody this attitude, but one only needs to Google ‘short term missions’ to see a popular conception of 21st Century mission. The cumulative effect of ‘casual missions’ plays a significant role in shaping a general impression of occasional mission activity in the local church. Consequently, there is rarely any thought toward pursuing reciprocal, cross-cultural connections, largely because congregants do not have such relationships in their communities either.

Furthermore, this periodic nature of mission reveals a managed vision, in that global engagement has become a series of missions (of varying length), in the military sense of target, strategize,

execute and exit. This incidental, limited time frame and scope may increase participation and provide measureable metrics, but such an approach also demonstrates a myopic perspective of mission. At the same time North American missions gravitates toward shorter terms and limited engagement, the wider world hungers for more than incidental contact. Short term missions provides insufficient relational connection, thereby perpetuating self-serving missions interest, further encouraging surface impressions of what it means to be involved cross-culturally, and scuttling opportunities for deeper, lasting relationships.

Another liability of mission-as-task, which flows from the unilateralism syndrome, involves viewing mission from a (unperceived) **position of strength**—economically, culturally, intellectually, theologically, as well as, spiritually. While the literal sense of ‘Christendom’ has dissipated, the Church in the West, in general, retains a hegemonic body of superior attitudes and practices.⁷ Such is the typical default grid through which we view the world and our potential engagement with its peoples. The commitment and urgency of the ‘task’ plays into a ‘can do’ spirit which, coupled with presumed capacity, create a dynamic where the ‘complete’ are reaching the ‘incomplete’. When we are accustomed to making things happen, and we have the means to see it through, we are often blind to missed opportunities to appreciate the full spectrum of all that God wants to employ in his kingdom story. Allow me to illustrate.

Perhaps you have encountered the story of Table 71 at a mission leaders session focused upon ‘completing’ the ‘Great Commission’ during the Amsterdam 2000 Conference on evangelism sponsored by the Billy Graham Association. Bruce Wilkerson and Paul Eshleman were challenging the group to commit to engaging the remaining 230, or so, ‘untargeted’ people groups in the world. The gist of the challenge was that there shouldn’t be any untargeted people groups in the world if Christians were doing their job, so “if we decided together, today” we can finish it! Over the next few minutes many of these leaders indicated their decision to target various people groups, but after 140, or so, the commitments waned. Then, there was a buzz around one of the tables, which passed a note to the MC that Table 71 would commit to the rest of the remaining peoples. Subsequently, the leaders of a handful of major evangelical mission organizations huddled around Table 71 to sketch out what they needed to do to see this through.⁸

Understandably, this event was cast as an electrifying moment. Certainly, the vision and commitment are truly commendable, yet, it is also a classic example of mission from a position of strength. Isn’t it hubris to ‘decide’ who will ‘finish the task’ and how? This group of affluent, influential North Americans was presuming a narrative, but is this the storyline God is crafting? Perhaps in part, but one suspects this is not necessarily the scenario our Lord intends regarding whom he desires to employ, and how, in establishing his kingdom. Good friends of this writer, a local church of MBBs of various ethnicities, are right now engaging the very nomadic group which those pastors envisioned to ‘adopt, target and reach’ in the remoteness of Niger, and they are watching a movement arise among one of the clans of this nomadic people. This is just one of hundreds, or thousands, of unsung gospel movements born out of God’s ‘weakness, suffering and persecution’ narrative. When we view mission as ‘our task’ rather than ‘His story’ we risk assuming more of the role than God intends for us.

Likewise, when we generate and apply our mission methods from a position of strength, we also tend to see **mission-as-charity**. Giving sacrificially, out of our abundant resources, and especially giving ourselves, is right and proper and expected. Yet, there are wider dynamics at work. There is the matter of presumption regarding the ‘natural’ downhill flow of resources, the

haves giving to the have-nots. Those who recognize their blessed abundance are resourcing those who are perceived to not have anything of value with which to reciprocate. It is a situation where economic superiority presumes universal superiority, as in the cultural, intellectual, theological and spiritual domains mentioned above.

