

# THE PRIMACY OF WORSHIP AND THE NECESSITY OF MISSION: SOME REFLECTIONS

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What is the Church for?

This is a question that has been growing in volume since the late 1950s, when Scots began to desert the Church in their droves. Yet as the Scottish Church declined, it is a question that has also become pressing for Church members themselves. When the Church was buoyant, it seemed clearer what the Church was for, and what part we should play in it. Yet in straightened times, when some aspects of Church life need to be abandoned, the question of what we are meant to be doing becomes an important one, and answers to it essential.

One answer that has come into vogue is that the purpose of the Church is to engage in mission: to be a Church without walls, to abandon our sacred sanctuaries and paeans of praise and meet people where they are, serving, supporting, and witnessing to them in everyday life. While this answer to the question ‘What is the Church for?’ is appealing, it also begs the question: what about all the other things the Church currently does? Do we abandon public worship, congregational life, the upkeep of buildings and our financial structures to better engage in mission? Or if we do not, how are we to relate the two together? Can new wine be put into old wineskins?

In this article, we will explore the relationship between mission and worship in our post-Christian context. We will first explore what mission might be by examining the Five Marks of Mission, which have recently been adopted by both the Church of Scotland and the Church of England. Having considered what mission might be, we will then examine what the purpose of the Church is, and how the ascended Christ works upon and within the Church to help it achieve that purpose. We will then examine how Christ’s action in worship leads to missional fruit, and what the relationship between worship and mission should be. The summary of our argument is this: The Five Marks are a good description of mission, but not of everything the Church is called to be or do. The purpose of the Church is to help people become like Christ by worshipping

the Father, loving their neighbours, and serving and witnessing to them in Christ's name. This love is grown, shaped, and sustained by the Spirit through worship and prayer, as it is principally through these that Christ and the Spirit act upon us, transforming us into the likeness of Jesus. To supplant worship with mission, or to place mission before it, will only weaken mission, and harm both the Church and the world. In presenting this argument, it is hoped that greater clarity can be gained in relation to the purpose of worship and mission and their relationship to one another, informing the decision making of church leaders as they face difficult institutional and social contexts.

### **What is Mission, and What is it Not?**

There are many different definitions and approaches towards mission, and space precludes any discussion of the wide field of missiology. What we will do instead, however, is examine one missional statement that has become central to the life of two of Britain's historic churches: the Five Marks of Mission.

The Five Marks of Mission are a recent addition to the life of the Scottish Church, but have had a longer genesis within the Anglican Communion. They developed from similar motivations as those of the Lausanne Covenant, attempting to bridge the gulf between service-focussed, activist-focussed, and evangelism-focussed forms of mission. They represent an 'holistic' approach towards Christian mission, not separating spheres of Christian activity into 'spiritual' and 'physical' but recognising that God's redemptive focus is cosmic in scale, and encompasses every aspect of human life. In recent years, they have been adopted by the Church of England as central to their strategic planning, and through their adoption into the Church of Scotland's Mission Plan Act are now being used to implement a 40% reduction in ministry posts.<sup>1</sup> The text of the Five Marks of Mission reads:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ

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1 "A Vision for the Church of England in the 2020s," Stephen Cottrell, last modified November 2020, <https://www.churchofengland.org/system/files/2020-12//A%20vision%20for%20the%20church%20of%20England%20in%20the%202020s%20-%20commentary%20by%20Stephen%20Cottrell.pdf>; "Act VIII 2021," General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, last modified May 2022, [https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/95987/2021-Act-8-Presbytery-Mission-Plan-Act.pdf](https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/95987/2021-Act-8-Presbytery-Mission-Plan-Act.pdf).

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth <sup>2</sup>

We will not consider in this article whether the Marks are scriptural or not - others have done this<sup>3</sup> - but instead consider what the Marks are intended to do and what they are *not* intended to do. First, we must note the obvious: they are Marks of *mission*. If the Marks were intended to describe *everything* the Church and Christians are called to do, we would hope to find explicit reference to worship, prayer, sacraments and discipline or polity. As it is, we find none of these things, and must therefore treat the Marks as a description of mission alone. Second, because the Marks are marks of mission, they are not marks of the Church itself. The marks or notes of the Church were famously described by the Scots Confession as the true preaching of the Word, the right administration of the Sacraments, and discipline uprightly ministered.<sup>4</sup> While Christians have different understandings of what it means to truly preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and enact discipline, they would generally include these activities in descriptions of what the Church is and what it should be doing. Their absence from the Five Marks is further indication that they were not intended to define or describe the full purpose, nature, or activity of the Church, and were – as their name suggests – intended to describe missional activity alone.

