

THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS

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Missions ICST 500
January 31, 2009

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Introduction

God is a mission “God” who is the center and initiator of all mission workings. “I pray that these words, “all the families on the earth,” may be written in our hearts. It is this expression more than any other which reveals the living God of the bible to be a missionary God.”¹ Mission is radiated through the very essence and substances of God and theology is the result of mission. Church birthing, development and mandates are a result of God’s choice to include mankind in His divine plans and purposes. Mission is ultimately not a human response to human need. “The churches involvement in mission is its privileged participation in the actions of a triune God.”²

Mission and the Old Testament

In Moreau’s book, *Introduction to Missions*, he points out how the bible, with mission in mind, can be laid out in the fashion of a divine drama; with major events being broken into specific acts.³ Looking at Genesis, chapters 1-11, the primary focus is on God’s dealings with universal mankind. George Peter’s points out in, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, that the Noahic Covenant was made with Noah “and his sons,” substantiating universality.⁴ Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant, found in Genesis 12:1-3, calls Abraham out from his country where God promises to make him a great nation (the early formation of God’s covenant people Israel). Abraham is given a three fold blessing which included once again “all the nations of mankind.” Midway through Genesis God begins to deal primarily, but not exclusively, with His

¹ Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, rev. ed. *Perspectives: On the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library 2009), 9.

² Winter and Hawthorne, *Perspectives*, 70.

³ Scott A. Moreau, Gary R. Cowin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2004) 29.

⁴ George Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press 1984) 87.

covenant people who are chosen to “be blessed” so that they may be a blessing to all the nations. One final passage is found in Joel 2:28 where a prophetic reference is made to “New Testament Pentecost” where “all mankind” can possibly be endued and indwelt with the Holy Spirit.

Looking briefly, we will substantiate the concept of universal mission in the Old Testament.

We find in Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” The promise of “her seed” is fulfilled in Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. Notice, her seed (off spring) eludes to “all of man kind” as seen in John 1:29; 2 Corinthians 5:19; 1 John 2:1, 2 and many other passages of scripture. “Its racial scope must not be overlooked, for only as Christ becomes the Savior of the total human race is Genesis 3:15 really fulfilled.”⁵

Genesis 12:1-3, a foundational text, gives a clearly defined preview of God’s planned design to use Abraham, his descendants and the nation of Israel to bless “all Nations.” “Genesis 12 introduces a new epoch in the history of salvation – a history which is particularistic *in method* but universalistic in promise, design and effect.”⁶ Paul magnified the universality of this promise when he wrote to the Church of Galatia explaining those who come to Christ “in faith” are in the lineage of Abraham spiritually and thus a chosen people of God (Gal 3:6-9).

“The passage from Joel [Joel 2:28] which Peter sees as fulfilled at Pentecost speaks of the Spirit coming to all classes of people-young and old, slave and free, men and women, saint and repentant sinner (Ford 1988, 148).”⁷ We find reference to the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy in Acts 2:16: “But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.”

⁵ Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, 85.

⁶ Ibid, 89.

⁷ Moreau, Cowin, and McGee, *Introducing World Missions*, 94.

Mission and the New Testament

Old Testament scripture finds fulfillment and continued progression in the New Testament. The advancement of kingdom and proclamation, resulting in dispersion, is caused by Roman persecution. Saul, later named Paul, is called, converted and set apart for a special calling previously unknown to the church. Paul takes the gospel message to the Gentiles (see Genesis 3:15 and Gen 12:1-3 and Joel 2:28). Unquestionably, the New Testament is a time when God is moving and working in the midst of the world through human instruments and the church. “To establish the theology of missions in the New Testament one simply accepts the New Testament for what it is.”⁸ Looking at 2 New Testament texts will serve to substantiate New Testament mission concept.

In Matt 28:18-20, we see a pre-ascended Jesus Christ who gives the disciples “The Great Commission.” Though the Great Commission is given to the Apostles its implication is directed to the entire church. Piper points out in, *Let the Nations Rejoice*, that because of the duration of the phrase “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world,” it becomes clear that the commission is applicable to the church.⁹ The church is to “go ... and teach all nations until “the end of the world.”¹⁰

In Acts 1:8 the disciples were told to wait for the enduement of the Holy Spirit: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

⁸ Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, 131.

⁹ John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics 2003) 160.

¹⁰ Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*, 160.

Acts is a recorded historical book describing inception and development of what we know to be the New Testament Church Age. In Acts chapter 2 we have Pentecost with the indwellment of the Holy Spirit which was affirmed by God through: rushing wind, cloven tongues with fire and the speaking of “other tongues.” This same gifted sign would was not restricted to Jews as seen in the conversion of Cornelius and his household in Acts chapter 10 verse 44.