There is an African proverb—*The receiving hand is always below*—revealing that the giver role is usually a power position. The giver (benefactor) decides what will be given, when it will be given, when it will stop, to whom it will be given, why it will be given, and the accountability required. This dynamic of the strong over the weak communicates an overriding message, “you need me (and that makes me feel good), but I don’t need you.” Likewise, a task-oriented focus runs the risk of shaping church and mission into a ‘delivery system’ of benefits to the disadvantaged.

A couple years ago this writer came across a church flyer aimed at stimulating missions involvement. Here is the text with identifying info removed:

“The love of Christ compels us to serve the poor in _____’s inner city (our ‘Samaria’) and globally (‘to the ends of the earth’). We’ve created local and global service opportunities that will challenge you, stretch your faith, and allow you to experience the joy of obedience.”

What does this statement communicate about the nature and perspective of this congregation? We learn that “the poor” are not us, that “the poor” are somewhere else (not in my neighborhood), that mission opportunities must be provided (not discovered), and that mission service is ultimately about how it will impact us. This is mission-as-charity from a position of strength. The inevitable result of mission from a context of strength, coupled with a spirit of benefaction, produces an imbalance of self-perception. We are often so molded by a spiritualized form of altruism that we cannot see our weaknesses and blind spots. Likewise, a *mission-as-task* orientation does not naturally cultivate the relational connections necessary to free us from patterns of superiority.

Lilla Watson, an Australian activist explains the perspective of native communities toward those who are attempting to ‘improve’ Aboriginal life: *“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”*⁹ This sentiment starts with a premise of shared dignity that acknowledges equal contribution and equal need...the nature of the liberation needed may be different, but the necessity to face it is a shared experience. If our approach to mission is to ‘get the job done’, to ‘make an impact’, to accomplish an agenda, to ‘finish the task’ . . . then we are falling short of all that God intends for his kingdom and the role his Church is to play.

Humanity and Relationship

These concerns (unilateral involvement, incidental engagement, position of strength, mission-as-charity) illustrate and contribute to a climate where task (‘Great Commission’) and agenda (methods like evangelism, church planting, compassion ministry, social action, etc.) presume to summarize global mission. However, there are wider implications to consider.

Not long ago a short term team went to East Africa to help a small group of Muslim background believers. As they were departing one of the team members was talking with a one of the MBBs and promised that he would pray for him and this group of believers. In response, one of the

young MBBs said, “*I have seen ones like you come and go...you visit us, you feel compassion and you make promises...but don’t call me ‘brother’ or promise you will pray for me unless you really mean to live up to what I left behind in Islam.*”¹⁰

What do these comments reveal about the expectations and assumptions of global mission from the perspective of the visiting team? They had accomplished *their* agenda, so, from the perspective of the team, *their* task was ‘finished’, *their* experience was a ‘success’. Thus, anger was the first reaction this short termer felt at this audacious expression of ungratefulness. After all the sacrifice and expense, this is the thanks they get? However, on the plane home, he processed the fellow’s statement. He had time to look at this circumstance from the perspective of ‘the other’; what sentiments shape this young man’s comments? It is a plea for *connection*, for *community*. Feeling isolated and rejected from his cultural heritage he longs to ‘belong’ again, he hungers for *relationship*.

This visitor realized that unless we intentionally make an effort to view mission engagement from each perspective, we risk proceeding based upon one-sided assumptions about the nature and outcome of mission endeavors. Such is the dilemma; unilateral perspective, strategy and expectations cause us to assume our outlook encompasses the whole reality, when we are only seeing partially, through our own lens.

Humankind was created for relationship and designed for community. Relational connections make us who we are as humans, and these connections, with God and each other, *are not optional*. God created humanity for himself, for intimate, eternal fellowship. “Humanity has its existence in and through relationship with God, for it does not give itself its own existence.”¹¹ We have not only existence, but inclusion into the communion of God, infinitely desired for his pleasure. Through creation in God’s very image, we were invited into divine communion. Humanity is not an addition, nor a completion, of divinity, but humanity is an *extension* of divine intention to include humankind into God’s infinite unity. But, sin happened.

