

Conceptualisation of *missio hominum* as an expression of *imago Dei*: From *missio Dei* to *missio hominum*

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Dates:

Received: 10 Aug. 2021

Accepted: 13 Mar. 2022

Published: 27 May 2022

How to cite this article

Thinane, J., 2022,
'Conceptualisation of *missio
hominum* as an expression
of *imago Dei*: From *missio
Dei* to *missio hominum*',
*HTS Teologiese Studies/
Theological Studies*
78(1), a7061. [https://doi.
org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7061](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7061)

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Academic data show little evidence that the concept of the *missio hominum* was ever explored beyond its context as developed by Nico Smith. There is little to no research that has conceptualised this phenomenon in light of *imago Dei* and the role it should play in fulfilling *missio Dei*'s mandate. It uses the relational nature of the Union of the Divine Trinity derived in *imago Dei* to conceptualise the idea of the *missio hominum* in the broader context of *missio Dei*. It aims to examine the role of *missio hominum* in fulfilling the objectives and scope of *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* here means the mission of God, which uses human relationships as an instrument to achieve the eternal goal of *missio Dei*. Nico Smith's account is used here to support the need for *missio hominum* within the broader understanding of *missio Dei*. This research is a first step towards a deeper understanding of the *missio hominum* in service to *missio Christos* and *missio spiritus* and the collective participation of *missio ecclesiae* towards the goal of *missio Dei*. The academic focus on *missio hominum* from Smith's perspective is lacking or neglected by missiology scholars.

Contribution: This article, therefore, presents overarching research areas in missiology, which are important for the overall and further understanding of *missio Dei*. It uses literature research as a method to gain knowledge about *missio hominum*.

Keywords: *missio Dei*; *missio Christos*; *missio spiritus*; *missio hominum*; *imago Dei*.

Introduction

A proper conceptualisation of *missio hominum* in the broader context encompassing the work of *missio Dei* is important as it will greatly enrich the field of missiology and deepen the understanding of *missio Dei*. In the last few decades, there has been an increasing scientific interest in researching other missiological frameworks such as *missio Christos*, *missio spiritus* and *missio ecclesiae* in service to *missio Dei*, yet not much attention is given to the understanding of *missio hominum* first in relation to other frameworks and particularly its participation in the broader work of *missio Dei*.

In an attempt to properly understand *missio hominum*, this article will first discuss the concept of *imago Dei*, in which the triune relational aspect is placed along the human need for relationships with others as the basis for *missio hominum*. Secondly, it will engage the route from *missio Dei* framework to the *missio hominum* framework by determining the role of *missio hominum* within the broader *missio Dei*'s project (Thinane 2021b:1–17). Thirdly, it will en route from *Missio Christos* to *missio hominum* wherein Jesus Christ as true image of God is analogously perceived as the divine delegated or chosen project manager who plays a lead role by setting the project in motion through inviting human participation in it during his site visit on earth or what is known as his earthly ministry (Thinane 2021b:12). Fourthly, it will make use of Professor Nico Smith's account as presented in his 2002 excellent article entitled: 'From *Missio Dei* to *Missio Hominum*: En route in Christian mission and missiology', wherein he sought to make sense of human participation in the project of *missio Dei* by highlighting his personal experience that led him to realise the need and importance of human relations (*missio hominum*) towards a more complete understanding of *missio Dei*. Lastly, the concept or understanding of *missio hominum* will be derived from Smith's perspective in his attempts to further emphasise or highlight the role of human relations in achieving the eternal goal of *missio Dei*.

Missio hominum en route for *imago Dei*

Imago Dei is a Latin theological term for the image of God, denoting human likeness or resemblance to God. This is recorded unambiguously in the first account of human creation in Genesis 1 wherein the Triune God is saying:

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Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gn 1:26–27)

Scholars such as Feinberg (2004) and Ramantswana (2013) argued that following this logic, humankind was thus made to be the apex or climax of all creation wherein or because human creation came as the last and final phase of God's creative activity (Feinberg 2004:238; Ramantswana 2013:425). The characteristics of human likeness to God are the following: the creation of humans came about by a divine decision, humans were made superior to all other creatures, the human race was given dominion over the earth and all other lower creatures, all other creatures that came before humans were created in their own way, meaning that only humanity was created. Historically, different commentators such as Oberdorfer (2013), Vainio (2014), Simango (2016) and Schoot (2020) were of the opinion that the image of God in humans was based on several characteristics such as will, reason, self-confidence, memory, soul, dignity, freedom, spirituality, personality, morals and intellect (Oberdorfer 2013:231–239; Schoot 2020:33–46; Simango 2016:172–190; Vainio 2014:121–134). It was also assumed that the upright human stature indicates the physical resemblance to God, the rational nature as a reflection of the divine Logos, the human rule over the earth as a mirror of the power and rule of God over all creatures, the human freedom and self-determination nature as Mirror of God's free creative nature (Feinberg 2004:235–246; Migliore 2004:139–141; Muller & Muller 1999:7).