Mission in Relationship to God’s Nature

The divine attributes of God: Omniscience; Omnipotence; Immutability; Omnipresence; indisputably cannot be separated from the task of mission. “Mission was understood as derived from the very nature of God. “It [is] thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another "movement": Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”¹¹ God’s traits are inseparable from mission such as: God is Spirit; God is love; God is light. God the Son is missionary, “It was not an imposition or acquisition. It was the outflow of His innermost being.”¹² God the Holy Spirit can also be seen as missionary: “The Holy Spirit not only preserves the world as a mission field; He also creates high-potential seasons and responsive people.”¹³

Mission Theology in Relationship to Theology

The term “Mission Theology” a relatively new term is the product of several brilliant minds

¹¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1992) 390.

¹² Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, 61.

¹³ *Ibid*, 81.

who have consistently tried to re-define the relationship between mission and theology. The early church was a church of mission and as a result Bosch terms mission in his famous description, “the mother of theology.”¹⁴ “During the Enlightenment era, mission moved to a twofold vision (practical and technical) and eventually evolved into what Farley (:74-8-; 99-149) calls the “fourfold pattern”: the disciplines of Bible (text), church history (history), systematic theology (truth), and practical theology (application).”¹⁵ Mission continued to gain interest and a new application of “practical theology” was introduced and is still accepted by many theologians today. Bosch argues against this narrowness, “So mission concerns the world also beyond the boundaries of the church. It is the *world* God loves and for the sake of which the Christian community is called to be the salt and the light (Jn 3:16; Mt 5:13-cf Linz 1964:33f; Neil 1968:76).”¹⁶ In summarization I think a statement by Anderson, in Bosch’s, *Transforming Mission*, says it best: “Just as church ceases to be church if it is not missionary, theology ceases to be theology if it loses its missionary character (cf Anderson 1955-60).”¹⁷

Key Motif’s of Mission Theology

Motif is defined as: “a recurring pattern or element that reinforces the central guiding theme of the house.”¹⁸ Moreau in his book, *Introduction to World Missions*, gives us three models with each one having (6) motifs. The first motif model was developed by a South African Missiologist, David Bosch and included: Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost,

¹⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 490.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 494.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 494.

¹⁸ Moreau, Cowin, and McGee, *Introducing World Missions*, 79.

Parousia.¹⁹ The second motif model was developed by American Missiologist, Wilbert Shenk and included: Reign (kingdom) of God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, church, world, eschaton (parallel to Bosch's parousia but more broadly focused on things related to the end of history).²⁰ The third motif model is promoted in the book, *Introduction to World Missions*, and included 6 motifs (vertically) and 3 cores (horizontally) and the idea is that the cores and motifs intertwine with one another. The (3) cores are: evangelism and church planting; Discipleship and church growth and Salt-and-light living. The (6) motifs are: Kingdom of God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Church, shalom, return of Jesus. Looking at these (3) motifs a natural progression can be seen.²¹ In the first model (David Bosch) emphasis is made primarily on Christ. The last motif (Moreau, Corwin and McGee) we see a diversified combination of Deity, church and missions.

Relationship of Mission Theology and the Missionary/Church Leaders/Lay Persons

Ultimately how a missionary, church leader and lay person perceive and define "mission theology" will effect their reactions in, but limited to: worship, prayer and suffering. We have pre-established that God is inseparable from mission theology and that theology is inseparable from mission theology so also are our responses to worship, prayer and suffering inseparable from mission theology. Piper in his book, *Let the Nations Rejoice*, states that worship is preferential to mission(s) and that the only reason mission(s) exist is because of the lack of worship.²² Missionaries, church leaders and lay persons should not "teach all nations"

¹⁹ Ibid, 80.

²⁰ Ibid, 80.

²¹ Ibid, 80.

²² Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*, 203.

out of a dutiful motive but because God is mission, Jesus is mission, the Holy Spirit is mission and so should Christians be mission, with a worshipful, prayerful and willingness to bear their cross.

Conclusion

Without the centrality of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in mission and our churches, we are doomed for failure. Here is a story that I believe sums up this entire subject regarding: the necessity of mission theology while engaging in mission work:

First, a theology of mission is like the rudder of a ship guiding the mission of God and providing it direction. My wife is fond of remembering how our children frequently wanted to “drive” when we took them on pedal-boats. At times they were so intent on pedaling, making the boat move, that the rudder was held in one position, and we went in circles. Realizing his mistake, but still intent on pedaling, the child would move the rudder from one extreme to the other so that we zig-zagged across the lake. When missionaries operate without the foundation of a mission theology, their lives and ministries zig-zag from fad to fad, from one theological perspective to another.²³

As earlier stated, God is a mission “God” who is the center and initiator of all mission workings.

²³ Missiology.org, “Monthly Missiological Reflection #20: The Theological Foundations of Missiology,” <http://www.missiology.org/MMR/mmr20.htm>.

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