Tragically, our designed relationship with God was ruptured by a choice to be independent of our Creator, to chart our own course, *to make up our own story*. This choice to reject and repudiate God’s intention not only broke relationship with him, but it also corrupted every relationship within creation. At the Fall, *all* relationships unraveled—intimate community with God *and* relationships between humans. Unless we understand the tragedy, not just of the individual sin problem, but also the consequences of the relational catastrophe which the Fall unleashed, all ministry and mission is incomplete. The Cross not only addresses the Genesis 3 problem (enmity with God), but also the Genesis 11 problem (enmity between each other). Each of these is resolved in Christ, through his death, and in life with his Body.

God’s kingdom mission addresses the fullness of reconciliation, with God, and with each other. Because he wants to restore humanity to what he intended for us to be. God pursued relationship, longing for reconciliation, to enjoy communion. Christ is the 2nd Adam, the perfect human. Therefore, the Church, his Body, is intended to be the manifestation of *perfect human community*...the intended design for humanity. This is exactly why ‘loving one another’ is such a contrasting testimony before the watching world (John 13:34, 35); it is natural enemies loving one another. As such, the Church is a “contrast community,”¹² salt and light, redeemed and unified in intercultural diversity.

Here is the foundational question of the relational dimension of the kingdom: **“Can a gospel that reconciles people to God, and not people to people, be the gospel of Jesus Christ?”**¹³

The answer is clear, for the import of the *whole* gospel, provides reconciliation with God and with each other. Any lesser outcome is an incomplete gospel. *“As individuals, we have been saved for life-giving relationships within kingdom of God communities, not merely for privatized walks with Jesus. We become our true selves only in community, exercising our gifts and learning to receive the gifts of others.”*¹⁴

God’s people, the Church, the Body of Christ, are called (commissioned) to continue *in continuity* with Jesus’ incarnational ministry, the sustained multiplication of Christ’s character and presence in the world. We are *witnesses* of the incarnate Son of God, which is, first, an *identity* given to a *community*, and secondly an activity (word and deed). The incarnation event invokes the Cross, which is directly relational, the center of reconciliation and restoration of broken communion with God and others. Restored from the tragedy of broken relationship, with God and with the rest of humanity, the ‘community of witnesses’ is the link between the Cross and the world. At one time the Church is the embodiment of gospel *and* its vehicle.

Mission is a *community* role, one which began when God established ‘a people’ and continues with Christ’s Church. Therefore, to employ Christ’s sending commissions as a charge for individual believers to engage in cross-cultural gospel ministry diminishes the comprehensive and collective intention of our Lord’s commands. Michael Goheen writes that “in overemphasizing the benefits of the cross to the individual believer, we have mistakenly allowed its *communal* significance to be eclipsed.”¹⁵ Our cultural embrace of individualism and independence naturally resists the communal nature of Church and kingdom, frequently tempting us to over-personalize what we are to collectively receive and incorporate. “Jesus sends a *community* on a mission to the nations. The whole of Jesus’s ministry has been to gather and form a people who will embody God’s purposes for the sake of the world.”¹⁶

With Jesus’ coming the kingdom was ‘at hand’ with the intent to establish (once again) the calling of his people to be a blessing to the nations. Thus, the incorporation of Jesus’ character, with community as its context and fruit, reflects the ‘already’ presence of God’s kingdom. Kingdom character is the soil in which, and from which, kingdom community grows, shaping lives, reconciling relationships and witnessing the living gospel of Christ before the watching world. “Living in ways that reflect God’s own character should make God’s people as attractive as God himself is.”¹⁷ In this way, the Church, God’s people are his adornment, the evidence of his reality, his face before the nations of humanity. —“*do what is honorable in the sight of all*” (Rm 12:17), “*Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.*” (Phil 5:4), “*your faith is proclaimed in all the world*” (Rm 8:1), “*that you may walk properly before outsiders*” (1 Thess 4:12), “*You yourselves are our letter of recommendation*” (2 Cor 3:2), see also Col 4:5-6. The core of this adorning light is the consistency of God’s Word in the relationships of his people, because it is in the context of relationship that kingdom character has its *truest* display and greatest *visibility* before the world. This missional identity is who we are, it is our *role*, God’s people for the blessing of the nations.

