

# SENDING LANGUAGE

By Brad Brisco

When considering the theological and biblical underpinnings of the missional church conversation I find the two most helpful topics to address include the concept of *missio Dei*, or mission of God, and the language of “sending” found throughout Scripture.

The chief element to grasp about the *missio Dei* is that the mission is God’s. We are not called to bring our mission into a local context, instead we are called to partner with God in *His* mission. In the words of South African missiologist David Bosch; “It is not the church which undertakes mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church.” We often wrongly assume that the primary activity of God is in the church, rather than recognizing that God’s primary activity is in the world, and the church is God’s instrument sent into the world to participate in His redemptive mission.

This leads to the second important topic, which is the theme of “sending” in Scripture. The reason it is important to recognize such language in Scripture is not only because it speaks to the missionary nature of the Triune God, but it also connects – particularly in the New Testament – God’s mission to our’s.

In the following article I will present a survey of the “sending” theme throughout Scripture. The survey is based largely upon the work of Francis DuBose in his 1983 publication, *God Who Sends*. However, I do hope to augment DuBose’s work, particularly in the Gospels, and especially in the Gospel of John. In the following introduction I lay out the breath of the study that I hope will be an encouragement to those who are wrestling with the need to cultivate a missional theology.

## Introduction

The *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* defines “mission” as “the divine activity of sending intermediaries whether supernatural or human to speak or do God’s will so that God’s purposes for judgment or redemption are furthered.” [1] However, when examining the idea of mission in the Bible is there a “divine activity of sending” as suggested in this definition? Furthermore, is it reasonable to ask if there is consistent biblical language that speaks directly to the topic of mission? Is the concept of mission something that has been imposed upon Scripture as a result of our own back ground and history, or does the Bible speak consistently regarding the missionary nature of God and his mission?

In the following essay I will respond to these questions by examining the language of “sending” found throughout Scripture. A “survey of the term sending in its various forms in Scripture suggest that it is more than a simple descriptive word,” [2] it instead reveals the missionary nature of the Triune God, as well as the very essence of the church. The

redemptive activity of God, his relationship to the world, and his dealing with mankind is described in Scripture by the word “sending.” In fact the word “sending” is the “sum and substance of God’s creativity and activity.” [3] The entirety of redemptive history exhibits itself as a history of God sending others to participate in the *missio Dei*. [4] Theologian Darrell Guder summarizes the breath of the sending theme throughout Scripture this way:

*Mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. “Mission” means “sending,” and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history. God’s mission began with the call of Israel to receive God’s blessings in order to be a blessing to the nations. God’s mission unfolded in the history of God’s people across the centuries recorded in Scripture, and it reached its revelatory climax in the incarnation of God’s work of salvation in Jesus ministering, crucified, and resurrected. God’s mission continued then in the sending of the Spirit to call forth and empower the church as the witness to God’s good news in Jesus Christ. [5]*

To illustrate the totality of the sending theme, I will consider the language of sending by surveying seven major sections of Scripture including: the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Poetical Books, the Prophetic Books, the Gospels (with specific emphasis on the Gospel of John), the Book of Acts, and the Epistles and Revelation. This survey of Scripture will be followed by a brief examination of biblical language that is less explicit, yet still speaks to the sending nature of God’s activity.

### **Old Testament Survey of “Sending Language”**

#### **The Pentateuch**

Johan Herman Bavinck, the Dutch missiologist and missionary to Indonesia, observed: “At first sight the Old Testament appears to offer little basis for the idea of missions. . . . Yet, if we investigate the Old Testament more thoroughly, it becomes clear that the future of the nations is a point of the greatest concern.” [6] The Old Testament is replete with sending language that presents a picture of God as the divine sovereign Lord who sends in order to convey and accomplish his redemptive mission upon the earth. The Hebrew verb “to send,” *salah* is found over 800 times in the Old Testament. While its usage is most often found in a variety of non-theological idioms and nuances, [7] it is employed more than 200 times with God as the subject of the verb. [8] In other words, it is God who commissions and it is God who sends.

