Research Paper:

Theology of Mission

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Global Missions Study

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Christendom, ‘missions’ is often an overused and incorrectly applied term. ‘Missions’ is a specialized term that should only be used in certain situations. George W. Peters correctly defines missions. He writes:

By it I mean the sending forth of authorized persons beyond the borders of the New Testament church and her immediate gospel influence to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in gospel-destitute areas, to win converts from other faiths or non-faiths to Jesus Christ, and to establish functioning, multiplying local congregations who will bear the fruit of Christianity in that community and to that country.¹

Mission, however, encompasses the entire scope of God’s plan for mankind. George W. Peters correctly defines mission theology as “the basic presuppositions and underlying principles which determine, from the standpoint of Christian faith, the motives, message, methods, strategy, and goals of the Christian world mission.”² Mission theology then becomes an important study because it sheds light on the very nature of God and His redemptive plan for mankind. Emil Brunner rightly explains that “the church exists by mission the way fire exists by burning.”³ Through careful study, the mission of God is found within all sixty-six books of Scripture, relates to all other aspects of theology, and reveals the very nature of God.

OLD TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES FOR MISSION

Throughout the Old Testament, God has called, equipped, and sent men to accomplish His mission. The word ‘mission’ actually comes from the Latin word mettere meaning “to

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send.” Of all the Scriptures of the prophets within the Old Testament, Isaiah 6:8 makes the top of the list. It reads, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!” Many times throughout Christendom has the phrase ‘God doesn’t call the qualified, He qualifies the called’ been used. This phrase is pivotal in the situation here with Isaiah. In verse 5 we find Isaiah describing himself as a ruined man of unclean lips who is clearly unworthy to carry on the mission of God. However, after he is pardoned by the Most High God in verse 7, Isaiah willingly and boldly offers his services to God in verse 8 to carry out His mission with cheerful obedience.

Another powerful example of God’s mission through an OT prophet comes by the way of Jonah. The LORD spoke to Jonah, saying “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you” (Jonah 3:2). He was in fact a true OT missionary who was called of God to venture outside the borders of Israel to witness to the sinful Gentiles. Unfortunately, like many Christians today, Jonah did not want to take the salvation of God to the heathen. Warren Wiersbe explains that Jonah “discovered God’s compassion for those outside Israel, even those who were their enemies.” It is little wonder that Jesus would someday expound on the Scriptures and command His sheep to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mat. 5:43). Ultimately, God’s love reaches every tongue and every nation,

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and Christians must follow His will and commands to partake in His mission to reach the lost regardless of context, circumstance, or opinion.

NEW TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES FOR MISSION

When the mission of God in the NT is discussed, it is hard to overlook the ministry of John the Baptist. The book of John writes that John the Baptist states, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said” (Jn. 1:23). In this passage, John the Baptist is making a very bold statement. He is stating that he himself was sent to prepare the way for Jehovah that fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. The Scripture here is clear that John is the prophet who will “prepare the way of the LORD” or YHWH. However, Jesus is the humble servant who shows up instead. Some question why this is, but Scripture reveals that Jesus is in fact divine and “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9). John as the prophesied messenger and Jesus as the prophesied LORD usher in the greatest hope for man in the mission of God.

Obviously, God the Father sending Jesus to redeem sinful man is the greatest climatic moment in the mission of God. However, Jesus Himself promotes another great moment in the history of God’s plan. Jesus told His disciples “it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you (Jn. 16:7). Just as God the Father had sent Jesus, Christ would send the Holy Spirit that would enable Christians to truly worship in spirit and truth. Because Jesus was fully man and fully God, He was limited because of His humanity. However, He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell all believers to empower them to do even greater things (Jn. 14:12). Francis Chan challenges believers with some
powerful questions. He asks, “But what do we do with the fact that Jesus says it is better for His followers to have the Holy Spirit? Do we believe Him? If so, do our lives reflect that belief?”

