

## Twelve Theses on the Church's Mission in the Twenty-first Century

In Interaction with Charles Van Engen,  
Keith Eitel, and Enoch Wan

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### **INTRODUCTION**

It is hard to imagine a more important task than to reflect on the church's mission in the world today. I count it a privilege to be part of this conversation and of the collaborative effort of reflecting biblically, critically, and constructively on the church's missionary task. It is not necessary to agree with everything Charles Van Engen says to appreciate his useful and competent essay, which is eminently suitable to serve as the basis for further discussion. I am writing this response as a New Testament scholar, born and raised in Vienna, Austria, theologically trained at Columbia International University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and now teaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. I am not attempting to provide my own definition of mission, but (with apologies to Luther) I am setting forth 12 theses that I hope will be useful guideposts for further discussion on this vital topic. These theses flow from my reading of Van Engen's essay, with

which I will interact along the way. At times I will also touch on the responses by K. Eitel and E. Wan.

## THE TWELVE THESES

1. *The church's mission—in both belief and practice—should be grounded in the biblical theology of mission.* This requires sustained reflection on the biblical teaching on mission in both Testaments, an awareness of the complexities involved in apprehending such a biblical theology of mission, and the adoption of a humble stance toward Scripture as the church's sole legitimate source of divine revelation and thus of the church's understanding of its mission.<sup>1</sup>

By "biblical theology" I mean, in essence, the theology of the Bible and of the biblical writers themselves, in contrast to our contemporary efforts to lay out what we believe the church's mission ought to be. A. Schlatter wrote:

We turn away decisively from ourselves and our time to what was found in the men through whom the church came into being. Our main interest should be the thought as it was conceived by *them* and the truth that was valid for *them*. . . . This is the internal disposition upon which the success of the work depends.<sup>2</sup>

Once the biblical teachings have been apprehended in their respective historical contexts and in the terms used by the biblical authors, it is possible to systematize the theology of the various biblical writers.<sup>3</sup> In this way the teaching of God's Word is allowed to set the proper parameters for the church's reflection on

<sup>1</sup> Van Engen's discussion of the Old Testament material is only one sentence (see the massive recent volume by C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006]), and his treatment of the New Testament teaching is sketchy at best. The lengthy quote of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is insufficient not only because of its nature as a secondary source but also because its methodology is questionable. See the critique of the *TDNT* entry on *apostellō* by K. H. Rengstorff in A. J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and of the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 99–102; and, more generally, J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1961), chap. 8. On a biblical theology of mission, see A. J. Köstenberger and P. T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (NSBT 11; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2001); cf. E. J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004). Van Engen also insufficiently distinguishes between the concept of "sending," the sender and sent one(s), and the task with which those sent are charged (e.g., preaching the gospel).

<sup>2</sup> A. Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, trans. A. J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 18.

<sup>3</sup> See A. J. Köstenberger, "The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John," *Missiology* 23 (1995): 445–64.

the nature of its mission. Rather than anthropology, psychology, sociology, or any of the other social sciences setting the parameters, it is the divine revelation in Scripture that forms the starting point of the church's reflection.

2. *Reflection on the church's mission should be predicated on the affirmation of the full and sole authority of Scripture.*<sup>4</sup> Unless the church's convictions regarding its mission and strategies are committed to the authority of Scripture, the purity of its missionary thought and practice will be compromised. Thinking derived from the social sciences will inevitably leaven the dough of its missiology.

3. *The church's mission should be conceived primarily in terms of the church's faithfulness and responsiveness to the missionary mandate given by the Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in Scripture.* If the church is to engage in mission as prompted by God's initiative in Christ (as is surely the case), then the church's mission is to be conceived as essentially responsive and representational in nature.<sup>5</sup>

The gospel is conceived in the New Testament in terms of stewardship and responsibility. Timothy, for example, is enjoined by Paul to "guard the good deposit" of the gospel (2 Tim 1:14) and to eschew "youthful lusts" (2 Tim 2:22 NASB), which may refer not merely to sexual temptation but also dangers of embracing the latest theological trends. The gospel is certainly not new, for Paul says it is "the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (Rom 1:1–2 NIV). The message of God's salvation in Christ is timeless and true.

4. *The church's understanding of its mission should be hermeneutically sound.*<sup>6</sup> This requires the consideration of facts; for example, the Synoptic Gospels focus on Jesus' teaching about the "kingdom of God," but John's Gospel speaks instead of "eternal

<sup>4</sup> In this I echo K. Eitel's call for "the foundational assumption of biblical authority, accessibility, and applicability" in "On Becoming Missional: Interacting with Charles Van Engen."

