An Evangelical Understanding of *missio Dei* in Contemporary Japan

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Preface

The concept of “the mission of God (*missio Dei*)” is broad, and needs to be examined further, whether it will be useful for the understanding of mission for the 21st century, or whether it will bring further confusion. For that reason, it is indispensable to organize the concept and to have an adequate understanding. The missiological issue of “church and mission” since the 20th century is also deeply related to “theological education” in northeast Asia. Therefore, this article will focus mainly on the Protestant missiological understanding, on bringing contemporary issues into missiological consideration.

1. The concept of “*missio Dei*” and its development

The classic concept of *missio Dei* is expressed by Ireneus, Tertullian, and Augustine, which means the activity of the Triune God in His redemptive history. Thus it explains the action of the Triune God in redemptive history through the Church (*missiones ecclesiae*) during the medieval Roman Catholic era. The modern concept of *missio Dei* is thought to have started through the Willingen Conference (1952) of the International Missionary Council (IMC). However, the concept does not appear until it was introduced by Carl Hartenstein in his commentary on the conference. Moreover, he was using this terminology back in 1934 through the influence of Karl Barth. They both based mission on Trinitarian work of God

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Himself, and that mission was His power revealed in history. And mission was dealt with in relation to Oscar Cullmann’s coming of the Kingdom of God. Mission was placed in between Jesus Christ’s first and second coming, and God’s mission (missio Dei) began to mean the realization of the coming of the Kingdom of God Himself.

Behind the appearance of the concept of missio Dei, there was the spreading of Christianity worldwide, especially the growth of the non-Western churches. This brought the main focus of mission to the “church” instead of “mission organizations” that were separate from the church. The issue of the relationship between “church and mission” was raised. Early in the 20th century at the Tambaram Conference (1938) of the IMC, following the Edinburgh World Mission Conference (1910), the unity of the church and mission were emphasized, and the nature of the church and the responsibility of the church to the world were discussed (4). And at the Willingen Conference (1952), the “missionary obligation of the church” was the most important subject in the conference (5). Moreover, the understanding of the relationship between the church and mission brought a structural aspect of unifying the IMC and the World Council of Churches (WCC) together in 1961. The IMC was now placed as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) under WCC. This world mission, based on mission organizations, placed its main focus on the church. Moreover, the understanding of this relationship brought both viewpoints of “ecclesiology and missiology” into theological discussion.

The understanding of “mission” also underwent change during this period. On the one hand, through the studies of theological foundation, mission was based on a Trinitarian God (the Father’s “sending” of His Son and the Spirit); whereas it was a work of mission organizations and churches, and that it was a action of God for the world and the human beings. Now, the understanding of mission and God’s Kingdom became closely related; the church came to be recognized as a “participant,” and it also becomes a “tool” for the work of God’s Kingdom. And the understanding of mission developed as a work of God that recognized outside the church in world history, not only as a narrow soteriological viewpoint, but also as a theory of creation and pneumatology. On the other hand, the non-Western countries and their churches that were once mission fields were thrown into a situation that they were not able to deal with simply the “salvation of the individual soul.” There was the world of cultural and

religious diversity, economical gaps and racial oppression. The churches that were the “participants” of the work of *missio Dei* for the world naturally became “the Church for Others” and “the Church for the World,” and the relationship between the church and the world became apparent. Thus the mission became unable to present the salvation of the soul, even in the church expansion movement.

However, the concept of *missio Dei* brought a change in mission from “church-centered understanding” to “God-centered understanding.” Soon enough, God’s work in the world preceded the church as participants. The church was excluded and mission took the road to secularization of “political/socialization and humanization.” At the 4th WCC Uppsala Assembly (1968), the understanding of *missio Dei* was further secularized. The characteristics of the Uppsala Assembly was, at first, according to Johannes Hoekendijk’s opinion, that God’s goal of mission is to have perfect peace and human prosperity (God’s Kingdom), and that God accomplishes His goal through a series of revolutionary deeds. Secondly, that the relationship between the history of salvation and the history of the world is that through God’s intervention in the events of the world, God changes the history of the world to the history of salvation. Thirdly, that the understanding of *missio Dei* is to think neither that the church is the starting point for mission nor the mediator of salvation. The task of the church is merely to be a participant in God’s work, to know the goal of salvation in history, and to become the forerunner of the movement of this goal. Fourthly, that since the church is the participant of “the work of God in the world,” it is to form an organization of “going out” appealing to the world. And lastly, that the mission field is not in foreign countries but in the secular world of human needs, tension, and strife.

