MISSION ESCHATOLOGY:
A FRAMEWORK FOR MISSION IN THE SPIRIT

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Introduction

Mission is the life-blood of the church and the natural expression of life in the Spirit. Church growth around the world and the impact of churches on society witness to the powerful movements of mission there have been this century. Yet this century has seen much debate over the definition and practice of mission. For Pentecostals the eschatological hope has been the motivating force for rapid growth. There is a need to ensure that our eschatology is always missionary in its orientation so that we do not become static or too settled. It is also important for mission to be understood from an eschatological perspective, enabling us to have a holistic, hope-filled approach to mission. Hence there is a need for what I have called in this paper a mission eschatology.

Understandings of mission range from seeing it as equivalent to evangelism to covering everything the church does in the world. There is a need for a framework of mission that encompasses the main existing ideas and yet retains a focused challenge for action. This action needs to be clearly linked with the activity of the Holy Spirit and with a vision of the future kingdom. Writings on mission can lack an emphasis on the work of the Spirit, as in Bosch’s landmark work, Transforming

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Mission. They can also focus on certain mission activities without giving a vision within which they fit and towards which they lead. We also need to be aware that mission encompasses activities at both local and global levels, which elsewhere I have argued reflects the work of the Spirit in the world. In particular it is important to reflect on the global aspects of mission, not just on their local application.

In this paper I consider the link between mission and eschatology and explore how an eschatological outlook can broaden some existing definitions of mission. I also consider the general outworking of mission by the working of the Spirit to bring a foretaste of the future. Using these to form a framework for a mission eschatology I look at how some common mission activities fit within this framework and consider the global aspects of some of these activities.

Mission and Eschatology

Mission can be seen in a very functional way as being the main task of the church between the first and second comings of Christ. It is the work of the church 'between the times', to use Padilla’s phrase. But this view can separate the task of mission from thoughts about the kingdom to come—we can think about saving souls, but not about what we are saving them into; we can think about evangelistic methods and miss the kingdom vision; we can think about the content of the gospel and miss the inbreaking power of the kingdom. Having said this, mission has been increasingly linked with the kingdom. As Cullmann said, ‘The missionary work of the Church is the eschatological foretaste of the kingdom’. Mission can be seen as the means by which the end can be tasted in the present. This is the idea behind Moltmann’s recent thoughts on mission: ‘The creative and life-inspiring Spirit of God brings eternal life here now, before death—not only after death... Mission, in this divine sense, is nothing else than a movement