

1. The founding principle of mission: There is one God

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[0 : 00] Well, it would be helpful at this point if you would turn to 1 Timothy chapter 2 and that passage that we read there.

I want to think this morning about the foundational principle of all gospel mission. And it's this, that there is, as 1 Timothy chapter 2 verse 5 says, well there is one God.

We're getting a new series this morning, as I said, running up to Christmas, a little different from normal. Normally, we seek to one Bible passage and we seek to expound and explain its meaning and its context and so on.

And that's what we've been doing, working through the book of Acts. And we're going to continue that for a while in the evenings. But sometimes it is helpful in our studies to think about a theme, a theme that perhaps runs through many parts of the Bible or indeed the whole of Scripture.

And I want to do that in this series over these next weeks and think about the theme of mission, both the how and the why of real gospel mission.

[1 : 18] I want to focus in the weeks to come, particularly on what we might call the fruitful partnership in gospel mission.

That is the calling of the whole church in the New Testament. There is one church and we have been given one shared task, the task of mission.

And every one of us as individuals is called to play a part in that corporate task, in that together task that the church has. And we as individuals are called to play our part in that in a whole host of different ways.

And I want to look at aspects of that because it's very important that every one of us sees what our own personal role is in the mission of the church. In a way, the inspiration for this series comes from a book by the Australian writer John Dixon called Promoting the Gospel.

And its subtitle is The Whole of Life for the Cause of Christ. We're reading through that book as an eldership at the moment on our monthly Saturday morning prayer breakfasts.

[2 : 29] And I'm hoping that perhaps in the new year, once we've completed this series, some of the home groups might take that book up as a matter of study. John Dixon was speaking at the Evangelical Ministry Assembly in London in June this past year.

And it was his messages given there, which are part of the substance of that book, that really stimulated me and helped me to think, well, here's a series that we ought to do in our own congregation.

And that's a mark of a good conference, isn't it, when you come back thinking, well, we must do that ourselves. So I want to acknowledge my thanks to John Dixon right at the start for his inspiration. And from time to time during this series, I think probably I will quote from his book To You.

It's a very helpful book indeed. But before we get on to thinking about these aspects of the church's fruitful partnership in mission, we need to begin with the basics.

We need to begin with the finding principle of mission. And that is, as I've said, neatly summed up in this verse, 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 5.

[3 : 37] Now we know better, don't we, than to take verses right out of context. So let's remember that 1 Timothy, and indeed 2 Timothy, and Titus, the so-called pastoral epistles, these are letters where Paul is writing to teach the church of Jesus Christ what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Just look down to 1 Timothy chapter 3, verses 14 and 15. That gives us the essence of it in a nutshell. Paul says, I hope to come to you soon, but I'm writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

Now you'll notice, I hope, that those are the words, or some of those words that are written every week on our service sheet. They're also on our church notice board outside. The church is the household of God.

It's to be the pillar and buttress of truth in the world. And that is, essentially, in a nutshell, what the church's mission is. It is to uphold and to point to the ultimate truth.

The ultimate truth about God and about the world. But let's begin right at the beginning. Why is that so? Why is Christianity a missionary faith?

[5 : 02] Quite good sometimes to just ask the very basic questions, isn't it? Not every world religion is a missionary faith. Some are just in the business, really, of preservation, not of propagation. Why is Christianity a missionary faith that must be outgoing, that must be telling forth?

Well, 1 Timothy 2, verses 5 and 6 spells it out. Let's just look at them again. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.

There is one God, says Paul. And therefore, he alone is the creator of heaven and earth, and therefore he owns all things that he's made.

And therefore, rightfully, he commands the allegiance of all his creatures. That means he is owed the worship, the devotion of all his creatures.

And that's very, very obvious, isn't it, when you think about it. If I form and own a business, then I decide how that business should be run.

[6 : 20] If I create an invention, then I will control the patent for that invention. I created it. If I compose a piece of music, then I will dictate the score and the tempo and how it's meant to be played.