THE NATURE OF GOD IN MISSION

An advanced study of the mission of God illuminates the very character of God. God’s nature is truly revealed in the ‘sending’ of Abram and subsequent promises in Genesis.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

God makes an incredible promise to Abram in this passage. Walter C. Kaiser asserts that the basic theology of the mission of God is revealed in this passage. He states:

The whole purpose of God then was that He would make a nation, give them a “name,” bless them so that they might be light to the nations and thereby be a blessing to all the nations as Abraham’s seed. To shrink back would be evil on Israel’s part. Israel was to be God’s missionary to the world – and so are we by virtue of our identity as Abraham’s spiritual descendants!  

John R. Stott aptly comments on the passage stating that “these are perhaps the most unifying verses in the Bible; the whole of God’s purpose is encapsulated here.” The most important portion in this wonderful passage states that Abram will be blessed so that he will bless others. God sent this one faithful servant into a foreign land, blessed him beyond measure, and enabled him to build a nation of people who could share the one true God with all nations.


9 Ibid., 3.
Man’s story could have ended right there. Prior to His covenant with Abram, man had turned from the one true God and became drunk on sin and idolatry. However, God’s mission, His love, and His promises were too strong for even mankind to derail. The nature of God is to finish what He starts. He is a winner. He never fails to bring about His sovereign will. And just what is the will of God? Through His mighty will God sent men, angels, prophets, apostles, His Son, and His Holy Spirit into this wretched world to warn, exhort, preach, teach, evangelize, baptize, call to repentance, and save a world that is lost and on a path to eternal damnation. The ultimate mission of God is to send His Son Jesus Christ to earth to become the Savior of the world so that every tongue from every nation could be saved and represented in Heaven (Rev. 7:9).

MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

When trying to fully understand missional theology, exploring other aspects of theology can be a great service. Bibliology and Christiology are two fields of study that can provide great insights into the world of missional theology. The Christians’ true source of knowledge and absolute truth comes from none other than the Bible; naturally the science behind that study is called Bibliology. The saints of old clung tightly to the study of the Holy Scriptures. Author W. Pink wrote:

Christianity is the religion of a Book. Christianity is based upon the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture. The starting point of all doctrinal discussion must be the Bible. Upon the foundation of the Divine inspiration of the Bible stands or falls the entire edifice of Christian truth. If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do? (Ps. 11:3). Surrender the dogma of verbal inspiration and you are left like a rudderless ship on a stormy sea, at the mercy of every wind that blows.10

Pink makes some very substantial claims regarding the importance of Scripture. Likewise, Paul held the Bible in high regard when he said “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). John also conveys the importance of the Word of God when he attributed it to Jesus saying “the Word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14), while Matthew records Jesus saying He Himself fulfilled the law (5:17). Ultimately, Christians seeking the mission of God need look no further than careful study of the Holy Scriptures.

The most important aspect of Bibliology is called revelation. Revelation is God’s method of revealing Himself, His will, His nature, and ultimately His mission to mankind. Revelation is simply the incredible act of God whereby He gives mankind knowledge that he could otherwise not acquire on his own. In the OT, the phrase ‘Word of God’ occurs over 1200 times “to refer to the revelation or message of God ...to a certain prophet.” However, for contemporary Christians, God’s main act of revelation comes from the Bible, or more specifically, those who spread the gospel of Jesus. The OT prophet Isaiah accepted the missional challenge by stating “here am I, send me” (Isa. 6:8), while the NT apostle Paul traveled many miles spreading the gospel of Jesus throughout the book of Acts. Bibliology simply reaffirms the mission of God to reach the nations with His love, blessings, and saving grace.

The second aspect to aid in the pursuit of knowing the mission of God can be found in Christiology. Christians who have yearned to truly know God and understand His will and mission have placed their trust and hope in His Son Jesus. Thus, a careful study in Christiology

is critical to gaining the proper understanding of God’s plan and successfully being an active partaker in His mission. Christiology, the Doctrine of Christ, reveals that Jesus is in fact delicately embedded throughout the mission of God within the 66 books of the Bible. Christians must understand that the person and work of Jesus Christ is in fact the hermeneutical key to the Old and New Testaments. For example, Jesus is the Serpent Crusher (Gen. 3:15), the Passover Lamb (Ex. 12), the Suffering Servant (Is. 53:5), the Messiah (Mat. 2:15), the Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), man’s Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), and the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19:16). Christians should not have to look hard to find Christ Jesus in all the passages of Scripture. Instead, seekers need only study the Scriptures to recognize that Jesus Christ has always been and will always be the main element in the history of God’s mission.