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2 “The Five Marks of Mission,” Anglican Communion, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>.

3 See particularly Chris Wright, *Five Marks of Mission: Making God’s Mission Ours* (United States: im:press, 2016), and Jesse Zink “Five Marks of Mission: History, Theology, Critique,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 15 , no. 2 (2017): 144 –166.

4 G.D. Henderson, ed., *The Scots Confession of 1560* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960), Article XVIII.

## What is the Purpose of the Church?

The Marks, then, are not marks of the Church, and do not attempt to fully describe the purpose and scope of the Church's life and work. Before we can understand the relation of mission to worship, then, we must spend some time considering what the *purpose* of the Church and its worship might be. We can then better assess how the worship of the Church should relate to its mission.

The first thing to note is that there is genuine disagreement among contemporary Scottish Christians over what the purpose of the Church is. Is the Church's purpose to love and fight for minorities? Is the Church's purpose to campaign for justice for the poor? Is the Church's purpose to hold and proclaim biblical truth, or is it to grow in closeness to the Lord, or save the life of the planet? These and many other things have been held up as the primary purpose of the Church, and while there is Scriptural warrant for most of them, focussing on one purpose or activity alone carries significant dangers. It can lead to a one-sided faith, where only one aspect of God's intentions for humanity is taken seriously while others are neglected. To have social justice without theology, or creation care without worship, or the sacraments without discipleship is to foster a one-sided and incomplete faith, which, in turn, leads to one-sided and incomplete people.

Thankfully, Scripture provides a solution to the danger of over-emphasising some aspects of the Christian life and under-emphasising others, of raising mission over worship or worship over mission: Jesus Christ.

On one level, all can agree that we are called to become like Christ. But *why*, and *how*, and *to what effect* is not always so clear. That is because 'becoming like Jesus' is often understood in ethical terms alone. It is taken to mean 'be a nice person', but with little further theological grounding. Yet becoming like Christ is not merely an ethical goal, but an ontological and teleological imperative, relating to the being, purpose, and destiny of human beings.

In order to understand this, and its importance for the relationship between worship and mission, we can begin by considering the classic account of creation in Genesis 1: 26:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...

When this verse is read alone, it is not clear what being made ‘in the image of God’ means, although if we were pressed for an answer we might say that being made in God’s image means controlling the world and other animals. That is, after all, what immediately follows this passage. Yet this is not the only reference to being made ‘in the image of God’ in Scripture, and if we read Genesis 1: 26 alone then there is a genuine risk of misunderstanding the destiny of human beings and the purpose of the Church. In Colossians 1: 15-19 we read this of Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...

What Colossians teaches, therefore, is that it is *Christ* who is the image of God. As John 1: 18 says, ‘No one has ever seen God’ but Christ, in his humanity, has made God known. If we want to know what Genesis means by being ‘made in the image of God’ then, we must look to Christ.

Yet there is more. For Christ’s perfect imaging of God in his humanity has implications for us also. In Romans 8: 28-9 we read:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

Christ not only reveals *God*, then, but reveals *us*, reveals what human beings should be and one day will be. Christ alone is the perfect image of the Father, and our destiny is to become like the one who is the perfect image of the Father.

At this stage in the argument, readers may be confused as to why we have spent time looking at creation and Christology in an article on worship and mission. We come now, however, to the crux: because we were created to be

like him, the purpose of the Church is to help people become like Christ. We find throughout the New Testament references to this core business of the Church. We are told to ‘have the mind of Christ’ (e.g. 1 Corinthians 2: 16; Philippians 2: 5), to help build ‘build up’ the Church so that it becomes ‘mature’ in Christ (e.g. Ephesians 4: 12-13) and similar commands.<sup>5</sup> These are all different ways of saying that human beings, corporately and individually, must resemble Christ, and that it is the Church’s purpose to help them achieve this.