And that's so even if all kinds of musicians mangle it and play it completely wrongly. I'm still the one as the composer who can say, no, this is how it's to be played. That's what I meant when I wrote it. But if God creates the world and everything that's in it, then he is in charge.

He commands the place, the behavior of every single one of his creatures. There is one God. That's why we have a mission.

And notice verse 5, one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. You see what that's saying?

There is only one route to the knowledge of that one God and to a true relationship with that one God, through Jesus Christ. Hebrews chapter 1 says, is God's ultimate revelation of himself to man.

[7 : 29] He, says Hebrews 1, is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature. That's why Jesus said in John chapter 14, He who has seen me has seen the Father.

And you see, that is the foundational principle of all Christian mission. Since there is one God and since there is one and only one mediator between men and God, Jesus Christ, then the Christian church must bring that mission to all the peoples of the earth.

For, look at verse 4 of 2 Timothy 2. For, this God desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

There is one God, one mediator, and he desires all peoples to come to a knowledge of that truth, and therefore to know him and to worship him.

Now, of course, immediately today in the 21st century, that gives us a great problem, doesn't it? Because our world strongly objects to that kind of extremist claim.

[8 : 46] And it might be that you do yourself. I don't doubt some of you here this morning are perhaps thinking that even as I speak. Many people do. Many people think that. How arrogant!

How can you dare to claim that you have a unique handle on God? How can you dare to claim that you have the ultimate truth? That's arrogant.

That's patronizing. It's imperialist. It's oppressive. It belongs to the past, that kind of idea. We've outgrown that. Well, that's a very common view today.

And I guess at first it does seem really quite reasonable. So we have to consider it. Let's consider it for a minute. There are, of course, different versions of that view. There are some people who will say, Well, look, all religions, of course, do have some truth to tell us about God.

But, of course, there are so many religions that each one of them just has part of the truth. And the reality about God, well, obviously, that transcends any one particular religion so that no one can have all the truth.

[9 : 56] So it's quite wrong for any one religion to make any exclusive claims. You need a little bit of all of them. And the truth somehow out there is much bigger than any one of them. All of them, they say, well, they're just like paths up the same mountain.

You've heard people talk like that, haven't you? Different paths up the same mountain to the real truth about God. So, look, you pick your path up the mountain and I'll pick mine and somebody else can pick theirs and that's fine.

We'll all get to the same place in the end. That's a very common view today, isn't it? Sometimes it's illustrated by that image of the elephant in the room with the blind people.

You've heard that, have you? You know, there's an elephant in the room and there are a number of blind people and they're asked to touch this creature and decide what it is that they're feeling. The first man says, ah, yes, I can tell that this is a snake-like animal because he's reaching out and feeling the big thick trunk.

And then the next man says, no, no, no, that's quite wrong. I can tell easily that this is a tree. He's putting his arm around this great fat elephant's leg and it seems just like a big tree trunk.

[11 : 06] No, no, no, no, no, says the third blind man. You're quite wrong, you're quite wrong. Obviously, this is a wall. He's feeling the great side of the elephant. And, of course, the point is made, you see, each one of them only has part of the truth.

But a person with sight, you see, can see quite differently. Each one of them is only seeing one aspect of things. Actually, it's an elephant.

And that's the way it is with religion, you see. And they say that that confidently settles the matter. But, you see, the problem is that to use that kind of argument to relativise all the claims to truth of different religions, you need to see what you're doing.

What you're doing when you're saying that sort of thing is you're claiming to be the only person who really sees everything. You've claimed the very same kind of exclusive insight and total knowledge that you say no religion can possibly ever have.

No one religion can possibly have the truth, but I can have the absolute truth to see that all these religions only see in part. You see, that makes me much more arrogant than those who claim to have the truth in their own religion, doesn't it?

[12 : 24] It says, I am omniscient, and I can know more than all the rest of these put together. So, actually, as an argument against the arrogance of claiming the truth for your religion, it's not a very good one, is it?

Of course, there are others who want to relativise everything, and instead of saying that all religions are equally true, what they think is that all religions are equally false. And you see, it's all just to do with your culture, your background, your upbringing, and so on.