In the Book of Genesis, God sends Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden as an act of judgment (Gen. 3:23). In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, God not only sends angels to destroy Sodom (Gen. 19:13), but he also sends Lot out of the city (Gen. 19:29). God sends an angel to help Abraham’s servant find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:7, 40). Later in the Book of Genesis, Joseph recognizes God’s providential care in sending him to Egypt to preserve God’s people. In Genesis 45:5 Joseph declares to his brothers, “And now, do not be distressed and

do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God *sent* me ahead of you.” [9]

“In the book of Exodus, there are some seventeen references to sending, all of them related in some way to the mighty salvation event of the Exodus.” [10] In the dialogue between Moses and God regarding who will stand against Pharaoh, there are five references to sending.

*The Lord said. . . . “So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.’” (Exod. 3:10-15).*

Moreover, the Book of Exodus is explicit in emphasizing that it is God who sends the plagues as an act of judgment against Pharaoh, “If you do not let my people go I will send swarms of flies on you and your officials” (8:21) and “This time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and your officials and your people” (9:14). It is also God who promises to send an angel to guard them and bring them to the promised land (23:20). In the final sending passage in the book of Exodus, Moses shares his concern over who God will send to assist him in leading the Israelites, “Moses said to the Lord, ‘You have been telling me, Lead these people, but you have not let me know whom you will send with me’” (33:12).

In the remaining books of the Pentateuch the language of sending persists. In Leviticus and Numbers God sends plagues and venomous snakes (Lev. 26:25; Num.21:6), and in the book of Deuteronomy the Israelites are once again reminded of how the Lord sent them from Kadesh-barnea, “And when the Lord sent you out from Kadesh Barnea, he said, ‘Go up and take possession of the land I have given you’” (Deut. 9:23).

### **The Historical Books**

The books of Joshua, Judges and 1 Samuel continue the vocabulary of sending in passages that reflect on the Exodus event (Josh. 24:2-6; Judg. 6:8; 1 Sam. 12:8). Furthermore, in 1 Samuel God sent Jerub-Baal, Barak, Jephthah, and Samuel to deliver his people (12:11). He sent Samuel to anoint Saul as king (15:1). He sent Saul on a military conquest (15:18, 20). He sent Samuel to Jesse to anoint his son David as king (16:1). And in 2 Samuel God sends the prophets Nathan and Gad to the king, “The Lord sent Nathan to David” (12:1) and “So Gad

went to David and said to him . . . think it over and decide how should I answer the one who sent me” (24:13).

In 2 Kings 2 the prophet Elijah, when conversing with Elisha, referred three times to the Lord sending him to a variety of places, “Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel” (2:2), “Then Elijah said to him, ‘Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho” (2:4), and “The Elijah said to him, ‘Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan” (2:6). In 1 Chronicles God sent a plague on Israel and threatened to send an angel to destroy the city:

*So the Lord sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead. And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the Lord saw it and was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was destroying the people, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand (21:14-15).*

Second Chronicles tells of how the Lord sent an angel who “annihilated all the fighting men and the leaders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king” (32:21). The book “closes with the sad note of God’s compassion and long-suffering in repeatedly *sending* messengers to his ever disobedient people.” [11] In 2 Chronicles 36:15 the Chronicler writes: “The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place.”

### **The Poetic Books**

In the Book of Job, God is described as one who sends “water upon the countryside” (5:10) and “lighting bolts on their way” (38:35). In chapter fourteen, Job counters Zophar by stating that God overpowers man, changes his countenance, and sends him away (14:20).

The psalmist uses sending language multiple times when remembering the events leading up to the captivity of the Israelites, as well as the exodus out of Egypt. For example, in chapter 105 alone, God is seen as the sender three times, “He sent a man before them – Joseph, sold as a slave” (17), “He sent Moses his servant, and Aaron, whom he had chosen” (26), and “He sent darkness and made the land dark” (28).