Subsequently, the WCC reached the highpoint of the secularized concept of *missio Dei* through the Bangkok Conference (CWME, 1973). With the theme of “Salvation Today,” they re-conceptualized salvation in context of contemporary situations. Along with criticism from the Evangelicals towards Uppsala and Bangkok (the Frankfurt Declaration (1970) and the Lausanne Congress (1974)), the nature and the role of the church were reexamined at the 5th WCC Nairobi Assembly (1975), and at the CWME Melbourne Conference (1980) as the “Kingdom of God” became the central theme of contemporary missiology, and the church and its missiological work were reemphasized. After this, *Contemporary Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation* (1982) was published. Here, the responsibility and urgency of the Church in world evangelism are realized. The Church’s evangelistic calling is fulfilled in its

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union with the poor. It not only maintains that transforming social injustice and strife to justice and love points to God's Kingdom, but that the proclamation of the gospel includes a personal decision for Christ's salvation. In other words, the testimony of the gospel needs to be proclaimed in all areas of life.

2. The Evangelical Understanding and Critique of “missio Dei”

The Evangelical response toward the mission understanding of missio Dei is characterized by the biblical trinitarian understanding of mission, the church-centered emphasis, the gospel and social responsibility, the Church and the Kingdom of God, and bold world evangelization to those who have not yet heard. These are characteristically seen in the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism (1974), the Pattaya Conference, Thailand (1980), the Lausanne-Manila Congress (1989), and the Iguassu Missiological Consultation, Brazil (1999). Regarding the evangelical stance toward the missio Dei, we see statements in the “Lausanne Covenant” (article 1: mission has a part in the eternal will of the trinitarian God, God's people's sentness to the world, article 6: “analogy of sentness,” the Church is at the very center of God's cosmic purpose, and His appointed means of spreading the Gospel), the Thailand Statement (to serve as God's witnesses and His servants for justice and reconciliation), the Manila Manifesto (focus on “the Biblical Gospel,” “God the Evangelist”), the Iguassu Affirmation (Commitment article 1, the trinitarian understanding of mission, not only the particular role of each Person in mission, but also the new study of the operation of the Trinity in the redemption of the human race and the whole of creation). A summary of the evangelical understanding of missio Dei includes the following: 1) Mission comes from the very nature of God, and that God is a missionary God. 2) The Son is sent from the Father, and the Spirit is sent from the Father and Son, and the Church is sent by the trinitarian God to the world. 3) The Church that is sent is God's central purpose for the world. 4) This Church has a calling to present the world with the Gospel of the Kingdom by word and deed. 5) The gospel, through the Church, will be preached to all peoples of the world, will end its history, and God's Kingdom, along with the second coming of Christ, will be realized.

The evangelical understanding of mission says that it is missio Christi. R. H. Matzken classifies mission into three aspects: missio ecclesiae, missio Christi and missio Dei. Missio ecclesiae says that the Church is the only place for salvation, and that mission should be thought of as the expansion of the Church worldwide. The Roman Catholic Church is an example of this. Missio Christi says that mission is to

spread the gospel of the salvation through Christ’s death on the cross and His resurrection, and to do what Jesus Christ has commanded His Disciples. This is expressed to the Lausanne Covenant (1974). Missio Dei says that mission is God’s missiological relatedness to the world and mankind. This later influenced “Neo-Universalism,” “Realized Evangelism” and “Wholism.”

Because they felt the danger of re-conceptualizing WCC’s missio Dei into secularization, the Evangelicals insisted, based on Christ’s Great Commission, that missio Christi is the only biblical understanding of mission. Christ’s mission (missio Christi) is to fulfill the redemptive activity of God and demonstrate His kingly rule over the Church and the world. The Church (the community of God’s people in Christ) is at the very center of God’s eternal purpose and is sent into the world by Christ to fulfill His mission in the world by proclaiming and demonstrating the Gospel by the power of the Spirit sent by the Father and the Son. The Evangelicals reexamined what the understanding of missio Dei presented as “the world-relatedness of the Church” to “the Gospel and social responsibility” and “the Gospel and culture.” This brought them to boldly evangelize those who have not yet heard. In other words, they understand that mission is to “call out” the people of the world to Christ. This is because they believe that Jesus Christ is “Lord of the church and Lord of the universe (the Iguassu Declaration)” and they argued that the Church, not of the world but in the world, stands as a different entity from the world.

3. Missio Dei and the “Okinawa Declaration”

With the main members as the Japan Evangelical Association (JEA) of Evangelical churches, the 4th Japan Congress on Evangelism took place in Okinawa in June, 2000. The main focus at this congress was “the world-relatedness of the Church” that meant missio Dei.

The keyword for this congress on evangelism was “the groaning throughout history, and the thirst of the people.” The congress made assured the Japanese society and the people of the world that “the Gospel” which is entrusted to the Church from generation to generation is the sole solution, and they were especially aware of the 99% the Japanese population who are non-Christian. Attendees also became strongly aware that the Gospel does not only have meaning in the Church but also to all humankind, and that it must be spread and presented to the public.

