



From Missio to Prothesis

Preparing for a New Era of Global Witness

A presentation to the Annual General Meeting of Missions Interlink New Zealand on the occasion of Jay's formal farewell from the role of Executive Officer (which concluded on 31 July 2024).

In this presentation Jay leaves the Missions Interlink community with a challenge to prepare well the next generation of missionaries from and to Aotearoa New Zealand for the 'new era' realities currently facing missions as a practice alongside a maturing world Christianity. To better engage this new era, Jay proposes that the old terminology of "missions" is made redundant in favour of a better framing of our global witness as participation in God's purposes. Here, Jay introduces the concept, launching from a fresh translation of Romans 8:28.

Kia ora koutou (e nga rangatira i hui hui nei (Life and wellbeing to all respected leaders gathered here). *Nga mihi nui kia koutou katoa. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa (I bring you greetings, three times I respectfully acknowledge you). He iti noa taku wā, na, me iti noa ōku mihi (Space is limited and so must my greetings be). Mo te nuinga, he whānau tonu tatou (For the most part we are family anyway, as Missions Interlink members). Nō reira, kō Jay Mātenga tōku ingoa (Anyway, my name is Jay Mātenga), and I currently serve in a number of capacities, primarily as the Executive Director of the World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, a position I've held in a half time capacity since 2020. Professionally, I identify as a contextual theologian of indigenous Māori heritage, mixed of course with Anglo-European.*

It's a privilege to be invited to share with you at this time, almost 4 months after vacating the role as Missions Interlink's Executive Officer. Thank you for the opportunity.

Introducing New Creation

For this presentation, I have chosen to explore a little more with you the implications of Romans 8:28 per N T Wright from his recent book, *Into the Heart of Romans*.

Wright's translation of this verse, to fit better with the context of Romans, and especially Romans 8, makes a slight switch from the translation we are more familiar with. He has it read: "We know, in fact, that God works all things together for good *with* those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

What almost all translators render as "for" (God works for the good of us), Wright translates as "with" — we work with God for the good of all things. Us together and together with God are to work synergistically to bring relief to a creation waiting as if in childbirth for the children of God to appear (Romans 8:19). We are now here, but is creation relieved? That is a question worth pondering... but it's beyond the scope of this presentation.

As I have extrapolated this translation into what we might otherwise understand to be missions, I have concluded that our Acts 1:8 witness beyond the people of Israel, which is what is inferred by Matthew 28:19's "now, go into all the world". That is, Jesus consistently told the disciples NOT to go beyond Israel (e.g. Matthew 10:6), but now that he is resurrected all such restrictions are lifted. So, in light of Romans 8:28 retranslated, our Acts 1:8 witness can be seen as a mandate to cocreate New Creation as a foretaste of the coming reign of God in Christ when finally, for all eternity, creation will join us totally free of all death and decay.

In the meantime, though, we groan with creation, longing to be set free from sin and suffering and death as fully adopted children, with brand new eternal bodies. Scripture, theologians, and preachers have traditionally identified that state as our salvation.

It's a promise worth fixing our eyes on and longing for! That is the hope that we have. Sadly, today it is rarely actually preached from our pulpits as trustworthy eschatology. Instead, we get some form of reduced version.



Jay Mātenga

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But New Creation is the outcome to which the narrative of Jesus that we call the gospel provides us access.

In case you're unsure, the gospel is the story of God's creation, Israel's commission, Christ's coming, death, and resurrection, and the penitent choice humans have to make in order to become part of that story and heirs of its inheritance. This gospel declares that "Our God reigns!" and reveals that the purpose of God is to regenerate all of creation and invite people to join us in that inheritance.

You can pick your preferred atonement theology, but whatever way you interpret Jesus' suffering and resurrection, it doesn't change the fact that New Creation is the outcome.

Moving on from Missions

For the record, I now no longer speak of missions—at all, if I can help it. I have concluded that our 230-year-old missions terminology is decreasing in its effectiveness, and it will not be helpful in the new era ahead of us. It may take a generation or more for Bible-believing, gospel-proclaiming, followers of Jesus to get comfortable with different terminology, but I am now convinced that that is what will be required for the gospel to spread as it should into all the world, without worldly imperial or colonial assumptions.