In agreement with scholars such as Migliore (2004) and Thomas (2012), in this article the image of God in relation to the human need for life in relationship with others is described as the true reflection of God's self-transcendent nature in a divine relationship with the triune members (Migliore 2004:141; Thomas 2012:133–153). Migliore (2004) rightly argued that the image of God cannot be aligned with an image that has been minted on a coin, but that it should be perceived similarly to an image reflected in a mirror (Migliore 2004:141). This way, the image of God is accurately understood as a reflection of God's own existence in a relationship with the triune company. Essentially humankind should coexist with others as a clear reflection of the triune nature of God in a relationship with God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and all other creatures.

As demonstrated by the life and death of Jesus Christ as one who remains the perfect image of God, the triune God who exist in a divine relationship with himself, called upon all humankind to a life of relationship with other human beings. Karl Barth supports this sentiment by arguing that the person of Jesus Christ alone is enough to give an understanding of what *imago Dei* is all about (Lidums 2004:117). While on earth, Jesus Christ conducted himself with total obedience to God the Father, totally relying upon the help of the Holy Spirit

and in absolute love for humankind. This alone makes it abundantly clear that humankind is inherently designed for a life of total relationship with others and God. It simply means humankind is created in the image of God, an image that can only be discovered and manifested by being in a total relationship with others. Being human within the scope of *missio hominum* means being open to demonstrating the image of God by being in a total relationship with others, which by extension reflects being in a relationship with God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Missio Dei* en route for *missio hominum

Missio Dei is a Latin theological expression for or pointing to 'Mission of God', of which the focus is entirely on God's redemptive purpose and action in human history. This term denotes mission of God as inherently using humankind as instruments while he is present as the executor of such mission (Thinane 2021a:2–11). According to scholars such as Buys (2020), Engelsviken (2003), Kemper (2014), ahead of its formal grounding at the International Missionary Council conference that was held in Willingen, Germany in 1952, the classical doctrine of *missio Dei* can be traced as far back as during the time of Saint Augustine (a theologian, philosopher, and the bishop of Hippo Regius in Numidia), including Saint Thomas Aquinas (an Italian Dominican friar, philosopher, Catholic priest, and Doctor of the Church) who described God's mission as the Father sending the Son and the Son in return sending the Holy Spirit (Engelsviken 2003:482; Kemper 2014:188). Of course, only later at the Willingen Conference, this doctrine reformulated to include the church as being sent, broadly saying: 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world' (Bosch 2011:399). In this form of mission, God is the one who is entirely responsible for the nitty-gritties of the mission project while the church is merely there to signify his work; hence, Bosch (2011) straightforwardly puts it that: 'mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God' (Bosch 2011:390). It means God is active in the eternal project of reconciling the world to himself.

Reimer (2019) rightly points out that *missio Dei* is Trinitarian both in nature and in character. This is based on the understanding that the oneness between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is eternally inseparable. This is also justified by Flett (2009), who referred to Kirk (1999) when he said that to speak about *missio Dei* means to state the *Missio* Trinity without any restriction (Flett 2009:5; Kirk 1999:27). Accordingly, the trio in *missio Dei* coexists eternally in harmony not only with one another, but in the existence of the other. Reimer also referred to the suggestion of John Damaskin (Christian monk, priest and apologist), who excellently pointed out that every person within the Trinitarian Union is indispensably present in the other two without losing their own character. In this sense, the Father is reciprocally in the Son, the Son is reciprocally in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is reciprocally in the Father and vice versa (Reimer 2019:1). The union or relationship that exists

between members of the Trinity is mostly characterised by reciprocity, mutual participation, equality, cooperation, collaboration, mutual understanding, mutual dependence, and active connectedness. For this reason, Augustine argued that the works of the Trinity are one; every Trinity person participates in every outward act of the deity (McGrath 1998:64). All three members within the Trinitarian cycle eternally reciprocate their missionary endeavours, their eternal participation in the mission and are dependent on each other for eternal existence.

