Biblical-Theological Foundation for Evangelism

Where to begin an evangelism class? It’s tempting to start with methodology—everyone seems eager to find the best, most effective way to share the gospel in this context. It’s also tempting to start with people—either the desperate need of those who don’t know the Lord or the missional lifestyle of those who do. But before heading off in either of those directions, it is wise to begin with God. After all, it is his mission. He is the main character of this story. So we’ll begin with a look at the biblical-theological foundation for the missio Dei—the mission of God.

As your textbook points out (pp. 46, 48–49), Christopher Wright has suggested that we need to look at the whole Bible through a missional hermeneutic. We don’t simply scour the Scripture looking for verses that show the “biblical basis of mission.” Instead, we need to discover the “missional basis of the Bible.” The entire Bible reveals the heart of a missionary God, and the central plotline of its story is his redemptive plan. This grand narrative follows a fourfold plotline: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration. For a helpful summary of this theme in a simple narrative, see Sharing Jesus, pp. 30-36.

Creation

In some sense, the divine mission stems from God’s original purpose to create both a people and a place. God made people in his image in order that they might walk in relationship with him, perfectly reflecting his glory in worship. He created the earth as a place perfectly suited for human habitation, but also as a place where he might dwell in their midst. Figure 1A illustrates how God placed Adam and Eve in Eden as a sanctuary where they might enjoy communion in the unmediated presence of God.

As the author of life, God has sovereign authority and ownership over all that he has created—including humanity. In Gen 1:28 he commissioned the first man and woman to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth with worshipers. Figure 1B illustrates the intended consummation of this first great commission, as the sanctuary of Eden expands to fill the whole world with worship of a glorious God. Habakkuk 2:14 thus articulates the mission of God: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

APPENDIX: MISSIO DEI

FIGURE 1: THE PURPOSE OF GOD
God had given the first couple only one restriction; he could deny them no less and still offer them freedom. Adam and Eve willfully chose to yield to the serpent’s temptation and disobeyed God’s command not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The essence of the temptation was a desire to be like God—to determine for themselves what is right or wrong. And so, the couple grasped for equality with God, taking the place that only God deserved.

Sin immediately resulted in alienation—from God and from each other. In this context the mere sound of the Lord walking in the garden struck fear in their hearts, and they tried to hide from his presence. Nothing had changed in the character or nature of God, but humanity had changed. The fall had devastating consequences for both the people and place God had created. The Lord drove the couple from the garden, expelling them and their descendants from his unmediated presence. A profound displacement, a sense of “not-being-at-home,” has reverberated through every generation since the fall.

Figure 2B shows the catastrophic results of sin: humanity’s relationships with God, with one another, and with creation were irrevocably broken. The wages of sin is spiritual death—eternal separation from the presence of God. Left on their own, there is absolutely nothing humanity can do to recapture that perfect communion.
Thankfully, the story doesn’t end there. Although sin resulted in judgment, the outlines of God’s mission to redeem both people and place began to take shape. **Figure 2C** illustrates God’s gracious redemptive mission to redeem humanity and restore creation. **Figure 2C** is actually three-dimensional, and the rest of Scripture from Genesis 3 onward traces the unfolding details of the mission of God, as the presence of God, people, and place intersect in the person of Christ.

*Redemption*

Even after the fall, God graciously received the worship of forgiven sinners who met his requirements for worship—including animal sacrifice. God chose one man, Abraham, and promised to make him a people, to give them a place, and to bless all the nations of the world through his offspring. Over time, God graciously condescended to dwell in the midst of his people in the tabernacle and temple. Yet the only way that a holy God and a sinful people could peacefully coexist was through the sacrificial system. Dwelling in their midst, God intended for his people to display what it meant to know, love, and walk with the Lord before a watching world.

Sadly, instead of being a light to the nations, the Israelites often yielded to the allure of idolatry. When they failed repeatedly, God still declared his own glory to the surrounding nations through his punishment of the Israelites. The capture of the ark and the defeat at Shiloh, along with the destruction of Solomon’s temple, paved the way for a new understanding: the presence of God was neither confined to a man-made structure nor to the physical descendants of Abraham. Prophets increasingly gave voice to a new covenant and a vision of an eschatological temple where true worshipers would assemble from all nations. God promised that one day he would send a deliverer who would redeem both people and place.

While the tabernacle and temple had served for a time as the dwelling place of God’s presence in the midst of his people, suddenly God’s presence, people, and place all three converge in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. John 1:14 records that “[t]he Word became flesh and made his dwelling [literally, ‘tabernacled’] among us.” John 2 depicts Jesus as the fulfillment of the temple as well: the person and work of Christ therefore made the physical structure obsolete. Amazingly, the meeting place of heaven and earth was no longer somewhere, but someone—the person of Christ.

Even more astonishing is the realization that Jesus’ mission to redeem a people in whom the Spirit of God may dwell required a sacrifice beyond comprehension—the crucifixion and resurrection of the enfleshed Son of God. As the perfect Lamb of God, Jesus became the once-for-all sacrifice, paying for the sin of the world on the cross. In other words, Jesus literally stepped into human history in order to live the obedient life humanity failed to live and died the death that humanity deserved. To show his power over sin and death, God resurrected Jesus from the dead and exalted him as Lord and King over all things.

At Pentecost, God’s Spirit descended on believers, incorporating them into an eschatological temple built on the foundation of Christ. The redeemed from all nations are joined to Christ as a holy priesthood and living stones in the new temple that God is building. Until Jesus returns, the Spirit of God indwells the church—individually and corporately—empowering believers to bear witness to God’s redemptive mission.
Restoration

When the Lord returns and ushers in the restored heaven and earth, the perfected people of God will be both the bride of Christ and the New Jerusalem city-temple where God will dwell with and in his people. According to Rev 21:22, the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb will be their temple. Ultimately, God’s unmediated, holy-of-holies presence will fill both redeemed people and place, and the new creation will thrill with the worship and glory of God—forever. Figure 2D depicts this fulfillment of the mission of God since the dawn of time.

The Bible depicts the presence of God in two ways: 1) the unmediated, fully manifest presence of God seen in the canonical “bookends” of Genesis 1–2 and Revelation 21–22; and 2) the mediated presence of God in between, as he works to redeem humanity. Thus, the presence of God is both the goal and means of redemption. This biblical-theological basis for the mission of God in terms of the presence of God has significant implications for sharing the gospel.