However, the Book of Psalms also reflects often upon the physical and spiritual blessings sent by God. In chapter twenty he sends assistance, “May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion” (43:2). In chapter forty-three he sends guidance, “Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me” (43:3). In chapter fifty-seven he sends safety and faithfulness, “He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me; God sends his love and his faithfulness” (57:3). In chapter seventy-eight he sends the provision of food, “He sent them all the food they could eat” (78:25). Finally, in the Book of Psalms, God sends out his commandments to cause nature to bless mankind:

*He sends his command to the earth, his word runs swiftly. He spread the snow like wool, and scatters the frost like ashes. He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can stand his icy blasts? He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes and the waters flow (147:15-18).*

### **The Prophetic Books**

The Prophetic Books utilize the language of sending more than any other portion of the Old Testament. There is a clear “association between God’s sending and the office of prophet.” [12] “The prophets were first and foremost men whom God had sent.” [13] Perhaps the most dramatic example of sending in the Prophetic Books is found in Isaiah 6. In this passage the reader catches a glimpse of God’s sending nature in a kind of Trinitarian fullness, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’” To which Isaiah responds, “Here am I, *Send* me” (6:8).

Later in the Book of Isaiah, he recognizes that God’s Spirit has anointed him to “preach good news to the poor” and that he is sent to “bind up the brokenhearted” (61:1). In the larger passage of Isaiah 61:1-3 it is interesting to note that there is no less than six redemptive deeds that proceed from, or are dependant on the verb *shalack* = “He has sent me.” [14]

*He has sent me, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion –to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*

In God’s call to Jeremiah he is sent to speak what God commands in 1:7: “You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.” The people obeyed the message of the prophet Haggai because he was sent from the Lord (1:12). Zechariah stated on several occasions that it was the Lord that sent him to the nations (2:8-9, 4:9, 6:15).

In the vast majority of cases the prophets were sent to pronounce God’s judgment upon the nations. Isaiah spoke of the Lord sending judgment on Israel (9:8), of sending his wrath on the godless nation of Assyria (10:6), and sending a “wasting disease upon sturdy warriors” (10:16). Jeremiah spoke of God sending “venomous snakes” (8:17), sending both fishermen and hunters to catch and track down the disobedient (16:16), of sending his people out of Judah and to the land of the Babylonians (24:5), and of sending judgment in a assortment of ways, “I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their fathers” (24:10). Other passages in Jeremiah that speak of God sending various types of judgment include: 25:16-17, 27; 26:12, 15; 29:17,20; 43:10; 48:12; 51:2. [15]

The Book of Ezekiel continues the sending of various types of judgments, including sending “famine and wild beasts” (5:17), plagues (14:19), the sword (14:21), and fire, “I will send fire

on Magog and on those who live in safety on the coastlands, and they will know that I am the Lord” (39:6). While the other prophets speak less often of the sending of judgment from God, the theme is still very apparent. Hosea speaks of God sending fire upon the well fortified cities (8:14). Amos also speaks of God sending fire upon various cities (1:4, 7, 10, 12; 2:2, 5) as well as sending judgment in the form of plagues (4:10) and famine (8:11).

While the message of the prophets is heavy on judgment, they were also sent to proclaim God’s care and blessings. Isaiah speaks of the Lord sending a “savior and defender” (19:20), of being sent himself to Babylon (43:14), and of the purpose of God’s word being fulfilled regardless of where it is sent, “So it is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (55:11, emphasis added). Daniel speaks of God sending an angel to rescue Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (3:28) and of God sending an angel to protect Daniel by shutting the mouths of lions (6:22). Joel speaks of God sending “grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully” (2:19). Micah reflects on the Exodus event and how God sent leadership to the people, “I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam” (6:4). Zechariah speaks of a group of angels as “the ones the Lord has sent to go throughout the earth” (1:10). Finally, in the last book of the Old Testament God promises to send his special messenger, “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me” (Mal. 3:1).

In addition to recognizing that God sent prophets to pronounce judgments and blessings it is also significant to note that Scripture makes clear that false prophets were *not* sent by God. In the Book of Jeremiah God denies sending false prophets on four different occasions (14:14; 23:21; 27:15; 29:9) and in chapter twenty-eight Jeremiah himself recognizes that Hananiah has not been sent by God, “Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, ‘Listen, Hananiah! The Lord has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies’” (28:15). Furthermore, in Ezekiel the people are told that unless a prophet is sent from the Lord his words will not be fulfilled, “Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, ‘The Lord declares,’ when the Lord has not sent them” (Ezek. 13:6).