New terms create new imagination, which in turn creates new practice.

My preferred definition of what we're called to do in the world, including cross-culturally, as followers of Jesus is that we are the "people of God participating in the purposes of God to cocreate New Creation for the glory of God in all the earth".

So, the term "missions" gives way to "participating in the purposes of God"—or simply "participating" if you'd like a short version. After all, "mission/s" is also short-hand for a much more comprehensive meaning that is assumed by us all. If you were to say you're involved in mission/s to a non-Christian, they would beg further definition. To the world, mission/s means bringing some sort of plan to fulfilment like a military mission or the mission of a business, usually with productive outcomes. It has long since lost its association with 'sentness' that we still assume in Evangelical theology.

The "purpose of God" (prothesis Theou, Greek) instead of the "mission of God" (missio Dei, Latin) or "participating" instead of "missions" feels uncomfortable at first, but purpose and participation exponentially expand our Biblical and theological imagination of what our global witness responsibilities might look like and, I

believe, will better strengthen the Church's participation in getting the gospel out to where it is least known, synergistically with people of God already there or nearby.

The people of God participating in the purposes of God to cocreate New Creation for the glory of God in all the earth.

Cocreating New Creation

When we become part of the people of God through allegiance to Jesus, what does it look like to cocreate New Creation as we participate in the purposes of God as revealed in Scripture?

In short, it looks like your vocation. It looks like whatever God has created you to be and has gifted you to do, wherever the Spirit of God leads you to live. Therein you find your calling, your vocation, your participating in God's purposes, which by implication are always salvific (leading to salvation) so further qualifier is not required (e.g. participating in God's *saving* purposes).

Cocreating New Creation as participation in the purposes of God looks like lovingly working to align the toxicities and dysfunctions you see in society to God's right ways. This is the meaning of justice and righteousness, which provides health and wellbeing for all, not just for those of us in Christ.

By the way, when it comes to speaking about New Creation (or, the Kingdom of God made material in our contexts), we must remember that Jesus' life and submission to death on a Roman torture device indicates that we are never to seek to overthrow or dominate this world, but we are to influence it for good. To improve what we can where we can. To love and extend God's loving kindness to all.

Furthermore, and very importantly, we should take every opportunity to explain the hope we exhibit as we cocreate. If we are influencing for good in society it should prompt questions as to why. We can then more effectively share our hope in the eventual renewal of all things by Jesus even as we work to renew them now.

We should also be prompting questions about the joy we have as we anticipate Jesus returns to make all things new including us, his followers in that renewal.

In this way, as we work to influence society (justice) in alignment with God's right ways (righteousness) we are witnessing to the New Creation, or God's shalom, that we are both a part of already in Christ. Contrary to many translations that incorrectly assume that we become new creatures in Christ, N T Wright translates

2 Corinthians 5:17 to say that we enter New Creation when we accept Christ's offer of salvation. In Christ we step into God's transcendent new reality and from that position we seek to together make it temporarily material in our worlds. To cocreate New Creation here—with one another and with God by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus was *sent* into the world (*apostello* in the Greek, which Latin translates as *missio*), so we are *sent* into the world to evidence New Creation.

I say temporarily because I do not believe this world will be permanently transformed by anything we do. Instead, we are to provide an analgesic, some temporary pain relief, until healing comes permanently in Jesus. Our little New Creation wins are like the cocreation of a movie trailer for the main event to come.

OK. There's a wee, just a tiny, snippet of what might be understood as a New Creation... we could call it 'purposeology' instead of missiology, but as introduced above, the Greek used in Romans 8:28 to speak of the purpose of God is *prothesis* (to put forth, see also Ephesians 1:11, 2 Timothy 1:9), so maybe it's a New Creation prothesiology. Perhaps one day we will see prothesiology subvert missiology as the study of our participation with God's purposes to cocreate New Creation. Such a concept would hold in creative tension both the demonstration and explanation of the gospel. But our cocreating work should always aim to attract more people to leave their hell on earth and enter the promised land of New Creation in Jesus. Joining with other believers in groups that we call churches.

Churches are those communities that provide the context for the Spirit of God to transform each of us by the renewing of our minds as we participate together in our cocreation of New Creation with one another as part of one body—both locally in specific contexts and globally, in a mysteriously unified sense.