That's what conditions what you think. So they would say to me, well, look, you're a Christian because you grew up in Scotland, you grew up in a church background, you just believe culturally the things that you're conditioned to believe.

But you wouldn't believe that if you'd been brought up in Pakistan. You'd be a Muslim. So you see, it's all just to do with your background and the things that have shaped you.

Well, you see, apart from the fact that there are many people who have grown up in Pakistan, not as Christians, but have become Christians, in fact, I had an email from one just yesterday, apart from that fact, and apart from the fact that there are many who grew up in this country in a very non-Christian background and also have become Christians, the answer has to be that if that is the case, if all our beliefs are just to do with the way that we're brought up, then that's the same for you, Mr. Pluralist and Mr. Relativist, who are criticising me.

[13 : 54] Your beliefs that all religions are equally false is just as culturally conditioned as my belief is about the Christian faith.

Just as much an accident of your culture and background and upbringing as you say my belief is of mine. So why should I listen to anything that you say? You'd been born in Pakistan. You wouldn't believe what you believed either.

You can't say that, you see. You can't say, well, all religious belief is just culturally conditioned and to do with your upbringing, except for the belief that I personally hold.

That's extraordinarily arrogant, isn't it? If there's no ultimate truth and if it's all equally wrong, then why should I pay any attention to what you say about it?

It's just your culture speaking. It's just your background speaking. And it's just as likely to be wrong. So that kind of killer argument isn't quite as killer as sometimes people think it is.

[14 : 53] Of course, there are others who are even more hostile and who actually want to ban all religion. They want to ban it as wicked, as a nefarious influence on our world. People like Richard Dawkins and other so-called new atheists, they actually blame all the evil in the world on religion.

But again, history doesn't really paint a very happy picture for those who want to hold up, those that want to rid the world of religion is our great example.

History has a rather different take, doesn't it, on those who have wanted to get rid of religion from the world in order to bring in peace and harmony and utopia. We just need to look at the legacy of Marxism, for example.

The Soviet gulags, the purges of Stalin, Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge, so many of these. Would you really rather be among people who are devoted to leaders like that?

Pol Pot, Stalin? Or would you like to be among people who follow a leader who says, love your enemies? Pray for those who persecute you.

[16 : 10] Do good to all. Love your neighbor. A leader who said, love one another as I have loved you with a total, life-giving, sacrificial love.

You might just want to give some thought to that if you, yourself, are a bit of a new atheist. Are you really, are you really attracted to the crusading zeal of a Dr. Dawkins and some of his acolytes who want to rid schools of any Christian influence, who want to rip books out of the bookshops by C.S. Lewis, who hate the Bible with a passion, who hate what they call Bible fundamentalists?

Are you attracted to that? Are you attracted to the kind of people who just, a couple of months ago there, along in the Museum of Modern Art, when there was an exhibition about the Bible, when there was a Bible put in a case, all the atheists who rushed in there to rip pages out of it, to deface it, to write abusive things on it, and to heap their scorn.

It seems to me that's really rather a nasty kind of fundamentalism. See, the truth is that whatever people say, every one of us has got fundamental beliefs that we believe to be superior to other beliefs, otherwise we wouldn't believe them.

And we all think like that, don't we? We all see our own view of things in a different light. So, I have convictions, you're rather dogmatic, he's a fundamentalist.

[17 : 44] It's never the other way around, is it? So, the real question is not any of these things. The real question is, which is the true truth?

Which beliefs really do face the facts of our world as we know it, and explain the world as we know it to be? And which truths point the way truthfully to that better world that we all know ought to exist and that we all want and we all know should be there but isn't there?

That's the question. Well, the Bible's message is plain and unequivocal. There is one God who desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, the one unique truth that's found in one place alone, in the man, Christ Jesus.

And that is the foundational principle for Christian mission. And we might as well face up to that, however arrogant it might sound to some, however misplaced it may seem in today's world.

And the whole of the Bible story is about that and explains that. In a few minutes just let me summarize. First, if there is one God, maker of heaven and earth, then as his creatures it is the fundamental duty of all people to worship him and to worship him alone.