Through the *missio Dei*, God the Father takes responsibility between himself, the Son and the Holy Spirit in order to demonstrate the divine eternal unity as one God for the sake of his redemption project. Of course, that fact that God is always present in his own mission is beyond doubt. However, the use of the concept of project is merely there to facilitate the understanding of God as he reveals himself through the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Trinitarian God would ultimately, as indicated in all Gospels, decide to delegate God the Son in the form or incarnation of Jesus Christ through the omnipresent guidance of the Holy Spirit to use *missio hominum* in the work of fulfilling the mission of *missio Dei*. Together with other mission frameworks, namely *missio Christos*, *missio spiritus* and *missio ecclesia*, *missio hominum* becomes mission mandates aimed at giving human service to the goal of the *missio Dei*. In this way, the above-mentioned mission mandates are used as pilot projects with the aim of fully implementing the eternal project *missio Dei*.

Missio Christos en route for missio hominum

This section above has acknowledged that the main project is *missio Dei* and revolves around God's redeeming work in the world through human history. It has also admitted that the Trinitarian God in the form of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit remains eternally active in the *missio Dei*. Thinane (2021b) invited his readers to imagine the trio (God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) using the example of the project leaders who are to play the main role and include such leadership roles in everything to do with *missio Dei* but not limited to the planning, implementation, monitoring, organisation and management of the completion of pilot projects aimed at the fulfilment of the main project. In order for this project to begin, the project managers, who in this case are the deity, must first conduct a site visit to appoint a group of individuals or a team to carry out the work associated with the project. In order to do this, God assigns the authority to Jesus Christ in the presence or through the constant help of other Trinitarians to initiate the project of salvation *missio Dei* (Thinane 2021b:1–17).

Migliore (2004) speaks of God's self-disclosure through the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the 'chosen one' or in Greek language – *χριστός* (*chrīstós*) meaning 'the anointed one' to represent Godhead on earth in the *missio Dei* salvation project (Migliore 2004:36). The term *Missio Christus* is a Latin theological expression for the Mission of Christ.

Holistic reading of the mandate outlined by Jesus Christ at the beginning of his ministry as recorded in Luke 14:18–19 where he said:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (vv. 18–19)

Reading it along with the mandate he expressed in the Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:16–20 when he said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and 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 everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (vv. 16–20)

The two texts (Lk 14:18–19, Mt 28:16–20) paint a rich picture of the mission of Christ on earth. During his earthly ministry, or what this article calls a site visit, Jesus Christ as project leader regularly supported several aspects of the main project or what Bosch (2011) would include as the multifaceted ministry that began with the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist in the Jordan River and ended in Jerusalem after his crucifixion. Bosch further emphasised that this ministry includes service, testimony, healing, reconciliation, peace, evangelism, deliverance, fellowship, and so on. (Bosch 2011:512). In order to secure scientific opinions about the importance of the Great Commission, Bosch refers to scholars such as Michel (1950/51), who argued that the entire Gospel was based on the assumptions implied in this text (Michel 1950/51:21) and Friedrich (1983), who scientifically outlined several phrases used by several scholars, such as J. Blank calling this verses: 'the theological program of Matthew', G. Bornkamm saying its: 'a summary of the entire gospel of Matthew', H. Kosmala arguing that they reflect: 'the most important concern of the Gospel', U. Luck concluding that they represent; 'the climax of the gospel', G. Schille calling it: 'a table of contents of the gospel', P. Nepper-Christensen suggesting that they represent: 'a sort of culmination of everything said up to this point' in the entire gospel, and G. Otto briefly calling it: 'a manifesto' (Friedrich 1983).

In conclusion, Bosch (2011) argued that the missionary mandate as presented in the Gospel of Matthew is in many ways the key to Matthew's understanding of the mission and the entire ministry of Christ (Bosch 2011:60). The overall idea of the *missio hominum* is planted in Bosch's understanding of the early Christ church, which was commissioned by Jesus Christ to make disciples, hence he wrote: 'the followers of the earthly Jesus have to make others into what they themselves are – disciples' (Bosch 2011:74–76). It was their job to make disciples not only of Jewish people, but also of non-Jewish people or non-Jews. In accordance with this statement, Bosch speaks of the open way of the Gentile mission, which is to be walked on the basis of the ministry of Jesus, death and his resurrection. In order to make this more conscious, he further argued that the followers of Jesus Christ would only recognise

their true Christian identity when they participate in the mission, only when they impart a new way of life and knowledge of God to others (Bosch 2011:81–84). Essentially, this means that the followers of Jesus Christ only manifest themselves as true Christians through this or when they engage in the process of disciple making, which is based on the relationality of the *missio hominum*.