<sup>5</sup> On the term "representational," see A. J. Köstenberger, *Missions of Jesus and the Disciples*, chap. 5; and D. J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), chap. 5.

<sup>6</sup> I agree with Eitel's warning against "dangerous creativity" and against "creative tensions without biblically firm boundaries" and his call for "hermeneutical measures" to be put in place "that will safeguard the integrity of the gospel message." At the same time, when Eitel says, "let us simply reaffirm the Great Commission and be willing to keep on telling the old, old story," this may unduly recognize the fact that the Great Commission still needs to be interpreted and has been interpreted in different ways over the centuries as Van Engen's essay has demonstrated.

life.”<sup>7</sup> This seems to caution against elevating the “kingdom of God” as the only paradigm by which the church’s mission is to be understood. Also, Paul emphasizes the centrality of the gospel (e.g., Rom 1:1–2, 16–17) and provides teaching on the church as the body of Christ, on spiritual gifts, and on the proper organization of the church, including qualifications for its leaders (see Rom 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12–14; and 1 Tim 3:1–13).<sup>8</sup>

Sound hermeneutics also requires that one Great Commission passage (Matt 28:18–20) not be treated as if it were the only commissioning passage in the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Nor should these commissioning passages be understood in isolation from the book of which they are a part. For example, Matt 28:16–20 shows the commission to be an extension of God’s command to Abraham that he would be a blessing to all the nations, and John 20:21–22 climaxes the Gospel’s portrait of Jesus as the Son sent from the Father and construes the relationship between Jesus and the church on the basis of this paradigm.<sup>10</sup>

5. *The church’s mission is to be conceived ultimately in theocentric rather than anthropocentric terms.* Mission is part of the church’s obedience to God, just as dying on the cross for the sins of the world was part of the sent Son’s obedience to the one who sent Him, God the Father (cf. John 17:4; 19:30). Thus the gospel and its abiding truth and relevance for lost sinners should be the primary point of reference as the church engages in its mission rather than human need and the contemporary cultural, political, economic, and social contexts.

6. *The church’s mission, properly and biblically conceived, is to be trinitarian in its orientation but not at the expense of neglecting the distinct roles of the three Persons within the Godhead.*<sup>11</sup> The church’s mission is to be prompted by God the Father’s initiative, to proceed on the basis of Christ’s redemptive mission

<sup>7</sup> The term “kingdom” (*basileia*) is found in John’s Gospel only in John 3:3,5; 18:36.

<sup>8</sup> The term “kingdom” (*basileia*) is found in Paul’s letters only 14 times, and at least eight of them have a future reference (1 Cor 6:9–10; 15:24,50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; Col 1:13; 2 Tim 4:18; note that five of these passages feature the term “inherit” or “inheritance”).

<sup>9</sup> See Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21–22; Acts 1:7–8. Although Wan elsewhere acknowledges several commissioning passages, at one point in his essay he does speak of individuals being obedient to the Great Commission.

<sup>10</sup> See Köstenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, chaps. 5, 8; and Köstenberger, *Missions of Jesus and the Disciples*, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> See A. J. Köstenberger and S. R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel* (NSBT 24; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 2008), especially chap. 9.

and commission, and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. In this sense, there is no dichotomy between the church's mission being trinitarian *and* Christocentric—it is to be both.<sup>12</sup>

Scripture does indeed teach that Jesus is the sender (John 20:21) and the one who commissioned the church on the basis of His authority (Matt 28:18). Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through” Him (John 14:6). In Jesus, God will bring all things to their end-time consummation (Eph 1:10). It is therefore vital to affirm both the trinitarian nature of the church's mission (Matt 28:19; John 20:21–22) and the preeminence given to Christ in that same mission.

In terms of both revelation and redemption, the New Testament writings state unequivocally that Jesus is preeminent (John 1:1–2, 14, 16–18; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–4). A church that opts to be broadly trinitarian yet holds that focusing on Christ is being unduly narrow may open the door to the notion that there are ways of salvation other than faith in Christ. Yet the exclusivity of Jesus Christ in salvation is an indispensable part of faithful gospel proclamation (e.g., Acts 4:12).

*7. The contemporary context of the church's mission, while important, ought not to override the church's commitment to the authority of Scripture, its need to be grounded in the biblical theology of mission, and the understanding of its task in terms of faithfulness to the gospel.*<sup>13</sup> Once contemporary context and experience are put on a par with Scripture, the former two take precedence and Scripture's authority is undermined, with the inevitable result that the gospel's integrity is compromised.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, of course, it is vital for the church to find ever-new ways to present the truth of the gospel in ways that are relevant to the culture.

