

*Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition*  
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## Why the Church Needs New Language for Mission

Missionary. Missional. Missiology. The language of mission is deeply ingrained in the thought and speech of the church. Mission rhetoric, however, didn't emerge until the modern era. This realization combined with the ambiguity that surrounds mission terminology prompted Michael Stroope to explore whether *mission* is the best and most biblical way to describe how the church interacts with the world.

Stroope's *Transcending Mission* studies the language of mission—its origin, development, and application. It investigates how the modern church has come to understand, speak of, and engage in the global expansion of Christianity. Stroope concludes that the assumptions of modern mission have become a barrier to the faithful witness to Jesus Christ. What's needed is new language for the church-world encounter. "We must do the hard work of reimagining witness, service, and love in conceptual and linguistic frameworks that allow for creativity and freedom," Stroope writes.

In this thorough study, Stroope addresses the following questions, revealing why it is crucial to transcend, and not just transform, mission language:

- What do you mean when you say it is not that mission *has* a problem, mission *is* the problem?
- What prompted you to take an in-depth look at mission language and its implications for the church's witness?
- If mission language is not found in Scripture or in the language of the early church, where did it come from?
- How did *mission* and *missionary* become descriptors of the expansion of Christianity?
- What are the problems with the current biblical and historical justifications for the language of mission?
- Why is mission language inadequate for the challenges facing the church in the twenty-first century? How is it preventing faithful witness to Jesus Christ in the world?
- Why is the language we use to describe how the church interacts with the world so important? How does language shape all our beliefs and actions?
- What fresh language do you suggest Christians use to frame the church-world encounter?

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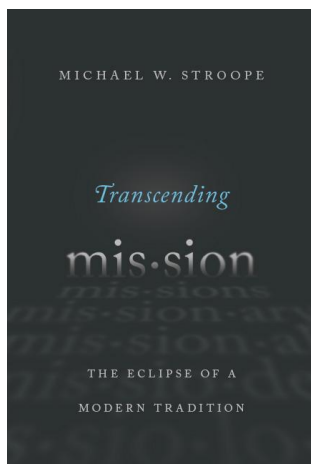


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## Mission Language Shapes How We Respond to the World

Why a book about the language of mission? Isn't *doing* mission much more important than *talking* about the way we *talk* about mission? A book about the language of mission is important because our talk about mission determines *who we are* and *what we do*. Language forms identity as words shape and express belief and ideals, choices and purpose. Notions conveyed in words and phrases provide the framework on which life decisions are made and efforts are expended. Because mission language forms particular ideals and notions that shape identity and purpose, that determine why and how we act, an exploration into the origin and use of these words is more than semantic quibbling. And more to the point, mission is important because it is the language that determines our stance toward the world and the means through which we respond to surrounding realities.

My encounter with mission language as a young person included images of exotic places and heroic figures. These came to me by way of vivid stories and colorful pictures presented by visiting missionaries. What I did not realize in my youth was that the rhetoric of mission was highly ambiguous. With time, mission as an uncomplicated, singular notion became more and more puzzling.

First, seminary studies muddled my idea of mission. I went to seminary to become a missionary, so I read books and articles on mission. My received beliefs regarding mission were challenged by competing images and accounts of what mission meant and how it operated. Even more difficult to reconcile were the passages within history where representatives of mission conquered, coerced, and destroyed in the name of Christianity. And yet, because mission was an ultimate duty and offered me a positive identity and a constructive understanding of reality, its ideals remained intact and continued without serious critique.

The second assault on my received notion of mission came during missionary service in Sri Lanka. My assignment was to work with the Sri Lanka Baptist Sangamaya (Convention), the bequest of British Baptists, with the intent to steer them more toward American Southern Baptist ways. The Buddhist religion was the main competition, but so were the Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, and Assemblies of God. The mission was to evangelize Sri Lankans and plant churches that would look like Southern Baptist churches. Mission, as received in my youth and seminary education, collided headlong with the mission legacy of colonialism.

In addition to the burden of history, social ills and ethnic conflicts also confronted my mission-oriented understanding of reality. Was mission only evangelism that resulted in

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*“Mission is more than a concept or idea but a central theme of life. Its examination is crucial, lest we find ourselves living for ideas that are less than clear and even unbiblical.”*

churches, or did it include humanitarian and social activities? When Lutheran missionaries spoke of mission, its meaning was different from how it was used by the Assemblies of God missionaries working in the same city. And the Sri Lankans understood mission from an entirely different perspective. Mission was the sending of persons from England and America to their country, and thus, as those on the receiving end, mission shaped *who they were* and *what they did*.

A few years after I completed my doctoral studies, David Bosch’s *Transforming Mission* made its appearance (1991). In my initial reading of *Transforming Mission*, three sentences in the section on colonization had escaped my notice. In a subsequent reading, what was left of my received notion of mission came unhinged. In the midst of his discussion on the interdependence of colonialism and mission, Bosch mentions that the terms *mission* and *missionary* came into use during this period as the assignment and designation of “ecclesiastical agents.” “The new word ‘mission,’ ” he concludes, “is historically linked indissolubly with the colonial era and with the idea of a magisterial commissioning.”

Astonishing!

Bosch up to this point generously and consistently employs *mission* and *missionary* in his discussions. He admits to being anachronistic, and then attempts to redeem mission. In his efforts to transform mission, Bosch leaves mission rhetoric untouched, with only a brief admission of misplacing it in the chronology. By doing so, Bosch does not transform mission but compounds the confusion, perpetuates a problem. His admission does little to solve its rhetorical difficulty or clarify its meaning.

My growing dissonance and Bosch’s admission has sent me on a quest. Because mission is more than a casual topic for polite church discussion or an academic subject to be dispassionately critiqued, but a matter of identity and how we frame reality, the question of its origin and meaning requires a thorough investigation. For many of us, formation from childhood to young adulthood has centered in mission – think, for example, about the mission education programs that were commonplace in many churches – and thus it has given us personal and vocational identity and purpose. As such, mission is more than a concept or idea but a central theme of life. Its examination is crucial, lest we find ourselves living for ideas that are less than clear and even unbiblical.

– Adapted from the prologue