***Missional* Matters**

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**Why Does the Church Exist?**

by Roland G. Kuhl

When we talk about mission or missions we tend to think of the church as being a sending agency or support agency for missionaries. We set aside, perhaps 10% or more, in our church budgets to support our mission efforts. So what do we do with the other 90%? How do we classify that ministry? What if all we are called to do is intended to be **mission**?

As the [Center for Parish Development](http://www.missionalchurch.org) has expressed, “The church exists because of God’s initiative, not ours. It is God who has called the church into being. It is through the church—the people of God—that God intends to carry out the Divine plan for the redemption of the world. The mission of the church is to discern and to participate in God’s mission” (CPD Handout, *Underlying Assumptions*, 1).

Georg F. Vicedom expresses in *The Mission of God*, “The mission, and with it the church, is God’s very own work. We cannot speak of the ‘mission of the church,’ even less of ‘our mission.’ Both the church and the mission have their source in the loving will of God. Therefore we can speak of church and mission always only with the understanding that they are not independent entities. Both are only tools of God, instruments through which God carries out [God’s] mission. The church must first in obedience fulfill [*God’s*] missionary intention. Only then can she speak of *her* mission, since her mission is then included in the *missio Dei*.” (Vicedom, *The Mission of God,* 5-6)

As I stated last week, the mission in which we are called as God’s people to participate is work that belongs to God – it is God’s mission (*missio Dei*). So, if God is the initiator of the mission, and God calls and sends the church to participate in this mission – then the church exists for God and God’s purposes. The Church has no purpose or mission of its own, unless it submits itself to the redemptive mission of the Living God.

This is indeed a new understanding of why we are church – but it is a biblical understanding. It is a biblical understanding we need to rediscover if we are to be the people of God in the world, otherwise we are merely a people who have an association with God – but not the people of God.

Vicedom further relates, “If it is true that God intends the mission since [God] carries out the mission, then the church can be God’s vessel and tool only if she surrenders herself to [God’s] purpose. If she disassociates herself from this concern of God, she becomes disobedient and can no longer be church in the divine sense. ‘There is no participation in Christ without participation in [God’s] mission to the world.’ Hence the church is not called on to decide whether she will carry on the mission or not. She can only decide for herself whether she wants to be church. She cannot determine when, where, and how missions will be carried out, for the mission is divinely guided, as is shown us above all in Acts. Mission as the business of God implies that [God] lays claim to make use of all [God’s people] exactly as [God] wishes, in order to impart [God’s] love to all [people] through believers [in Jesus Christ]. God makes this claim clear by first achieving the mission *through Himself*. The church can only follow in achieving what God has already done and is doing. She can only point to what [God] will do. Thus mission is based on the activity [that] God [initiates and completes].” (Vicedom, *The Mission of God,* 6)

A former seminary professor of mine, Ray Anderson, who shaped much of my understanding of the praxis of ministry, further reiterates this perspective expressed by Vicedom. “The church has no existence apart from being called into being through [God’s] ministry and equipped for it by the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the church to seek a ministry of its own is to deny Christ’s ministry and to turn aside to spurious activities that can never justify its own existence or redeem the world.” (Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 63)

So what does all this mean?

What it means is that mission is not merely one activity amongst others that we engage in as the people of God. Rather, mission is the core understanding of who we are as the people of God in the world – God has called us out of the world, set us apart as the people of God, filled us with the Holy Spirit, to be the unique community of recreated humanity through Jesus Christ. As this community that has its identity centered in Christ, we are called not to participate in ministries of our own choosing, but to participate with God in whatever and wherever God sends us for the accomplishing of God’s redemptive purpose of reconciling humanity to himself and making all things new. This mission of God’s is all focused and accomplished in and through Jesus Christ.

So why does the church exist? We exist for God alone and for what God seeks to accomplish in recreating humanity and all creation. The needs of the world do not set the agenda for our ministry, rather it is in our serving of God that we participate in what impassions the heart of God – it is because God loves the world that not only did he send the Son (cf. John 3: 16-17), God also continues to send the church.

Next week: Church as *Sign* of the Reign of God

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