Dual Nature of Kingdom Mission

This kingdom perspective envisions *mission-as-connection*, creating community; not just multiplying the number of peoples who are ‘reached’, but allowing the gospel its complete

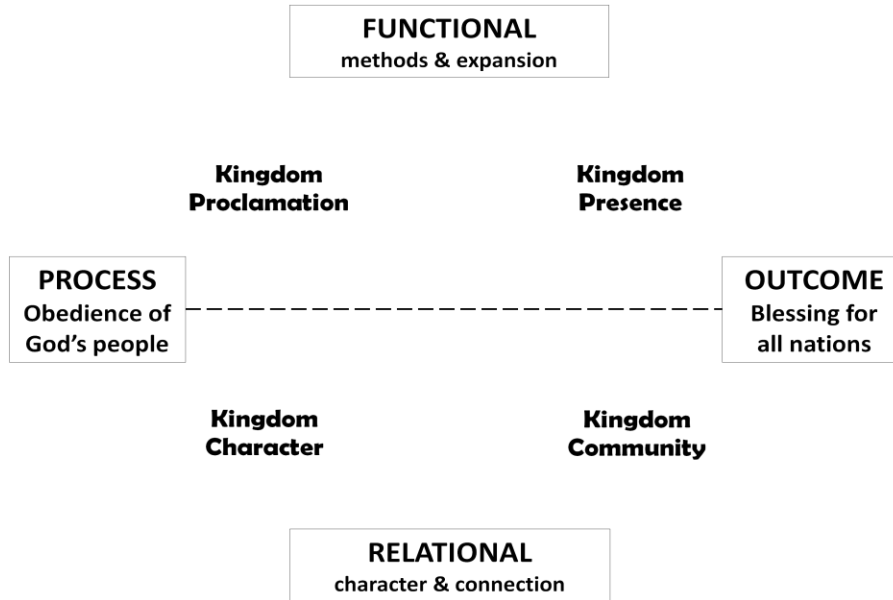
intent, to reconcile and restore lost connection. Without a robust conception of the relational obligation of life in Christ our approach to global kingdom mission remains incomplete. The relational dimension of kingdom mission provides the foundational context on which, and from which, the functional activity of mission unfolds. This foundation consists of Kingdom character and community; more specifically, the character of our King manifested in community. This may not seem an innovative revelation, but my thesis proposes that kingdom community (intercultural unity in diversity through reconciliation in Christ) is a biblical outcome of kingdom mission, co-equal with church planting movements.

Consistently, and overwhelmingly, over the last few decades, church planting movements (CPM) are the perceived outcome of global mission. That is, “a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment.”¹⁸ In fact, an entire industry of global mission has arisen to analyze demography, promote awareness, create strategies and mobilize churches toward this horizon. CPMs are the water in which global mission swims, and a classic example of the ‘functional activity’, mission-as-task dimension of kingdom mission. Yet, there are more recent developments which have identified gaps in global mission endeavor which this functional, task orientation finds difficultly addressing. One example involves the discipleship resurgence movement.

Increasingly in recent years there is concern that the expansion of CPMs has out-paced the depth of Christian maturity—as in the ‘mile wide, inch deep’ analogy. The publication of *Reaching and Teaching*, by David Sills, has highlighted this phenomenon, as have three recent editions of *Mission Frontiers*¹⁹ which are completely devoted to climate change in the discipleship arena. Likewise, a number of mission agencies, my own included, have embraced initiatives in this domain. Primarily, the concern rests on two levels, (1) that discipling ‘the nations’ must be intentionally and comprehensively scalable (not just for leaders) and (2) that there must be greater attention to the maturity level of those mobilized into mission.

I concur with this assessment, but, all too often, ‘discipleship’ is just another method, typically packaged into information transfer (i.e. more materials = more information, leading to maturity) for ‘individual’ spiritual growth. As such, a crucial element is often, indeed chronically, lacking—kingdom character development in, and toward, Christian *community*. This is discipleship-in-context, lives-on-lives, or ‘collective mentoring’ which understands and directs believers toward inward (faith community) and outward (cultural context) implications of life in Christ (in his Body).

When we focus on the ‘great commissions’ of our Lord as our launch pad for ‘making disciples’, we inadvertently undermine our Lord’s initial command to his disciples—“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” We have placed far greater attention on the scope and strategy of our *fishing* as opposed to the quality of our *following*. Such activity-over-character has led to this resurgence of concern regarding the quality of ‘followship’. Therefore, I assert that the lack of comprehensive kingdom character development (Christian ‘followship’) is a direct result of overlooking the biblical prominence of the relational dimension of the kingdom. The following diagram seeks to illustrate these two dimensions of kingdom mission.