The process of making someone a disciple is not abstract; in order to make someone a disciple one must first develop a relationship with such a person and only then look for ways to make him a disciple. Thus, it is through being the true image of God (relational with others), wherein *missio hominum* plays a role of being at the helm of founding the relationship with the other in order to make them into disciples. This means that the prerequisite of becoming a true Christian is to first submit to the *missio hominum*, in which you become the true image of God by being in relationship with other people. Jesus Christ himself, whenever he uttered the words ‘follow me’ as it was the case when he called Peter, Andre, James and John as his disciples in Matthew 4:18–22; Mark 3:16–20; Luke 5:1–11 and John 1:35–51, he essentially was inviting them individually in a relationship with him wherein or through which the mandate of *missio Dei* shall be fulfilled. Similarly, in the context of *missio hominum*, people are preoccupied with calling one another into a relationship that aims to accomplish the transcendent goal of the *missio Dei*. The following account by Nico Smith attempts to describe how he conceptualised *missio hominum* as the prerequisite of becoming a true Christian.

Nico Smith and *missio hominum*

Professor Nico Smith gave an account wherein together with his dear friend, Carel Boshoff while studying theology at the University of Pretoria between 1946 and 1952 during the days of apartheid when black people in South Africa were not allowed to worship under the same roof with white people of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), and how they both used to preach to black domestic and garden workers each Thursday evening as theology students and how they thought or perceived mission to mean saving souls and imposing views upon black people. For them, black people were nothing more than objects of conversion, even if some of them had already been exposed to Christianity. Explaining their perception further, he wrote:

To me all whites were already Christians and I accepted that they all belonged to a church where they were taught to understand the gospel correctly. I regarded blacks as people who did not really understand the gospel and I thought I was superior in my knowledge of the Christian faith. (Smith 2002:4–5)

When he and his wife were doing missionary work for the DRC church for the Venda people on the north eastern border of South Africa in 1956, as a typical white African DRC preacher at the time, he showed little or no respect for churches and missions that existed before his arrival. He mentions that they conducted missions in such a way that they colonised black people even further and put religious flowers on the apartheid system. For him, missionary work

was firstly only about establishing the church and secondly about the glorification and manifestation of divine grace (Smith 2002:6). Their political life, social challenges and even building a relationship with them were not a concern of theirs; but more important to him was to convert and civilise the uncivilised pagan black people, to get them to give up their own cultural identity and customs, so that they can lead what he thought was a decent life. Not even caring to learn their language, he made arrangements to have an interpreter to translate while he preached to them the gospel he believed to be the gospel (Smith 2002:7).

Smith’s attitude towards black people and his unwillingness to identify with them on a social level reached its climax when he had to eat with them at Christian Fobbe’s house (missionary from the Berlin Missionary Society in Germany). Smith utterly refused to share a meal with black people; instead he chose to angrily take his food alone in a separate room. All of this happened as he gradually realised that he was doing God a disservice by undermining black people, hence he wrote: ‘Soon I started to realise that I was actually doing my own thing among the Venda, without being interested in their lives or relating to them personally’ (Smith 2002:8). Later, after the death of Christian Fobbe, who was expelled from South Africa by the apartheid government simply because he cared too much about the plight of the black Venda people, Smith began to change his old habits and ask himself important questions that would make him realise that everything he was doing was contrary to *missio Dei*’s mission. He conclusively conceded: ‘I had to admit to myself that my focus was completely on God and the church, and not on the people’ (Smith 2002:9). As if with a broken heart, he continued to admit:

In spite of all I did to promote the acceptance of the gospel by the people, I had not accepted the people who needed to be recognised as human beings, whom I needed to respect and acknowledge as equal fellow human beings. (Smith 2002:10)

Missio hominum as having relations with others

Smith’s report showed that the process of fulfilling *missio Dei*’s mandate is interrupted when people believe more in their holiness by worshiping God individually without caring about their relationships with other people. While the ecclesiastical mission is intended to demonstrate or signify the presence of God in the world, *missio hominum* seeks, more than anything, to portray or reflect the relational nature that exists within the divine project of *missio Dei* as the true reflection of *imago Dei*. Where there is *missio hominum*, there the true Church of Christ exists as a visible sign of *imago Dei*. The Church is made up of individuals, not just ordinary individuals, but those who seek to be true saints in the communion of saints, or, as Smith (2002:12) calls them, those who are predestined to believe. However, being a community of saints does not begin with a group but with an individual who then participates in the *missio hominum* by building relationships with others. Before the existence of a church, there were first people who were individually identified by