*8. The church is the God-ordained agent of His mission in this world today.* Just as it is *in Christ* that God has chosen to center

<sup>12</sup> Compare the way of putting things by Wan, who speaks of “the trinitarian orientation rather than [the church being] impoverished by being merely Christocentric in emphasis.”

<sup>13</sup> This is why Van Engen's definition of “theology” as “the knowledge of God in context” is potentially slippery (see Van Engen, “The New Covenant: Knowing God in Context,” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, ed. D. S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word, 1989), 91 (cited by Eitel, “On Becoming Missional,” n. 9).

<sup>14</sup> For a demonstration of this with regard to the feminist portrayal of Jesus, see M. E. Köstenberger, *Jesus and the Feminists: Who Do They Say That He Is?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

His salvation-historical program, Christ is the head of His body, *the church*. Paul stated, “In *Him* you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation—in *Him* when you believed—were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13, emphasis added). Paul’s desire was that “to Him [God] be glory *in the church* and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:21, emphasis added).

This recognition of the agency of the church in God’s plan also requires that the kingdom of God and the church be properly related to each other. While related, the two concepts are nonetheless distinct. The kingdom, while having been inaugurated through Jesus Christ at His first coming, is to a significant extent still future. At the present time the life of the kingdom is to be displayed in an anticipatory fashion in the life of the church. Nevertheless, there are also differences, such as that marriage is part of the present way of life in the church while there will be no marriage in the kingdom (Matt 22:30).

9. *The way the kingdom of God is extended in this world today is through regenerate believers acting out their Christian faith in their God-assigned spheres of life: the church, their families, their workplaces, the societies in which they live* (see Eph 5:18–6:9; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7). This realization precludes both an overrealized eschatology and an otherworldly escapism or heroism that has the effect of bypassing the primary God-ordained familial and social structures in this life. Instead, believers are to live out the gospel in their natural social and political environment by being good spouses, parents, citizens, and so on.

10. *There is no true lasting social transformation apart from personal conversion through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ*. Wan is right to stress the indispensable personal and individual nature of faith in Christ and to caution against an overreaction against an unduly individualistic understanding of the biblical teaching on mission. At the same time it should be acknowledged that mission is the Church’s task, not the task of individuals apart from their membership in a given local church.

11. *Human organization is perfectly compatible with an acknowledgment of God and his initiative in mission*. While at times in the history of the church and its mission human organization

became a substitute for faith in God, it is also true that the opposite of organization is chaos. The New Testament writings (especially the book of Acts) indicate that the early church took concerted steps to organize itself to carry out its mission successfully. It appointed and commissioned missionaries, planted networks of churches, and set up leaders, and so on.

While not addressing every conceivable challenge with which the church would be confronted in its missionary task, the book of Acts therefore constitutes an abiding, divinely inspired casebook to guide its missionary practice. But the study of the book of Acts reveals that the church must remain open to God's direction and redirection and must be aware that God's purposes, not human strategizing, are to be primary. This includes Paul, who is depicted in Acts not so much as a master strategist but as one who remained open to God's leading.

*12. The church's task today is to nurture, renew, and plant churches composed of a spiritually regenerate membership and constituted in keeping with the biblical teaching regarding church leadership.*

In this the apostle Paul's example is unsurpassed. We would do well to immerse ourselves in Scripture—particularly the book of Acts and Paul's letters—and to emulate Paul's priorities, values, strategies, and missionary practice.<sup>15</sup>

In my local church, Richland Creek Community Church, I teach a class called Kingdom Families. In this class, which is made up of families and singles from over a dozen countries, I am blessed to experience a foretaste of life in the kingdom. We worship, fellowship, study, pray, serve, go and share the gospel; and above all we love. May the work of God continue to flourish until the gospel has been preached to all the nations (Mark 13:10). And may we, both individually and corporately, be prepared to follow where God leads us, wherever that may be.

## CONCLUSION

Van Engen has provided a helpful thumbnail sketch of the various definitions of *mission* over the history of the church. In fact,

<sup>15</sup> See E. J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008).

he has been part of this history himself for several decades. While I was reading his essay, it occurred to me that while the church should certainly be prepared to learn all it can from the past as it reflects on the nature of its mission, in the final analysis it should take its cue not from the history of missions but from the biblical teaching regarding the mission of the church. Toward the end of his essay, Van Engen suggests today's church should be missional and proposes a rather lengthy definition of mission.

Yet I wonder if the way forward in the church's quest for a proper understanding of its mission is to be found in adopting a new terminology or in crafting an elaborate definition of *mission* that commands widespread support. Instead, I offer these 12 theses as a small contribution to the conversation of how the church should conceive of and go about her mission. "Now to Him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think—according to the power that works in you—to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph 3:20–21).

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