Here we note the complementary dynamic between the relational and functional dimensions; the outcome of comprehensive kingdom mission is *blessing for all nations*, the process toward this outcome is the *obedience of God's people*. “God’s intention to bless the nations is combined with human commitment to obedience, which enables us to be the agent of that blessing.”²⁰ Thus, process and outcome are intrinsically linked. If one understands ‘blessing for the nations’ as the pervasive presence of church movements, then the process will emphasize gospel proclamation (‘bearing witness’ of Christ). As mentioned above, this process/outcome description is by far the dominant narrative within the global missions community. However, this paper seeks to establish that this is not the only biblical outcome of kingdom mission. The other dimension of ‘blessing for the nations’ is relational reconciliation, the restoration in Christ of humanity’s intended communion with God *and each other*, the interdependent community of Christ’s Body. This dual conception of biblical outcomes of blessing, the expansive presence of God’s Church among all peoples living in reconciliation before the watching world, affirms both the relational and functional dimensions of kingdom.

Therefore, ‘making disciples of all nations’ is not only the expansive multiplication of believers and churches among all peoples (a strategic process of progressive proclamation), but it is also a relational process which cultivates the character of the King toward, and within, ‘community in Christ’, the interconnected life and identity of Christ-followers. Simply stated, the kingdom of God is to reflect the character of the King in all its dimensions. **God intends that the character of his kingdom accompany the expansion of his kingdom.** The greatest test, and witness, of kingdom character involves reconciled relationships in Christ. The nations will be blessed by the presence of CPMs through mission methods and expansion, but God also desires to bless the nations through a reconciled community manifesting the character of Christ and connection with each other.

Implications of the Relational Dimension of Mission

We now turn to the practical implications which the relational dimension of mission generates.

1. Comprehensive love - All of Scripture intentionally cultivates kingdom character and community; however, there are two summary commands upon which the relational dimension of the kingdom rests: “Love one another” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The latter represents the full import of the Law (Gal. 5:14, Jn 2:8), that one cannot love God without loving neighbor, and, thereby, summarizes God’s intent for humankind, to love God and each other. Love of neighbor is not selective or limited in scope or quality. Since ‘neighbor’ can be anyone, then, essentially, ‘neighbor’ is everyone; none is excluded.²¹ Such is the starting context for all human relations—we are neighbors together—and it forms a significant part of the foundation upon which mission perspective rests.

The former command, “love one another,” reveals the relational dynamic of the new covenant. It flows directly from the loving character of the unified diversity of God himself, “as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,” and “as I have loved you, so you must love one another.” The reciprocal love of all those ‘in Christ’ is absolute, unconditional and mirrors the internal, eternal love within the Godhead. The life and character of Christ’s Church, as well as, his mission, embodied in the Church, directly proceeds from this Trinitarian reality. Thus, Jesus could say, “All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” (John 13:35) Yet, why do we not embrace *this* command as the ultimate ‘missionary method’? Why does this idea seem so audacious? Because we have essentially discounted the role of the relational dimension of kingdom mission. Here is but one example.

Awhile back, a colleague forwarded a lengthy paper for me to review, “*To The Edge: A Strategy Development Process Manual for An Ethnolinguistic People Group Focus Globally, including the Americas.*”²² Sensing the drift of the writing I stopped reading in order to run four specific word searches. Since the focus of the paper centers upon what needs to be done, the first term I queried was “task,” which appeared 168 times. Given the attention toward unreached people groups the next step in the missionary task is to “target” these groups, and this term catalogued 319 uses. Thirdly, “strategy” (or “strategic”) is the aspect which channels missionary activity among the targeted peoples, and these terms logged in at 302. The fourth term, however, stands in contrast to the other three, “love.” In a 229-page paper on developing strategic missions to the remaining hundreds of people groups who have no understanding of the Good News of the Kingdom, how often would I read of the role of love in this process? *Two times.*²³

Why is ‘love’ essentially absent from a long paper on global mission strategy? Does this mean that the dedicated missionaries and scholars developing this manual have no love for those without Christ? Of course not. In fact, the love of Christ for those who have never heard of him is the motivating force behind this strategic endeavor. What makes the difference is that they do not seem to recognize that love, specifically, ‘love for one another’, is *itself* a missional strategy. Likewise, love is the context for every implication of the relational dimension of kingdom and mission.