## **New Testament Survey of Sending Language**

### **The Gospels**

Some people might argue that “as a collection of documents telling the story of Jesus, the Gospels do not contain a systematic theology of mission.” [16] However, “the New Testament is a missionary book in address, content, spirit and design. . . . [It is] theology in motion more than theology in reason and concept.” [17] Furthermore, while the sending motif is clearly significant in the Old Testament concept of mission; the theological concept of sending plays an even greater and more central role in the understanding of missions in the New Testament.

“As the Old Testament closes with the promise of the special messenger whom God will send as a forerunner of the Messiah” [18] (Mal. 3:1), the New Testament begins with the announcement that the messenger has come in the person of John the Baptist, “a man who was *sent* from God” (John 1:6; cf. Matt. 11:10-15; Mark 1:2-8; Luke 7:18-28). Each of the Gospels then proceeds to illustrate the importance of sending in understanding the mission of Jesus. The vocabulary of sending is most prominent in the Gospel of John, while occupying a lesser, yet still significant place within each of the synoptic gospels.

### **The Synoptic Gospels**

In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus is pictured as one who has a profound sense of being sent:

*Every mission involves a sender and a sent one. In a saying recorded in all three synoptic gospels, Jesus alluded to a relationship in connection with his own mission: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent (ton aposteilanta) me” (Matt. 10:40; Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48). With this statement, Jesus established three facts in regard to his mission: first, there was a sender; second, Jesus himself was the sent one; third, there was a close identification between the sender and the one who was sent. [19]*

Jesus’ self understanding of being the “one sent” can also be seen in other passages in the synoptics. In Matthew, Jesus speaks to the Canaanite woman telling her that he “was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (15:24), in Mark Jesus tells his disciples that anyone who welcomes a little child does not only welcome Jesus himself, but “the one who sent me” (9:37) and in Luke Jesus shares that he must preach the good news of the kingdom “because that is why I was sent” (4:43).

In the Gospel of Luke there are three key sending passages. First, is the record in Luke 4:16-30 of Jesus returning to the synagogue in Nazareth and equating himself with the passage read from Isaiah 61:1-2. “Of all the Old Testament passages he could have chosen, he selected this one as the platform for his life and work. It became the manifesto of his ministry.” [20] As noted earlier in the discussion on the sending language of Isaiah 61:1-3, each of the redemptive deeds listed in the passage proceed from the verb “sent.” Having Jesus identify himself with this particular Old Testament passage adds to the relationship between his mission and that of being sent.

In Luke, Jesus is not only the sent one, but he is also one who sends. The second significant sending passage in Luke is that of Jesus sending out the twelve in Luke 9:1-6:

*When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: “Take nothing for the journey –*

*no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them.” So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.*

*“If the foundational mission, according to Luke, is Jesus being sent by God, then the sending of the twelve is an integral part of Jesus’ own mission. From a larger group of disciples Jesus chose and commissioned twelve ‘apostles’ (apostoloi, Luke 6:12-15). He now shares his power and authority with them, and sends (apostello) them on their mission (9:1-2).” [21]*

Reminiscent of Jesus identifying his ministry with Isaiah 61:1-2, he now sends out the Twelve to “preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (9:2). Parallel passages of the sending out of the twelve can also be found in the Gospel of Matthew, “These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions” (10:5) and Mark, “Calling the twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits” (6:7).

The third significant sending passage in Luke is the sending of the seventy-two [22] in Luke 10:1-24. Jesus again sees himself not only as the sent one, but also as the sending one. Jesus sends out the seventy-two as advance teams to prepare the towns and villages he was about to enter. Jesus not only sends out the seventy-two, but he also calls upon the people to ask the “Lord of the harvest” to send workers to assist them in their labor (10:2).

### **The Gospel of John**

The primary focus of the Fourth Gospel is the mission of Jesus: “he is the one who comes into the world, accomplishes his work and returns to the Father; he is the one who descended from heaven and ascends again; he is the Sent One, who, in complete dependence and perfect obedience to his sender, fulfills the purpose for which the Father sent him.” [23] “The entire Gospel is about sending and being sent.” [24] Therefore it is not surprising that John’s gospel is laden with the vocabulary of sending – the term and its derivatives appear almost sixty times.