[19 : 16] That's why the psalm says, O come, let us bow down and worship, let us kneel before the Lord, our maker. And that's the heart of the Bible's message, the Bible's command to human beings.

Don Carson puts it this way, the heart of biblical religion is God-centeredness. In short, it's worship. And that's the purpose of God's creation, that everything that he has made should worship him, that everything he has made should have him at the very center of all things.

And above all, that that should be so for humankind whom he's created as the glory of his whole creation in his image. To image him and to relate to him and to have relationship with him, right relationship with him.

That's what the word worship means, worth-ship. We give due worth to God. That means God is the center of all things in the universe.

He is the Lord. And we, as his creatures, are bowing down to him and everything is centered around him. That's what worship means in the Bible. But of course, we see that picture, don't we?

[20 : 28] Only in the first two chapters of the Bible. By chapter 3, it's all gone wrong. That perfect vision of worship is shattered. Sinful rebellion of man puts himself at the center of the world stage.

And God, if he's there at all, is there to serve man. That's what the great rebellion in Genesis 3 was all about. God, you're here to serve me, not the other way around. And that's our world, isn't it?

Protagoras, in the 5th century BC, put it this way, man is the measure of all things. And that sums up human existence, estranged from right relationship with the one-two God.

Man is at the center of the world and God is right on the circumference, if he's there at all. And every human religion is merely a creation of man. So that we can have worship, but we can worship God as a projected image of ourselves and what we think.

Not an acknowledgement of the true God whose image and whose creatures we are. And that's why mission is the task of the church, because true worship is not everywhere in this world.

[21 : 40] Let me read to you the first paragraph from John Piper's book, Let the Nations Be Glad, The Supremacy of God in Missions. Mission, he says, is not the ultimate goal of the church.

Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man.

When this age is over and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever.

Mission exists because worship doesn't. And worship of the one true God is the very purpose of man. And therefore, his fundamental duty, come, worship and bow down, kneel before the Lord, our Maker.

And that's the message of the whole Bible to the whole world. All the earth must bow down and must acknowledge the one true God. And that's why God's people must always be a missionary people.

[22 : 44] Now that was so for the Old Testament people of God. Sometimes people say extraordinary things that the Old Testament has no interest in mission. But if you read or listened at all as we read Psalm 96, you'll see just how utterly fallacious that position is.

Just turn again to Psalm 96 because it's so important, isn't it? Let's read again the first five verses and see if you think the Old Testament has no interest in mission. O sing to the Lord.

Wherever you see Lord in capital letters there, it's the name. Yahweh, Jehovah, the personal covenant Lord of Israel. O sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth.

Sing to the Lord. Bless his name. Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory, where? Among the nations. His marvelous work among the peoples. For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised.

He is to be feared above all gods. For the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. You see, that's a call to mission for God's people Israel to publish the light of the one true God to all the world from Israel's place right there at the center of the nations.

[23 : 58] Declare his glory among the peoples. And it's a call directly to all nations to come and to find this one God and to know him by name, by the name of the Lord, Jehovah, the God of Israel.

Look at verse 7. Ascribe to the Lord. It's a command. O families of peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name.

Bring an offering. Come into his courts. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. Tremble before him all the earth. That's an invitation to the whole world to come and meet the personal, the unique, the one and only God in the one and only place of his revelation on earth in the temple in Jerusalem.

That's the place, the one place where his unique name was made to dwell. And it's not just an invitation, is it? It's a command.

Look at verse 10. Say among the nations, the Lord reigns. Yes, the world is established. It shall never be ruled. He will judge the peoples with equity.

[25 : 12] Verse 13. For he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the earth in righteousness and the peoples in faithfulness. He is the God who comes, says the Bible, to judge all peoples, the whole earth and to hold them accountable for their obedience to that call or for their rejection of that call.

That's the message of the whole Old Testament. And in the New Testament it's no different, is it? Only it's more urgent. Because in the coming of Jesus, God the Son himself, God has published to the world finally and completely his unique revelation of himself and he calls everyone to come and bow down before him, before Jesus who is Lord of all, who is judge of all.

