

## What Is the *Mission* of the Church?

### Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission

by Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert (Crossway: 2011)

A Book Review by Jack De Vries

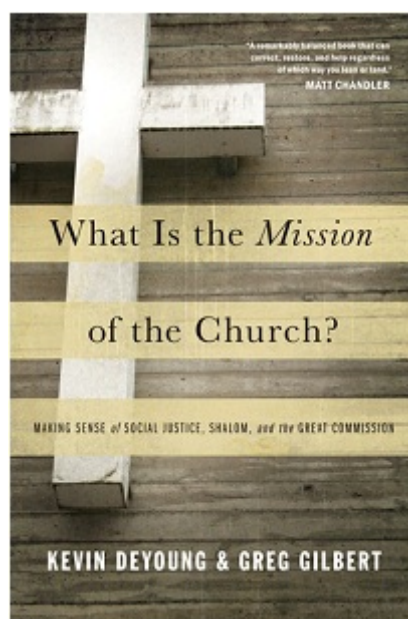
What is the church all about? As I coach pastors and churches the answers to that question are varied and, at times, subject of much debate and disagreement. Christians today define mission more broadly and variably than ever before. How do we make sense of all the divergent views in Christian circles today? The book *What is the Mission of the Church?* is an attempt by co-authors DeYoung and Gilbert to get Christians on the same page when it comes to the mission of the church. As they admit, “we want to help Christians articulate and live out their views on the mission of the church in ways that are more theologically faithful, exegetically careful, and personally sustainable.” (24)

Have they achieved their aim? Is this recent contribution to the missional dialogue a help or a hindrance? There are those like Don Carson who give this book a thumbs up! Carson writes: “Among the many books that have recently appeared on mission, this is the best one if you are looking for sensible definitions, clear thinking, readable writing, and the ability to handle the Bible in more

than proof-texting ways.”(2) Others of equal evangelical stature give DeYoung and Gilbert’s book a thumbs down. For example, Ed Stetzer, on the whole, is quite critical in his [lengthy review](#) found in Gospel Coalition’s publication [Themelios](#), a publication of which Don Carson is general editor. DeYoung and Gilbert also provide an equally long [response to Stetzer](#). In their response the authors are quick to admit that they figured this book would kick up some dust. As they write: “This question of what the church is sent into the world to accomplish is not only enormously complex, but it is also deeply felt. People have strong emotions about it, and rightly so.”

As I read *What is the Mission of the Church?* I agree with what DeYoung writes in his blog. For me, this book did kick up some dust. Parts of the book gave me pause and called to question some ideas I have about the mission of the church. But as I let the dust eventually settle I found myself agreeing with both Carson and Stetzer. This book is not difficult to read. The authors are clear and concise when it comes to unpacking their understanding of the mission of the church. Yet I question some of their arguments and conclusions.

At the outset the authors are clear about their purpose in writing this book. Among other things, they do not want “Christians to think evangelism is the only thing in life that really counts.” Neither do they want “Christians to stop dreaming of creative, courageous ways to love their neighbors and



impact their cities.” (22) What they want is “to make sure the gospel—the good news of Christ’s death for sin and subsequent resurrection—is of first importance in our churches.” They also want “the crystal-clear and utterly unique task of the church—making disciples of Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father—put front and center, not lost in a flurry of commendable concerns.” (22-23) And here is the one-sentence answer to the question of this book: *“The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.”* (62)

I found myself resonating in agreement to these ideas that are at the heart of *What is the Mission of the Church?* Their one-sentence summary of the mission of the church is balanced and spot on. Underscoring the importance of the gospel, discipleship, and impacting our cities – well, who will argue with that? I begin to take issue, however, with some of their conclusions about the biblical story. For example, in their discussion about the Abraham story, they write: “...there is no evidence Abraham ever takes his call in chapter 12 as a commission to go find ways to bless the nations.”(33) Contrast what DeYoung and Gilbert write to what Michael W. Goheen writes in *A Light to the Nations*(Baker: 2011): “The community called by God exists as the place where God begins his work of restoration and as a channel whereby that salvation might flow to all peoples, all to the praise of his glory.” (26) “The first eleven chapters of Genesis reminds us that God’s particular attention to Abraham and Israel in the Old Testament was for the sake of *all* nations, for *all* creation. God employs particular means to reach a universal goal.” (28) Referring to the Abraham story,

Goheen goes on to say: “Thus in the biblical story, privilege and responsibility, salvation and service, receiving and mediating blessing, belong together in election. God’s people are a *so that people*: they are chosen *so that* they might know God’s salvation and then invite all nations into it.”(31) Abraham was blessed to be a blessing.

I appreciate DeYoung and Gilbert’s focus on the Great Commission(s) and discipleship.