Last year two students in a *Perspectives* course asked me to review their semester project, a comprehensive strategy for reaching the Chechen people. As I looked over their work they seemed to have included every missionary method they had ever encountered—translation, literature, Bible studies, drama, medical, music, etc.—while deploying different combinations of missionary workers from all walks of life. However, there was a critical aspect I didn’t see, so I

asked them, “Do don’t appear to have included Russian believers on the mission teams you propose?” Naturally, they responded that the Chechen people despise Russians and would have nothing to do with them. I explained, however, that this is exactly the reason why they should be *appropriately* involved. In other words, what witness is more powerful among the Chechen people than humble Russians, in loving communion with other ethnicities, learning the Chechen’s language, asking forgiveness, submitting to them and washing their feet in Jesus’ name? Showing love, mercy and grace to those who have rejected us is exactly what God did for us in Christ Jesus—and the picture of the Samaritan in Luke 10—because Jesus ‘neighbored’ us!

2. Humility – Without humility Christlike love is not possible. Accustomed as we are to our position of strength which gives us the capacity to treat mission-as-charity, we must constantly resist the presumption of superiority.

Dr. Simon Chan (Ph.D, Cambridge), a theology professor from Singapore, gave an insightful daylong seminar on the implications of global Christianity. Having recounted the journey of the Majority World Christians to surmount the cultural, spiritual and economic hegemony of Western Christianity, he was asked a question by a Euro-American, “What, then, can our contribution be?” Chan replied, “Humility...to anticipate and welcome the kingdom contributions of the worlds’ peoples.”²⁴ In this opportunity to humble ourselves we see the challenge of *kenosis*, the ‘emptying’ necessary for loving, incarnational relationship across diverse cultures. Clearly, our own liberation is bound up with the growth and depth of global Christian community.

3. Inclusive embrace & intercultural unity – The greatest test of relational humility regards how we live in our own context and community. Thus, cultivating kingdom relationship begins at home. However, one of the reasons the relational dimension of kingdom and mission is not on our radar is that we do not apply its implications where we live. The gospel of the kingdom intends to bring all the ‘sheep’ God calls into his fold; though diverse, *we are one*, the key identity and community outcome for which our Lord prayed (John 17). Is this the testimony of our friendship networks, our congregations, our institutions, our mission agencies? Are we even prompted to look around and wonder, “Who is not here?” We were created for relationship and designed for community *inclusively*. God intends for his people to move toward each other in mutual, God-testifying relationship.

The gospel of Christ specifically addresses the exclusion we naturally generate, and when we obey God’s inclusive intention in our own context we will naturally apply it in global mission. To persist in applying homogenous strategies of kingdom growth is to work cross current to the biblical witness of ‘kingdom already’ love. There is a place for homogenous gospel ministry and fellowship, but, such a state is a valid and often needed *waypoint* on our kingdom journey, *not a destination*. The metaphor of the Body of Christ, directly communicates integral identity and interdependence. Our Lord prayed that we would be one because that is who we are created and redeemed in his image and nature. As global believers, in all our diversity, we need each other, for we are incomplete without each others’ contribution to the community.

4. Relational consciousness – The way we think, envision, plan, discuss, program, strategize, mobilize engage, and even, pray about mission demonstrates a functional activity mentality. Just today, in a morning worship service, the pastor prayed that “*God would bless Mr & Mrs Missionary in _____ as they get the gospel out and grow the kingdom.*” We naturally fixate

on *doing*. Listen to any prayer or discussion about mission and ninety plus percent of it will be about the functional dimension because we reflect our understanding and orientation. Rarely is anything said about love, relationship, reconciliation or community.