In “the groaning throughout history,” standing on the “times” of the 21st century, they looked upon the groaning bared throughout history. They applied this to themselves and their churches, and reflected upon it before the God of history. In “the thirst of the people,” the congress made
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attempts to relate to those with deep thirst that comes from segregation and indifference within Japan and the Japanese, and doubt and rejection spread throughout the world. And whatever way it comes out, the congress renewed its stance as churches in Japan to face the reality of our sinful nature, face Christ’s Gospel of Reconciliation of the Cross and His resurrection once again, be assured of the power of the Gospel itself and the decision to live in this matter

The fruit of this Congress was the “Okinawa Declaration,” with the slogan “living together in the Gospel of Reconciliation” in the context of Japan today. Through the Lausanne Congress, the Evangelicals emphasized the duty of the Church’s social responsibility. They also confirmed that the Gospel has “the power to reform people and society,” and that it works with the needs of all people. In this context, the 4th Japan Congress on Evangelism was held in Okinawa. It can be said that Okinawa symbolizes “the suffering and pain” that comes from distrust, opposition, and indifference. Okinawa was historically absorbed into Japan, then it was used as a sacrifice to protect mainland Japan during World War II, and many civilians were killed. It later became the occupied territory of the US, and even after the return to Japan, the US military bases remained for the security of northeast Asia, and therefore, it still serves as a victim for the safety of Japan. Okinawa’s “groaning throughout history and present thirst” holds universal validity to the real condition of the world today. In this context, for the understanding of missio Dei in Japan today, there is a need to examine how to express and demonstrate the Gospel of Reconciliation through word and deed.

The Gospel of Reconciliation, which was stated in the “Okinawa Declaration,” adequately expresses the nature of the salvation written in the Bible. The contemporary viewpoint of the Biblical Gospel that was emphasized in the Manila Manifesto could be said that, before it is the Gospel of the Kingdom, it is the Gospel of Reconciliation that demonstrates the blessings of the Kingdom to the world through “the Reconciliation with God through Christ,” “interpersonal reconciliation” and “reconciliation of creation.” The Church, which is “the community of God’s people,” must examine this, demonstrate it towards the world, accept it and live in reconciliation with people interpersonally and creation. The Declaration made a resolution to “live together in the Gospel of Reconciliation;” in the homes, in the context of domestic destruction such as discord between married couples, adultery, divorce, child abuse, domestic violence and juvenile delinquency; in the churches, in the context of opposition and division within the church and disagreement between churches; in

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(9) K. Sakurai, Okinawa Sengen (Okinawa Declaration), Word of Life Press, 2001, p. 55
the local community, in the context of the lack of relationship between the church and local community, the problem of child diminution and an aging society and the need of those who are socially handicapped; in Japan, in the context of the segregation that comes from uniformed “harmony,” and the rise of a new nationalism that has its roots in the “Emperor System;” and lastly, in the world, in the context of the reality that a large percent of the world’s poverty and unevangelized areas, famine and disaster, and many of those who suffer from fighting and oppression are concentrated in Asia\(^{(10)}\).

4. The Missiological Reflections of the “Okinawa Declaration”

The Evangelicals reexamined their understanding of missio Dei with “the world-relatedness of the Church” in mind, within the understanding of missio Christi. They reaffirmed the Lausanne Covenant which says that the Church is at the very center of God’s cosmic purpose, and His appointed means of spreading the Gospel, asserted the centrality of the Church and emphasized the Christ-centeredness also in the mission understanding. They also affirmed the Christian view of “Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church and Lord of the universe (the Iguassu Declaration, article 1)” and to search for the best way of mission based on Eph. 1: 10, 22–23; “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church.” Therefore, the Evangelicals are to keep the Christ-centeredness also in mission.

Reconciliation is a keyword not only for northeast Asia but also for the whole world. “Living together in the Gospel of Reconciliation” means that the victims experience hurt and forgiveness. Therein lies God’s love that sacrificed Christ, and one cannot go on without facing this fact. To face the historical groaning and the willingness to share the present pain is in God’s love and forgiveness through Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection. The “Okinawa Declaration” strives to relate and recognize the groaning throughout history “as those with history written on our hearts,” and to strive for unity of the Church to spread and live the Gospel of Reconciliation “as those who make history”\(^{(11)}\). In order to demonstrate the Gospel of Reconciliation by word and deed, there is no other place but the Church where the community of God’s people lives within God’s reconciliation. This Church includes people from all over the world, even where there is distrust and opposition. Korea and Japan have been experienced this situation. For this reason, it is necessary to continue to have exchanges between Korean and Japanese churches, and between pastors and theologians.