Jesus is the one mediator, the one place, the embodiment of God's holy temple. He is now the one place where God's holy name and true name can be known.

It's the only place. Philippians 2 says God has exalted him and given him the name above every other name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

That's why Peter says in Acts chapter 4, his name is the only name given among humans by which we must be saved.

[26 : 45] That's why the church is a missionary church. Not calling the nations now to some earthly temple of stone in Jerusalem to find the dwelling place of God's name.

That's long gone, isn't it? Just a few stones remain. It was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 but more importantly it was abolished by God because it had served its place, it had served its time.

It's been superseded by the great coming of the Lord himself and his body. I am the new temple says Jesus. In Jesus is where we find the presence, the dwelling place, the name of the one true God.

So our task is the same as the Old Testament. We're calling the nations to come and bow down to the name of the Lord but we're calling them to come down and bow down in the name of Jesus Christ because he is the unique bearer, the unique revealer of that name above all names.

The name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. That explains, doesn't it, what Jesus said in his great commission as he ascended to heaven.

[27 : 57] Just as we come to a close, do turn up Matthew chapter 28 with me. It's page 835 in the Visitor's Bibles. Verse 16, The eleven disciples went to Galilee to the mountain which Jesus had directed them and when they saw him they worshipped him but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.

and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. See his great focus on Jesus as the one with authority over all the world.

Teach what I have commanded you. Proclaim my gospel because there is one God and one mediator, one Savior who brings God to us in the fullness of a once for all and unique revelation in Christ and who can bring us to God through the fullness of a unique and once for all salvation in Christ.

And that's the foundational principle of all biblical mission right through the Bible and right from the lips of the Lord Jesus himself. You see, it's all about God, isn't it?

[29 : 35] our primary motivation for mission is never ourselves, never even other people. It's not primarily that becoming a Christian will give people a more fulsome life, a happier life, a more joyful life, a life that helps them reach their true destiny as a child of God.

Of course, it's all these things and much, much more. That's not the primary motivation for our mission. It's not even that our primary motivation for mission is a passion for the lost and the thought of the horror of people spending a lost eternity without Christ.

Of course, we should have a real compassion that drives our evangelism. In Matthew chapter 9, Jesus had compassion, didn't he, on the crowds who were like lost sheep, harassed and helpless.

He calls his disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest, to send out laborers into the Lord's harvest field. But even that is not our primary motivation for mission in the Bible. The primary motivation for our mission must be the reason that the Bible itself gives us for that mission.

That mission exists because worship doesn't. That this world and its peoples don't ascribe to the Lord Jesus Christ, the glory that is due to his name, the honor that he deserves from every creature.

[31 : 08] The fact that the world and its peoples don't tremble before Jesus Christ, don't worship him in the splendor of his holiness.

That fact is the greatest possible scandal in this whole universe. It's a scandal that, as we'll see tonight, moved the Apostle Paul as he looked around that idolatrous city of Athens.

The heavens, they know the truth. That verse we began with, worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

The heavens recognize the glory due to his name and they cast their crowns before him and bow down as one. But friends, God has declared that the earth and all its peoples will also do likewise.

And so he invites them and he commands them to worship him. And that's the finding principle, that's the why of the church's mission.

[32 : 29] And that's why our task is to declare his glory among the nations until the need for that mission is no more. Because in its place will be worship.

Every knee bowed. Every tongue confessing Jesus Christ as one Lord and one God. Come, worship and bow down.

Kneel before the Lord, our Maker. Say among the pagan nations, the Lord reigns.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name. That's our mission. And our mission exists because worship doesn't.

And it will exist until it does. And all this earth and heaven united in one peen of praise to Christ, the exalted Lord of glory.

[33 : 36] Amen. Let us pray. Lord, your glory fills the heavens and yet on earth so often it is ignored.

May our hearts, we pray, burn with a holy and pure jealousy for the glory of your name.
May it work within us a deep desire of motivation with courage and with strength to say
among the peoples of this nation and all nations, the Lord Jesus Christ, he reigns.

Bow down and worship him. For we ask it for his glory's sake. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.