While there is a variety of vocabulary used to describe the sending concept in the Fourth Gospel, [25] the concept is most often “expressed by different variations of the verbs *pempo* or *apostello*.” [26] The verb *pempo*, which is commonly translated as “to send,” occurs 33 times in John as compared to the Synoptic Gospels where the word is found four times in Matthew, once in Mark, and 10 times in Luke. [27] The verb *apostello* has the basic meaning of “to send forth,” and can be used of persons or things. [28] “When the object of the verb is a person, *apostello* often has the connotation of a commissioning, which transfers the authority of the sender to the person being sent.” [29] On account of the frequency of

these two verbs it would appear that both words are of equal importance to the Johannine concept of sending and are virtually synonymous in John, however the question of synonymy has created significant debate in the past few decades. [30] Nevertheless, regardless of the position one takes on the nuances of the sending vocabulary in the Gospel of John it is difficult to overemphasize “how deeply the sending concept relates to Jesus’ identity. Almost every page of the Fourth Gospel breathes with a passage in which Jesus expressed who he is in terms of his sense of being sent.” [31]

When considering the sending motif in John’s Gospel there are at least three major areas of exploration: (1) Jesus’ mission and the origin of that mission, the Father who sends; (2) the fulfillment of the mission in the sending of the Holy Spirit to the disciples; and (3) the continuation of Jesus’ mission through the sending of the disciples into the world.

“It is part of the fundamental structure of any *sending*, even the sending of a mere human being, that the one sent does not follow his own will, but that of the sender, and that he does not speak and act in his own name, but represents another.” [32] This structure is clearly evident in Jesus’ relationship with the Father as depicted in the Gospel of John. Jesus, the sent one, is to know the sender intimately (7:29; cf. 15:21; 17:25) and to live in a close relationship with the one who sends (8:16, 18, 29; 16:32). Jesus came not to do his own will but the will of the Father who sent him (4:34; 5:30; 6:38-40), to speak not his own words but the words of the one who sent him (7:16-18; 8:26-29; 12:49; 14:24), and not to do his own work but the work of the Father who sent him (5:36; 9:4). The sending relationship between the Father and the Son speaks to the very heart of the gospel: “For God did not *send* his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (3:17).

In addition to the theme of the Father sending the Son, the Gospel of John speaks twice concerning the sending of the Holy Spirit. [33] In John 14:26 the Spirit is sent by the Father: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” And in John 15:26 the Spirit is sent by the Son from the Father: “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father.”

Of special importance in John is the linking of the mission of Jesus with that of his followers as the “sent ones.” “The disciples’ mission is essentially the same as the mission of the Son and the Spirit – to bring glory to God and to bring to the world forgiveness of sins and spiritual life.” [34] In Raymond Brown’s commentary on the Gospel of John he explains the continuity of mission in the following way:

*The special Johannine contribution to the theology of mission is the Father’s sending of the Son which serves both as the model . . . and the ground . . . for the Son’s sending of the disciples. Their mission is to continue the Son’s mission; and this requires that the Son must be present to them during this mission, just as the Father had to be present to the Son during His mission. [35]*

After his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus sends his disciples to reap the harvest (4:38). In the high priestly prayer Jesus prays to the Father for the protection of disciples as Jesus sends them into the world (17:18). And shortly before Jesus ascends to the Father he commissions the disciples to evangelize the world. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (20:21). Here John in one pericope repeats once again three main aspects of mission he has been developing throughout the gospel: (1) Father has sent Jesus into the world, (2) Jesus sends his disciples into the world, (3) the Holy Spirit is sent to enable disciples in their mission. By themselves the disciples are inadequate to fulfill the mission, yet by receiving the Spirit they receive authority and so also become God’s “agents, or sent ones,” the apostles. Referring to this verse, John Stott remarked that the church’s mission finds precise articulation in the Fourth Gospel:

*The crucial form in which the Great Commission has been handed down to us (though it is the most neglected because it is the most costly) is the Johannine. Jesus had anticipated it in his prayer in the upper room which he said to the Father: “As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). Now, probably in the same upper room but after his death and resurrection, he turned his prayer-statement into a commission and said: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21). In both of these sentences Jesus did more than draw a vague parallel between his mission and ours. Deliberately and precisely he made his mission the model of ours, saying “as the Father sent me, so I send you.” Therefore our understanding of the church’s mission must be deduced from our understanding of the Son’s. [36]*