Christ as his future disciples, who will actively participate in the *missio hominum* by forming relationships that ultimately fulfil the mission of the *missio Dei*. Every man and woman is a candidate for the *missio hominum* as pronounced by Jesus Christ. Calling and sending are two different functions; human beings are first called to Christ and once in Christ, they are then sent into mission. Collectively, those who are sent constitute *Missio Ecclesia*. It was precisely for this reason that Smith spoke of the Church only as an instrument of apostolate to establish signs of the kingdom (Smith 2002:13). This means that reconciliation with God (as the ultimate goal of *missio Dei*) is first predicted through what can be called a down-to-earth reconciliation or relationship with other people. As if putting it differently, Smith (2002) wrote:

My aim was to decentralize the mission of the synod from a head office to the local congregations and thus get individuals personally involved in the mission of the church instead of having mission performed and controlled from a head office. (p. 11)

Not only are people important within the broader project of the *missio Dei* to fulfil the mission of reconciliation with God, but people are more important in their reconciliation with one another so that they, in a broader sense, represent or reflect the true image of God on earth. This fact is observed by Smith when quoting the Dutch missiologist Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk (1912–1975) who believed that the existence of peace among men presupposed or declared a true reconciliation with God (Smith 2002:14). Only through such relationality or human relationality can the broader scope of the *missio Dei* (reconciliation with God) be fulfilled. When Godhead in Genesis 1 said:

Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. (v. 26)

Essentially, God's intention was that people in their relational existence could rule over all other creatures and live in harmony on earth, just as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relationally enjoy or live in heavenly harmony. Any system that denies humanity the existence of such harmony by restricting the human relational nature is inherently contrary to the mission of *missio Dei* and also denies the opportunity to reflect the image of God. The reason apartheid was labelled evil is simply because it allowed other people (especially white people) to alienate themselves or to reject harmonious relationships with other people (black people). Smith first realised the sinfulness of apartheid when he began to build real relationships with black people by living among them, hence he wrote: 'it did not take us long to understand why apartheid was called a sin against God and a crime against humanity' (Smith 2002:16). The apartheid system had laws that forbade human relationships such as interracial intimacy and mixed marriages (Jaynes 2010:396–413), policies that isolated black people from white people (Hamilton 1987:153–182), separate schooling system for white people and black people

(Parker 1972:266–275) and many other policies that sought to drive division between people. Smith rightly contends that white people's unwillingness to live among black people in South Africa has made the Incarnation of Jesus unimportant or deprived of the respect it deserves. He then conclusively wrote:

Missio Hominum thus means believers going out into the world to be involved in the affairs of people in their contexts, identifying with them and demonstrating to them God's concern and love for people The world needs Christian people living among people, sharing in the reality of their lives and taking co-responsibility with them to change what needs to be changed so that the kingdom can come in its fullest. (Smith 2002:18–19)

This correct understanding of *missio hominum* does not seek to disorient or surpass the rightful place of *missio Dei*, but rather is intended to reflect the relational nature of *imago Dei* by focusing on humanity as relational beings. In this way, *missio hominum* rightly becomes the functionaries of the *missio Dei*, because it is only there to fulfil the aim of the *missio Dei*. *Missio hominum* is about people who are called to exist in human relationships with other people in order to first reflect the true image of God and ultimately to fulfil the *missio Dei*.

The human horizontal relationship within the *missio hominum* is a reflection of the divine horizontal relationship within the *missio Dei*, and it is through these forms of relationships that the *missio Dei* is to be achieved or fulfilled. Through *missio hominum* people are called into space, with relationships in the style of *imago Dei* to fulfil the task and mandate of *missio Dei*. In the light of *missio hominum*, people are first called into a relationship with one another as partners and with God as the sole project manager of *missio Dei*.

Conclusion

In this article, the understanding of *imago Dei* was first discussed as it relates to the triune relational aspect and paralleled with human need for relationships with one another as the sole basis for *missio hominum*. Secondly, it moved from the framework of *missio Dei* to *missio hominum* by determining the role that *missio hominum* is to play within the divine project of *missio Dei*. Thirdly, it went from the conceptualisation of *Missio Christos* to the conceptualisation of *missio hominum* wherein Jesus Christ is observed as the true image of God, as the God-delegated project manager who played a leading role in putting the *missio Dei* project in motion by openly inviting people to participate in it during his site visit on earth or what is known as his earthly ministry, and afterwards. Fourthly, it made use of Nico Smith's account as he sought to make sense of this human participation in the project of *missio Dei* by underlining his personal experience which led him to realise the need and importance of human relations (*missio hominum*) as they participate in the fulfilment of *missio Dei*. Lastly, the understanding of *missio hominum* has been derived from Smith's perspective as he successfully emphasised or highlighted the role and importance of human relations in achieving the eternal goal of *missio Dei*.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.T. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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