They make the point that “The Great Commissions ... are more than random parting words from Jesus. They actually shape the whole story, either as a climax to which everything

points or as the fountain from which everything flows.” (45) They focus on the Great Commissions found in Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 13:10; 14:9; Luke 24:44-49; and Acts 1:8. I am not sure that “more than any other Gospel, Matthew focuses on discipleship. What do disciples believe about Jesus? How do they behave? What must they be willing to give up? ...”(43-44) Take for example the gospel of John. Discipleship is a recurring theme in this gospel. John’s purpose throughout his gospel to help his audience understand the nature of discipleship and what it means to meet, know, and follow Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

I found DeYoung and Gilbert’s discussion about the “whole gospel” quite helpful. They speak about a wide-angle lens and a zoom lens on the gospel. “As we read it, the New Testament seems to use the word gospel in both of these ways. Sometimes it looks at the good news of Christianity with a wide-angle lens, calling ‘gospel’ all the great blessings that God intends to shower on his people.... Other times, though, the New Testament looks at

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**If everything is mission,  
nothing is mission.**

- Stephen Neill

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<sup>1</sup> See Gary M. Burge’s commentary on John’s gospel in *The NIV Application Commentary* series (Zondervan:2000). He shows how John develops this discipleship theme from the prologue onward.

the good news of Christianity with a very narrow focus – with a zoom lens, if you will – and is quite happy to call ‘gospel’ the singular blessing of forgiveness of sins and restored relationship with God through the sacrificial death of Jesus.” (94) The authors then reference a number of New Testament passages that show these two different foci of the word “gospel.” They underscore that there are not two gospels, but one gospel. It is just that at times the New Testament writers zoom in and other times they zoom out. The authors make this distinction to emphasize that ultimately the Christian message is not just about the blessings of the kingdom. “The gospel of the kingdom is the declaration of the kingdom of God *together with the means of entering it*. Remember, Jesus ... preached, ‘The kingdom of God is at hand; therefore repent and believe!’” (110-11) “That is what the early Christians took to be their mission.... Their commission ... was to declare that the kingdom had come, to call the world to enter its blessings, and to declare to them how they could do so.” (112-13)

Another very helpful discussion in *What is the Mission of the Church?* is understanding God’s redemptive role. Too often we as Christians think that it is our role to usher in the kingdom of God. We must build the church. It is our doing. But as the authors remind us: “...the kingdom is what it is. It does not expand. It does not increase. It does not grow. But the kingdom can break in more and more.... God certainly uses means and employs us in his work. But we are not makers or bringers of the kingdom.... We herald the kingdom and live according to its rules. But we do not build it or cause it to grow because it already *is* and already has come. ...we as human beings may proclaim, enter, reject, inherit, and possess the kingdom, but it is God and God alone who

establishes and ushers it in.” (134) This focus on God’s sovereignty is missing in many missional discussions.

There are long discussions on social justice and the place of good works in our missional strategies. It is here that good missional thinkers like Ed Stetzer and Reggie McNeal take issue with *What is the Mission of the Church?* As the authors write: “We’ve been arguing in this book that the mission of the church is best defined not by a charge to engage the world’s social structures in an effort to build the kingdom or join God in his work of remaking the world, but rather by the Great Commission that Jesus gave to his followers just before his ascension – that is, verbal witness to him and the making of disciples.” (231) This does not rule out the importance of good works nor loving our neighbours. “The point ... is that when discipleship is central, we’ll always be asking how the good deeds we undertake can give us an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus Christ.” (237) And I believe this emphasis is a helpful corrective to much of the missional literature today. As Christians we don’t simply do good works for the sake of doing good works – but we keep the proclamation of the gospel central. As DeYoung and Gilbert write: “Neglect or tamper with the root issues –the cross of Christ, justification of sinners, the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the need for repentance– and the fruits will surely wither.” (237-8)

One last excerpt from *What is the Mission of the Church?*: “God will make all things new, but our job in the world is to help all peoples find a new relationship with God. We are not called to bring a broken planet back to its created glory. But we are to call broken people back to their Creator.” (248) “It is our responsibility ... – our unique mission and plain priority– that this unpopular,

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**The priority of the institutional church  
must be to preach the Word,  
rather than to “change culture.”**

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- Tim Keller

impractical gospel message gets told, that neighbours and nations may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, they may have life in his name.” (249)

Like others you might take issue with DeYoung and Gilbert’s insistence upon the priority of proclamation and discipleship. You might question whether or not their explanation of key Biblical passages has been clouded by their seemingly narrow understanding of the mission of the church: the proclamation of the gospel. But as Matt Chandler writes about this book: “A remarkably balanced book that can correct, restore, and help regardless of which way you lean or land.” Like me you might lean or land in a different spot when it comes to understanding the mission of the church. If anything, this is a book that will make you ponder hard, even rethink some of your ideas about the church and its mission. Given the plethora of books on the missional church, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* is very timely and a book to take serious for those who care deeply about the church’s mission in our day.

#### About the Authors:



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