Finally, in an excellent commentary on the Gospel of John by Craig Keener he offers a similar summation of the importance of the commissioning passage in the Fourth Gospel for the life of the church:

*Whereas the sending of the Son is the heart of the Fourth Gospel’s plot, its conclusion is open-ended, spilling into the story of the disciples. Thus the church’s mission is, for John’s theology, to carry on Jesus’ mission (14:12; 17:18). Because Jesus was sending “just as” (kaqws) the Father sent him (20:21), the disciples would carry on Jesus’ mission, including not only signs pointing to Jesus (14:12) but also witness (15:27) through which the Spirit would continue Jesus’ presence and work (16:7-11). [37]*

### **The Book of Acts**

In the Book of Acts it is common to recognize that Luke’s presentation of mission is less about the “Acts of the Apostles” than about the “Acts of the Holy Spirit,” less about the mission of the church than about the mission of God. [38] “For Luke’s narrative portrays each person of the Godhead as a “sending one,” both in commissioning and promoting

mission. Each person of the Trinity is also a “sent one,” a direct agent of mission, as well as a participant working through human agents,” [39] both individually and collectively.

The individual aspect is clearly illustrated through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. The Lord appeared to Ananias and sent him to Paul in order that Paul would regain his sight (9:17). Twice Luke describes Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles with sending language, “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles’” (22:21) and “I will rescue you from your own people and the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light” (26:17-18). In chapter twenty-eight Paul also speaks of salvation being sent, “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles and they will listen” (28:28).

The collective nature of sending in the Book of Acts can best be seen in the church at Antioch. In chapter thirteen, Luke records that after prayer and fasting the leaders of the church placed hands on Paul and Barnabas and “sent them off” (13:3). The next verse describes the beginning of the journey by stating that “the two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus” (13:4).

Finally, in the Book of Acts the language of sending can be found in two sermons recorded by Luke. In chapter three, Peter’s messages uses sending language as he affirms God’s salvation in the sending of the Messiah: “that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you. . . . When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (3:20, 26). Then, in chapter seven Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin reflects back to the Exodus story of God sending Moses back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh (7:34-35).

### **The Epistles and Revelation**

In the Pauline epistles there are several clear uses of sending vocabulary, “each conveying a different theological perspective within the larger salvific sphere.” [40] In Romans, Paul speaks of God “sending his own son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering” (8:3). In Romans Paul also asks how the people can hear unless the one who preaches is sent (10:15). When dealing with division in the church at Corinth over loyalty to certain leaders, Paul states, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17). Speaking to the heart of the Gospel, Paul makes reference to both God sending the Son and the Spirit in Galatians 4:4-6:

But when the time had fully come, God *sent* his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God *sent* the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” In Second Thessalonians, Paul refers to God sending a “powerful delusion” to those who have rejected the gospel (2:11). Finally, in multiple places throughout the Pauline epistles we find

Paul adopting and defending the title of apostle [41] or “sent one” (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1).

In the General Epistles, the author of Hebrews refers to Jesus as the “apostle” [42] or “sent one” (3:1). First Peter speaks of the “Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (1:12) and in keeping with Johannine tradition, 1 John speaks of the Son being sent by the Father (4:9-10, 14).

The Book of Revelation “uses the language of sending to convey a variety of theological ideas.” [43] In chapter one, the revelation is made known to John through the sending of an angel (1:1), later in the same chapter John is told to send messages to the seven churches (1:11), and in chapter five the seven spirits of God are “sent out into all the earth” (5:6).

Finally, in chapter twenty-two we read that both God and Jesus send angels, one to prepare the people for what was to come, “The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angles to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (22:6) and one to give John the message for the churches, “I Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star” (22:16).