God has in fact ‘sent’ angels, prophets, and apostles to do His bidding throughout the history of man. However, the climax of God’s mission was completed by none other than His own Son – Jesus Christ. Christiology is crucial to understanding the mission of God because not only is Jesus the second Person of the Trinity, but He was given all the power of Heaven and earth from the Father God (Mat. 28:18). Mankind’s sin had created a rift between man and God that could only be remedied by the blood sacrifice of Jesus (Heb. 9:12-14; 2 Tim. 2:5-6; Mat. 20:28; Jn. 1:29). Elmer Towns weighs in on the importance of Christiology. He writes:

Jesus Christ possessed all the divine attributes of the Father, and was one with the Father, yet was separate in person. Christ affected redemption for men because in Him was united both the human and divine natures. In humanity, Christ was totally human; in deity, Jesus was unalterably God. Yet in Jesus Christ was a single, undivided personality in whom these two natures are vitally and undividedly united, so that Jesus Christ is not God and man, but the God-man. 


KEY MOTIFS FOR MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

Two crucial motifs that reinforce the mission of God are the work of Jesus Christ and His second coming. Firstly, Jesus Christ is the most important motif in God’s plan because salvation is found in no other approach. John 14:6 reads, “Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” The fact is, Christians do not center their lives on prophets, poets, traditions, or old wise tails. Their life, beliefs, worldview, and eternity wholly rest in the completed work of Jesus Christ. 1 Timothy 3:16 succinctly summarizes Christians’ faith in Jesus. It reads, “He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.” The Bible is clear that Jesus was born of a virgin (Mat. 1:18), is pre-existent and eternal (Jn. 8:58; Heb. 1:11-12), is God’s Son (Jn. 3:16), completely fulfilled the Law of God (Mat. 5:17), died to pay the sin debt of mankind (2 Tim. 2:5-6), and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God (Eph. 4:10; Rev. 3:21).

Another important motif within Scripture is Christ’s second coming. The catastrophic and eternal events, detailed in the Bible concerning the second coming of Christ, ultimately initiate the final chapter of the mission of God. Towns describes the last events stating that “Christ is the unifying theme around which all events are analyzed as they move toward the final consummation in the rapture, the Tribulation, the glorious appearing, the Millennium, the Great White Throne judgment and the New Heaven and the New Earth.”14 From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture is clear that God is a sending God. First came prophets, then came Jesus, then came apostles, and soon He will again send His Son Jesus to end all things and restore His kingdom.

14 Towns, Theology for Today, 713.
APPLYING MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

It seems the mission of God can properly manifest itself through three distinct functions: missionaries, church leaders, and lay people. Firstly, missionaries have always been a big part in the mission of God. Soon after the flood Noah’s sons could be considered the first missionaries who spread throughout the world sharing the supernatural powers of God. Jonah was another OT missionary that took the message of God to Ninevah. Of course Paul and the early churches of Acts faithfully took the gospel of Jesus to foreign lands. Today, Missionaries across the globe continue the mission of God to seek and to save that which is lost.

Secondly, church leaders must echo the Scriptural mandate of the Great Commission to their congregation. They must properly teach the Word of God, equip the soldiers of Christ to utilize the gifts of the Spirit, and joyfully aid in the missionary efforts around the world. God’s mission should be advanced inside and outside the walls of the local church. Once Christians have been properly educated on the mission of God and His ‘sending’ nature, congregations will gain a better appreciation for those who are sent, support God’s mission with their time and resources, and hopefully partake in the action themselves.

Lastly, but maybe most importantly, lay people must become actively involved with the mission of God. Scripture states that all Christians receive the Holy Spirit upon repentance and belief in Jesus. The Spirit then manifests certain gifts to enable Christians to grow in righteousness, actively partake in the mission of God, and immediately seek out the lost with the saving grace of Jesus. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus says the Lord’s will is going to be done. To what extent Christians will participate in His will and mission is completely up to them. From the checkout line at Wal-Mart to the break room at work, lay people have ample opportunity to willfully participate in the mission of God.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