Recruiting Participants in God's Purposes

I dare to suggest that this is the essence of what we should be calling followers of Jesus to aspire to, while challenging them to be open to the Spirit moving them across the world to do it in places where the gospel has not penetrated.

For that is why most members of Missions Interlink New Zealand exist—to deploy resources and recruits out to those frontiers in need of a locally contextual witness to New Creation. To places where the people of God participating in the purposes of God are few (if

any). It is right that we continue to promote such deployment as a priority.

But I question how adequately we are preparing people of God to go from here to there. What kind of world are we preparing them for? What are we trying to recruit them to?

If you were not there or have not seen the livestream, I recommend you dip into "The Send" event held at Mystery Creek on 23 November 2024 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFSv11q364&t=14704s>.

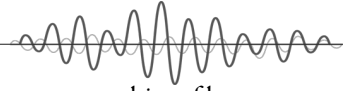
The event was a non-stop 10 hours and 20 minutes of worship, prayer, testimonies, and a little teaching along the way. It's worth scanning the recording to find Andy Byrd's content (5 hours 21 minutes 30 seconds in) and listen to that at least. Because that was the main point of The Send.

Those who know me know that I am a veteran missions mobiliser, it has been my primary motivation for serving cross-cultural workers for over 30 years. Trust me when I say that Andy's message was dated. It was turn of the century mobilisation technique. It was old school motivation, based on unreliable data (I have little confidence anymore in people group data from Joshua Project), making some unsubstantiated claims (associating missions service with insider people movements around the world), using questionable missiology (that expatriates are required to save the world, rather than as participants alongside those already there).

But, boy, was it emotionally compelling! In spite of my critique, it was pragmatically effective. Hundreds, if not over a thousand kids took their shoes off in response to the appeal at one point. Some of those kids may be knocking on the metaphorical door of your mission agency soon.

Fun fact: the most up-to-date data Andy quoted was actually ours. It was Missions Interlink's missionary statistics from 2023. 700 cross-cultural workers (at best estimate) serving from Aotearoa New Zealand, down from around 1700 in 2000. Andy challenged the crowd to respond and "double those numbers right now".

Imagine if the missions community of Aotearoa New Zealand was inundated with 700 new enquiries passed on to follow-up before Christmas. What would you with them? What would you say to them about cross-cultural ministry? How would you prepare them for the world they'll face in five years' time—because that's at least how long it will take teens before they're ready to



be added to the number of long-term cross-cultural workers included in Missions Interlink's annual statistics.

In light of what I suggested earlier, what do they think they're going to do out there as their participation with the purposes of God? How might they imagine they'll be able to cocreate New Creation alongside God's people already out there? Do they even know their vocation and what their best contribution might be to making New Creation temporarily material in some cross-cultural context?

The Send conveniently ignored such questions, as mobilisers tend to do. But world Christianity demands that we no longer ignore such questions.

Conclusion

In closing then, let's dare to imagine something much larger than the box we have called missions, or cross-cultural ministry, or whatever. Let's call the entire Church, the whole people of God, to the cocreative work—whether here or afar—to create powerful, miraculous even, glimpses of New Creation in our worlds as a witness to the reality that is coming with Jesus. Because, whether through our death or his Parousia, it is not far off.

And, finally, I implore you all to cooperate in the development of new training to better equip the next generation to go into all the world, in whatever innovative ways they find to go, because they will find new ways if you all don't open up the way.

We all know, that where there's an eagerness to make a difference, there's potential to make a mess. Some of that can't be avoided but some new thinking around equipping God's people to cocreate New Creation can make a world of difference.

Arohanui ki a koutou e haere ana ki te ao (love to you all as you go into the world).

Testimonies from others on stage gave a hint of how God called them to participate in God's purposes, but it is different for everyone. To "The Send": top marks for challenging young people to dare to trust God to lead them, but now you, Missions Interlink member organisations, have to figure out how to best guide them... that is, if you're fortunate enough to get some stuck on your fly paper as it were.

Romans 8:28 again, "God works all things together for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose". Prothesis Theou: God's purpose. For us to cocreate with one another and God who works all things together for good. Cocreating New Creation.