### **Sending Language Implicit in Scripture**

As presented in the previous pages of this chapter, the explicit language of sending found throughout the Old and New Testament is substantial. Moreover, the usage of sending language “establishes such a clear picture of mission in the Bible that its unique missional character is seen unmistakably even in events and ideas where the language as such is not explicit.” [44] There are multiple passages in Scripture that speak to the missionary nature of God and the missional essence of the church that employ terms different from sending language. For example, the widespread use of the word “go” in both the Old and New Testament “is the imperative mood of the missional idea. It expresses through mandate form what the sending expresses in description and idea through the indicative mood.” [45]

In Genesis God told Abram to “go to the land I will show you” (12:1). There God’s plan was to bless Abram so he in turn could be a blessing. In many of the Prophetic Books the word “go” is central to commissioning of the prophets. In Ezekiel the prophet is told to “go and speak to the house of Israel” (3:1), Amos is commanded to “go and prophesy” to God’s people (7:15), and Jonah is told twice to “go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you” (1:2; 3:1).

In passages mentioned earlier the idea of going and the idea of sending are linked. In chapter six of the book of Isaiah not only does the prophet respond to God’s question, “Who shall I send? And who will go for us?” in the affirmative; but after he does respond, God tells Isaiah to “Go and tell this people” (6:9). Moreover, in the sending of the seventy-two in Luke’s gospel they are told to go as Jesus was sending them out, “Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves” (10:3).

Finally, while the language of sending is clearly explicit in the commissioning of the disciples in John's gospel, the language of "go" (or "going") is evident in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 (cf. Mark 16:15-18). However, it is still clear that Jesus,

*the one who was sent on mission and who has accomplished his mission, now becomes the sender. . . . The eleven disciples are the sent ones. Jesus had called them with a view to mission (4:19). He had taught them about kingdom living (5:3-7:27), kingdom mission (10:5-42), the mysteries of the kingdom (13:3-52), relationships within the kingdom (18:1-35), and the future consummation of the kingdom (24:3-25:46) – all in order to prepare them more effectively for their mission. [46]*

### Conclusion

The sheer volume of the sending theme evident throughout Scripture ought to prompt the church to examine more closely the theological implications of such language. It undoubtedly illustrates the sending, missionary nature of the Triune God. The mission is ultimately the mission of God the Father, who has sent the Son, who has sent the Spirit, who has sent the disciples – this must give the Church's mission both its power and its authority. In the excellent little book, *A Sense of Mission*, Albert Curry Winn concisely summarizes the importance of having this sending theme form the church's understanding of its nature and activity when he writes: "If the sense of having been sent defines who Jesus is, from henceforth it must define what the church is." [47]

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1. William J. Larkin Jr., "Mission," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 534.
  2. Francis M. DuBose, *God Who Sends* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1983), 24.
  3. Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 9.
  4. Latin for "the sending of God," in the sense of "being sent," a phrase used in Protestant missiological discussion especially since the 1950s, often in the English form "the mission of God." Originally it was used (from Augustine on) in Western discussion of the Trinity for the "sentness of God (the Son)" by the Father (John 3:17; 5:30; 11:42; 17:18). Georg F. Vicedom popularized the concept for missiology at the CWME meeting in Mexico City in 1963, and publishing the book: *The Mission of God*. John A. McIntosh, "Missio Dei" in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland and Charles Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 631-633.
  5. Darrell Guder, *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4.
  6. Johan H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 11.

7. Ferris L. McDaniel, "Mission in the Old Testament," in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, ed. William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel William (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), 12-15.
8. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 11.
9. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible references are from the Holy Bible, New International Version.
10. DuBose, 42.
11. Ibid., 44.
12. McDaniel, 19.
13. DeBose, 46.
14. Koole, Jan L. *Isaiah III*, vol. 3, *Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. Cornelis Houtman, Gert T.M. Prinsloo, Wilfred G.E. Watson and Al Wolters (Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 270. See also John N. Oswalt. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 565.
15. DuBose, 47.
16. A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 40.
17. George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 131.
18. DuBose, 49.
19. John D. Harvey, "Mission in Jesus' Teaching," in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, ed. William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel William (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), 31.
20. DuBose, 50.
21. Andreas J. Kostenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 120.
22. Some manuscripts say seventy. It is difficult to come to any final decision regarding the number of disciples sent out by Jesus – seventy or seventy-two. See Kostenberger, 120.
23. Kostenberger, 203.
24. Johannes Nissen, "Mission in the Fourth Gospel: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives" in *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives, Essays from the Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel Aarhus 1997* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 215.
25. In addition to the most common use of the verbs *pempo* and *apostello*, analogous to these are *erxouai*, *ecerxomai* and *katabaino*; prepositions that are used with the sending concept are *apo*, *ek* and *para*; other terms that relate to the concept are *agiazo*, *didwmi* and *entellomai*; verbs that describe the return of the missionary to the Father are *upagw*, *poreuomai*, *anabainw*, and *metabainw*. Johan Ferreira, *Johannie Ecclesiology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 167.
26. In John's gospel the term *pempo* is used approximately twenty-three times for the sending of the Son, all in articular participial forms: eight times in the nominative (5:37;