Yet this raises a further question: what does it mean for people to become like Christ? Well just as Christ is not only concerned with worshipping *or* helping people *or* teaching *or* witnessing to the Father, but does *all* of these things, so too must we become like Christ in *all* the ways appropriate to our created humanity. Craving simplicity and control, human beings like to reduce the richness of Christ’s life down to one objective, whether it be evangelism, creation care, social justice or indeed worship. Yet what human beings hold apart Christ reconciles, and in his perfect humanity we see the full integration of worship, love, service, and witness. The Church is therefore called to create fully Christ-like people, to help people worship the Father like Christ, know and speak the truth like Christ, love like Christ, and serve and witness like Christ. Mission is part of being like Christ, but it is *one part alone*, and follows from a great many other things.

### **The Ascended Ministry of Christ**

The Church, then, is to help people become like Christ in every aspect of their thinking, feeling, and doing. Yet there is a danger here, the danger of thinking that it is the Church alone which does all of this shaping and conforming to the image of Christ. Yet it is not principally the Church that does this, but Christ *himself*. It may not be immediately obvious that this is the case. We look around in our communities – and even our churches – and sometimes struggle to see Christ at work. Finding no presence of Christ or Christ’s activity, we then assume that it is only *our* activity that maintains the Church: only *we* who

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5 Sometimes these commands contain the image of the Body or of the Temple. These are not opposing or unrelated images, however, but different ways of saying that the image of God is only completed in us when we are united with other Christians to form the image of Christ in the world. See Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 68; G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2004), 365-402.

worship, only *we* who serve, only *we* who witness. Yet this is to misunderstand where Christ is and what he is doing. For the Ascension of Christ did not – as many would have it – mark the *end* of Christ’s ministry, or the passing over of every aspect of his ministry to us, but the *development and expansion* of his ministry. During the incarnation, Christ’s ministry took place in Judea and Samaria, geographical places in space-time where he was physically present. Yet because Christ is no longer physically present anywhere but in heaven, he can be present to *all* places. Since the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Christ’s ministry has been expanding to every place and every culture, working with the Church to point to and realise the Kingdom throughout the world.<sup>6</sup>

Yet while Christ wishes to minister and reign in every place and time, he ministers and reigns *first* in the Church. This ‘first’ has two aspects relevant to our discussion of the relation of worship to mission. On the one hand, it is a statement about time. Christ ministered and reigned *first* in the Church *before* ministering and coming to reign in the wider non-Christian world. Yet on the other hand, it also refers to a theological and missiological primacy. Christ ministers and reigns *first* in the Church *so that* he may then minister and reign in the lives of those who are not yet Christian.

We gain greater insight into this relation between Christ’s ministry, the Church and mission by considering the vivid teaching of our Lord in John 15: 1-8:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

Jesus’ teaching in John 15 is that Father, Son and Spirit incorporate us into their divine life, and it is from being rooted in Christ by the Spirit, and tended by the Father in love, that we then bear fruit. One of the fruits of this participation in God’s own life is what we call mission: working with Christ to bring people to

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6 This understanding of the ascension is drawn from the classic Scottish text by William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1892).

faith, serve and heal them, challenge injustice and care for creation. This fruit is an essential part of God's own mission to the world, and is a non-negotiable part of being like Christ. Yet this fruit is grown by being engrafted into Christ by the Spirit, and tended by God the Father. There is no other way for this missional fruit to grow.

### **Worship: the Workshop of the Lord**

Christ works in and with the Church, then, to shape us into his likeness and help us bear missional fruit. Yet *how* does he do this? He does it principally through *worship*.

By worship, we mean the sung praise, prayers, teaching and sacraments that constitute corporate worship, along with the private prayer and Scripture reading undertaken by individuals. Worship is not just something that churchy people like to do on a Sunday morning, but something far more interesting. It is the principal way in which the ascended Christ acts upon us as Prophet, Priest and King, and is an expression of eternal life in the here and now.

Both of these aspects of worship are important, but the action of Christ has a certain priority insofar as we cannot experience eternal life and its effects unless we are first acted on by him. Christ the Prophet teaches us his truth through Scripture readings, the preached Word, and the words of the hymns we sing. Christ the Priest reconciles us to God and to each other through confession, Baptism, and Holy Communion, and Christ the King calls us to obedience by demanding that we obey his will and offer our praise. As Christ acts upon us in this threefold way, we are united with him by the Spirit, and are shaped and formed by the Father to resemble more and more the likeness of his dear Son. This is never an end in itself, however, but serves Christ's wider ministry and mission of making *all* people like himself. To the extent that we resemble Christ in our minds, hearts and actions we will have the inspiration, motivation, courage and wisdom to engage in successful mission. If we do not resemble Christ, however, then our mission will falter, or fail to even begin.