Throughout the year missionary candidates are visiting our mission agency office. These prospective missionaries have name tags with their hometowns, so the first two questions they usually receive from our office staff are: “Where are you going?” and “What are you going to do?” Consistently, this is what matters to us concerning mission, the place and the task. Unless we train our thinking, attitudes, conversations and intentions toward the relational dimension nothing in this pattern will change and we will continue to perpetuate the liabilities of the functional dimension.

5. Strategic restraint – The power of capacity, fueled by admirable intentions, encourages us to make up our own strategic story. Such is the momentum a mission-as-task orientation generates. It is only through humility, inculturation, time, appreciative inquiry and relational patience in the host context that we will be able to appropriately live the role God intends for us.

Miriam Adeney relates a cautionary tale from China. The Back to Jerusalem movement is full of courageous Chinese missionaries and martyrs. However, Chinese missionaries have been in NW China among minority populations for three decades, though few of these missionaries have learned the local language. “To the indigenous people, these Chinese missionaries appear to be one more arm of the imperialistic Han [majority] Chinese.” Missiological training is critical, especially for those from “large and powerful cultures.”²⁵ We from North America do well to heed this caution, for it underscores our same tendency to disregard the humble choices and relational connections which forge lasting friendship and trust, and which provide a foundation for gospel ministry.

Summary

Global mission is almost exclusively presented as a task to finish, emphasizing the functional activity of accomplishing an agenda—that all people(s) would have access to the gospel of reconciliation with God. However, can a gospel that reconciles people to God, and not people to people, be the gospel of Jesus Christ? We were created in the image of a relational God, so we have relational identity with God and each other, connections that are not optional. Due to sin, however, all relations were corrupted. The gospel of Christ, represented by the Cross, addresses all broken relationship. Since God intended humanity to be in intimate communion with himself and each other; this is who we become in Christ, through redemption and reconciliation, the embodiment of perfect human community as God intended. Therefore, the outcome of mission is to establish (1) kingdom presence, through repentance and reconciliation with God, *and* (2) kingdom community, through intercultural reconciliation, that all nations would be blessed to the glory of God. Kingdom mission is a community role—ministry *with* our global family in Christ *among* our human neighbors in this world—we cannot offer the nations reconciliation with God and neglect reconciliation with each other, otherwise, each is incomplete. As such, we recover the relational narrative of mission.

¹ DeYoung, Kevin and Gregory D. Gilbert. 2011. *What is the mission of the church? Making sense of social justice, shalom and the great commission*. Wheaton: Crossway. Kindle location 200.

² Wright, Christopher J. H. 2010. *The mission of God's people*. Langham Partnership International. Kindle edition. Location 212.

³ Wright, 2010. Location 295-98.

⁴ Unilateral independence is not limited to mission activity. We are naturally bent toward self-containment in our ethnicity, culture, denominational tradition, etc.

⁵ Goheen, Michael. 2011. *A Light to the Nations*. Baker Academic. Kindle edition, p. 4.

⁶ Langmead, Ross. 2004. *The word made flesh*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, p. 224.

⁷ Goheen, p. 10.

⁸ <http://www.call2allmedia.org/watch/3b78927e0cd15ba4c968/History%20of%20Table%2071>

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson

¹⁰ As told to this writer by Rob Denning.

¹¹ Deddo, Gary. Neighbors in racial reconciliation. *Cultural encounters*. 3:2, p. 29.

¹² Goheen, p. 90.

¹³ John Perkins, quoted from a public message, April, 2008, St. Louis.

¹⁴ Gombis, Timothy. 2011. The Paul we think we know. *Christianity Today*. July, p. 49.

¹⁵ p. 103.

¹⁶ Goheen, p. 115.

¹⁷ Wright. Kindle location 2939.

¹⁸ Garrison, David. 2004. *Church planting movements*. Midlothian: WIGTake Resources, p. 21.

¹⁹ September-October 2009, January-February 2011, September-October 2011

²⁰ Wright, Kindle location 1371.

²¹ Deddo, 31.

²² Slack, Jim. Unpublished document. full sequential edition. Received: June 6, 2009

²³ Actually, 'love' appeared four times, but two of the instances referred to a person, Rick Love.

²⁴ Personal notes of the writer (comments paraphrased). May 11, 2010. Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC.

²⁵ Adeney, Miriam. 2009. *Kingdoms without borders*. Downers Grove: IVP Books, p. 59.