6:44; 7:28; 8:16, 18, 26, 29; 12:49); seven times in the genitive (4:34; 5:30; 6:38, 39; 7:16; 9:4; 14:24); seven times in the accusative (5:23; 7:33; 12:44, 45; 13:20; 15:21; 16:5); once in the dative (5:24). *Apostello* occurs seventeen times in reference to the sending of the Son, in indicative forms only. Martin Erdmann, "Mission in John's Gospel and Letters" in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, ed. William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel William (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), 210.

27. Ferreira, 168.

28. *Ibid.*, 167.

29. *Ibid.*

30. For an excellent overview of the debate see Andreas J. Kostenberger, "The Two Johannine Verbs For Sending: A Study of John's Use of Words with Reference to General Linguistic Theory" in *Studies on John and Gender: A Decade of Scholarship* (New York: P. Lang, 2001), 129-147.

31. DuBose, 49.

32. Michael Waldstein, "The Mission of Jesus and the Disciples in John" *Communio* 17, (Fall 1990): 319.

33. For an excellent study on the priority of the Holy Spirit in mission see Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Richmond, John Knox, 1964). Berkhof argues that there has been a serious theological neglect of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the work of mission. He writes: "In Roman Catholic theology, the Spirit is mainly the soul and sustainer of the church. In Protestant theology he is mainly the awakener of individual spiritual life in justification and sanctification. So the Spirit is either institutionalized or individualized. And both of these opposite approaches are conceived in a common pattern of an introverted and static pneumatology. The Spirit in this way is the builder of the church and the edifier of the faithful, but not the great mover and driving power on the way from the One to the many, from Christ to the world. In one of the very rare theological works on the relation between the Spirit and mission, the American missionary Harry R. Boer writes: 'Much has been written about the work of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of men, but very little about his crucial significance for the missionary witness of the Church.' This situation is probably to the detriment of the mission, but surely to the detriment of theology, which suffers a great impoverishment indeed in that it is oriented to situations far more than to movements. In neglecting rather than reflecting the great movement of the Spirit, it distorts the whole content of faith and is an accomplice to the individualistic and institutionalistic introversion and egotism still found in the churches today" (Berkhof, 33).

34. Geoffrey R. Harris, *Mission in the Gospels* (London: Epworth, 2004), 177.

35. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 1036.

36. John R.W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 23.

37. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1204.

38. William J. Larkin, Jr. "Mission in Acts," in *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach*, ed. William J. Larkin, Jr. and Joel William (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), 174.
39. Ibid., 175.
40. DuBose, 51.
41. Apostle (*apostolos*) is defined by its use in the New Testament and its relationship to the three words *apostello*, *pempo*, and the Twelve. *Apostello* ("to send") is used frequently in the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles when referring to an authoritative commission. The word *apostle* is indebted to the Hebrew term *shaliach*. A *shaliach*, as used by the Jews, was someone sent by one party to another to handle negotiations concerning matters secular or matters religious. Harold E. Dollar, "Apostle, Apostles" in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland and Charles Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 73-74.
42. In this case Jesus is designated as "apostle," a title that otherwise is never used of him in the New Testament. The title *apostolos* is invariably used for one sent on a commission by another, and is given specifically to the representative of Jesus sent out by him (see Matt 10:2; Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2; 14:14; Rom. 1:1; 1Cor. 4:9; 12:28). Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 106.
43. DuBose, 52.
44. Ibid., 55.
45. Ibid.
46. Harvey, 129.
47. Albert Curry Winn, *A Sense of Mission: Guidance From the Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 43.