As we are acted upon by Christ in worship, however, something else happens: we are drawn progressively deeper into the relationship of praise and love and joy that exists between the Son and the Father in the Spirit. For when we worship, we do not sing as lone individuals to a distant, shadowy God in a faraway heaven, but share and participate as a united people in the loving



relationship that Christ has with the Father in the Spirit. With Christ, we express our love of the Father, and he, in his goodness, sees us in Christ, and by his Spirit shares with us his joy, holiness, love, and eternal life. Worship, then, is not just a good singalong with likeminded churchgoers in a nice building, but a foretaste of eternal life. Today – haltingly, half-heartedly, but really and truly – we can experience something of our eternal destinies, and act as signs of the coming Kingdom to an unbelieving world.

### **The Relation of Worship to Mission**

Having laid this groundwork, we are now in a position to describe the relationship between worship and mission. Mission is not all the Church is called to do, and statements such as the Five Marks of Mission are misinterpreted if they are thought of as marks of the Church rather than marks of missional activity. In order to understand what other things the Church should be doing, we must properly understand its purpose. That purpose is to help people become like Christ by working with Christ and the Spirit to encourage worship of the Father, the development of love for others, and providing opportunities for service and witness. Because service and witness are essential aspects of being like Christ, they are non-negotiable for the Church, and must be taken seriously. Yet mission begins with worship, the workshop of the Lord. When we are acted upon by Christ in worship, we come to learn more of the truth, grow in love of the Father and our neighbour, and obey God in more aspects of our life. It is then, and *only then*, that we can we serve and witness successfully in mission.

The prioritisation and coordination of worship and mission is therefore a matter of crucial importance, and has significant practical implications. If we ask people to serve and witness to non-Christians, yet do not properly teach or feed them so that they become like Christ, four things will happen. First – and perhaps most likely – they will hear the call to mission yet will not be moved by it. They will conclude that mission is primarily for enthusiasts, and not for ‘normal’ churchgoers. Alternatively, they will conclude that talk of mission is merely rhetoric to justify the closure of their buildings, or the siphoning away of resources from local churches. Whatever the reason, the outcome will be the same: inactivity. Second, and alternatively, church members may begin missional activities but - not being discipled and shaped by Christ through worship and teaching – will serve and witness in unhelpful ways. In relation to missional service, they may begin projects that, while good, are totally detached from the life and witness of the Church, indistinguishable from any secular charity.

They may conclude – as we discussed earlier – that only one part of mission is important, believing that climate justice or justice for the poor are the only activities worth participating in, and castigating those who think differently. Or, alternatively, they may evangelise, but do so in unhelpful ways that actually move their neighbours *further away* from Christ. Third, without abiding in Christ the true vine, something accomplished through worship, they also stand a good chance of simply *burning out*. Launching missional projects in a post-Christian, secular society is hard, and requires great courage, determination, and faith. Without being fed and nurtured through worship it can be very hard to keep going, and all too easy to give up. Fourth, however, if we neglect worship, we will lose one of the most important tools for mission that we have. Lesslie Newbigin once described the local congregation as the ‘hermeneutic of the Gospel’, meaning that people do not interpret Christianity in the abstract but as they see it lived out in concrete communities of faith.<sup>7</sup> Meaningful, passionate, and engaging worship is therefore essential if the plausibility of the Christian faith is to increase, and our lives bear missional fruit in our post-Christian context.

## Conclusion

In summary, then, worship, teaching, and sacraments precede mission theologically, temporally, and practically, and mission is contingent on them. Mission is the fruit of abiding in Christ by the Spirit, and being tended and shaped by the Father. This abiding and shaping happens when we participate in worship both corporately and individually, and if we do not worship, mission will either fail to happen, become distorted, or peter out.

None of this is to deny necessity of mission in contemporary Scotland, however, or criticise the attempt of Scotland’s churches to pivot to a more missional model of Church. The missional *inactivity* of many congregations is not only an indication of their lack of health, but is a tragedy for their neighbours, few of whom know the love, and strength, and hope that comes from a saving relationship with the Father. Yet mission is not the root of the Church but its fruit, and our neighbours will not taste that fruit unless the followers of Christ cling to him first, and worship the Father in Spirit and in truth.

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7 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 2014), 227.

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