In the context of the Church’s world-relatedness, the Evangelicals have a tendency of

\(^{(10)}\) ibid., pp. 58–62.
\(^{(11)}\) ibid., pp. 32–36, 57–58.
emphasizing the personal relationship with God without their interest in and relation to the social aspect of the Christian faith. After the Modern Enlightenment, religion was regarded as a private matter, and its public character was eliminated as much as possible. The Christian faith (religion) has public aspect, and it needs to be fully recognized that the Church places importance on the community of God’s people in the public life. It also needs to form a society that will ensure the freedom of faith and the public freedom that will enable them to proclaim their faith boldly, not merely to look to the government, but to the Church itself to work on the formation of external conditions to proclaim boldly \(^{(12)}\). This would be a contribution to “the symbiosis” of the pluralist society, and would prepare an environment for enabling the Church to grow. Theological education, with the understanding of history and of the world in mind, is needed even more today in the missiological understanding of “the Church’s world-relatedness.”

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現代日本における福音主義的ミッシオ・デイ理解

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「神の宣教（ミッシオ・デイ）」理解には幅があり、この概念が21世紀の宣教理解に役立つのか混乱をもたらすのか、さらなる吟味が必要である。福音主義的見地から、プロテスタントの宣教理解に焦点を当てて、『沖縄宣言』をもとに現代日本の今日的課題を宣教學的に考察する。

ミッシオ・デイ理解は、宣教の主体が宣教団体ではなく教会に焦点が当てられ、「教会と宣教」の関係が問われる中で発展してきた。宣教は、宣教団体や教会の活動である前に、三一の神にその起源があり、その神の世界と人類に対する活動であるというものである。そして「神の国」理解と関係づけられ、単に「魂の救い」の提供ではなく、貧困と抑圧という世界をも視野に入れるものとなって行く。しかし、WCCのミッシオ・デイ理解は、やがて宣教の「社会・政治家、人間化」の方向を辿る。その中で、福音主義者らの批判を受け、WCCは教会の伝道的召命を自覚し、また、貧しい人々との連帯や社会的不正義への働きを「神の国」理解の中に位置づけていく。

WCCのミッシオ・デイ理解は、福音主義の宣教観にも影響を与えていく。しかし、ミッシオ・デイ理解の世俗化を避けるために、福音主義者は、この理解を「ミッシオ・クリスティ」理解の中でとらえ直して行く。その宣教観は、「魂の救い」に重点を置いていたあり方から「全人間の救い」を視野に入れた「御国の福音」を世界に「ことばと行い」をもって示すものとして理解された。同時に、世界に対する神のご計画の教会中心性が再確認された。

ミッシオ・デイ理解が指向した「教会の世界との関わり」は、福音主義諸教会の第四回日本伝道会議の『沖縄宣言』に反映された。沖縄の「歴史的うめきと今日的渴き」は現代世界の実情に普遍的妥当性をもち、そこで「和解の福音をともに生きる」ことこそ現代日本における「ミッシオ・デイ」理解であるとした。なお、教会の一体性の証示とその公共的役割は、今後の課題として残されている。
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The concept of “the mission of God (*missio Dei*)” is broad, and needs to be examined further, whether it will be useful for the understanding of mission for the 21st century, or whether it will bring further confusion. This article will focus mainly on the Protestant missiological understanding, on bringing contemporary issues in Japan expressed in the “Okinawa Declaration” into missiological consideration.

The concept of *missio Dei* has developed in terms of the relationship between the Church and mission, focusing on the Church instead of mission organizations. Mission was based on a Trinitarian God, whereas it was a work of mission organizations and churches, and that it was an action of God for the world and human beings. The understanding of mission, closely related to the Kingdom of God, dealt not merely with the “salvation of the individual soul,” but with the world of poverty and oppression. But the WCC understanding of *missio Dei* took the secularization road toward “political/socialization and humanization.” This understanding was criticized by the Evangelicals and the WCC came to realize the evangelistic calling of the Church. Union with the poor and the work of improving for social justice were placed in their understanding of the Kingdom of God.

The WCC understanding of *missio Dei* also gave an impact to the Evangelical understanding of mission. But avoiding the danger of re-conceptualizing their *missio Dei* into secularization, the Evangelicals recaptured what *missio Dei* was seeking by understanding *missio Dei as missio Christi*. They understood mission as demonstrating the Gospel of the Kingdom in word and deed for the salvation of the whole person instead of the individual soul. They also reaffirmed the centrality of the Church in God’s plan for the world.

“The world-relatedness of the Church” meant that *missio Dei* was reflected in the “Okinawa Declaration” at the 4th Japan Congress on Evangelism. Okinawa’s “groaning throughout history and present thirst” holds universal validity to the real condition of the world today. The true understanding of *missio Dei* in Contemporary Japan means “to live together in the Gospel of Reconciliation.” Striving for the unity of the Church and her public role are still needed for the future.