

# A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

The very concept of mission theology<sup>1</sup> has essentially been a foreign idea throughout the centuries. In fact, missiology as a separate discipline only came into being when the church was developing a greater interest in the “professional” aspects of the ministry.<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to understand why this gravitation toward professionalism occurred; certainly that is how other professionals acquired their standing in society. It is by gaining control over their specialized fields that doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, and engineers secured their own space and social standing for themselves.<sup>3</sup> So then, missiology came of age in a very fragmented, educational structure.

Though some labeled mission theology a practical matter due to its applicational nature and placed it within ecclesiology, a second strategy was to introduce missiology as a theological discipline in its own right.<sup>4</sup> Many “missiologists” then declared mission theology to be an independent study and actual departments of missions were formed. However, missiology is still rarely included in systematic theology programs. The theology department concerns itself

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *theology of missions*, *mission theology*, and *missiology* will be used interchangeably throughout this paper and will generally refer to the formal academic study of all aspects of the missionary enterprise.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Wicks, "Toward a Missions' Apologetic," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4, no. 369 (2000): 107.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Edward Van Engen, *Mission on the Way : Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, c1996), 24. See also ; Wicks: 107.

with and teaches theology, while the missions department concerns itself with and teaches missions.

Nevertheless, missions must at its core be as much a part of systematic theology as it is ecclesiology. So then, this paper will offer a survey of missiology showing its foundation with respect to the nature of God, its essential character from Scriptures, its key themes and motifs, and its practical application to the layperson, the church, and to missionaries.

### MISSION THEOLOGY AND THE NATURE OF GOD

First and foremost in our study is to evaluate mission theology in view of the nature of God; that is, it is in the very being and character of God that the deepest ground of the missionary enterprise is to be found.<sup>5</sup> Stott argues that God's nature as it relates to missions is fully revealed in His promise to Abraham and its fulfillment (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:17, 18).<sup>6</sup> Yet as Peters suggests, mission theology should really be more interested in the qualitative aspects of God such as God as Spirit, God as light, and God as love.<sup>7</sup>

In the words of Christ, "God is Spirit" (John 4:24a).<sup>8</sup> These words reveal God as, "the absolute, underived and outgoing reality who has all the sources of existence within Himself."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> George W. Peters, "Perspectives on the Church's Mission - Part 1: Missions in Biblical Perspective," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136, no. 369 (1979): 4.

<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, "The Living God Is a Missionary God," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter et al. (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, c2009), 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, : Moody Press, [1972]), 57. See also Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Swengel, Pa.,: Reiner Publications, 1961), 70.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from *Holy Bible : English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, 58.

He seeks out worshipers, and accepts worship offered “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24b). He is a spirit being without limitation; He transcends all limitations. He cannot be fully described by definitive aspects such as immensity, infinity, omnipotence, and omniscience. He is boundless and presently working to reconcile the world to Himself.

Scripture also declares, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). The incarnate God, Jesus Christ, proclaimed, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), the light that cannot be overcome by darkness (John 1:5). In Scripture “darkness” stands for sin, evil, death; and “light” for holiness, goodness, life. “God is light” means that He is the sum of all excellence. He gives light to everyone who comes into the world (John 1:9).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the most majestic description of the qualitative nature of God is that He is love. Indeed the form of divine love that is most central to Scripture’s message is the love of God in saving sinners. It is the Father’s love for the world that sent Christ to save sinners (John 3:16). It is the love of Christ, from which nobody can separate us, that is the love of Him who “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). “God is love” implies that God will go to the uttermost to bless His people; He will give Himself to the greatest extent, which is exemplified by Christ’s atonement.<sup>11</sup> Love is not one of His attributes; it is His very nature.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, since God’s nature is foundational to missions, we should then expect to find a great deal about missions in His “self-revelation” to us in Scriptures.

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<sup>10</sup> Pink, 90.

<sup>11</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, N.J.,: P&R Pub., 2002), 422-423.

<sup>12</sup> Pink, 90.

## THE MISSIONARY IDEA IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

While Christian missions finds its full meaning within the corpus of the New Testament, one should not overlook the missionary idea that is found throughout the Old Testament.

Starting with God's first dealings with Adam and Eve, He said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). To Noah, when mankind was given a second chance, an identical command was repeated (Gen. 9:1). *Diffusion* unto the ends of the earth was God's thought.<sup>13</sup>

We also see God choosing a nation through a man – Abraham and his Jewish descendants – not to be isolated and the sole beneficiary of God's affection, but to be His conduit of blessing for the whole world (Gen. 12:3). Glover comments, "Abraham's divine call (Gen. 12:1) furnishes a worthy model for that of any modern missionary, while his heroic rescue of the victims of King Cherdorlaomer's raid (Gen. 14:1-16) and his importunate pleading for sinful Sodom (Gen. 18:22-33) are fine instances of missionary zeal, courage, and devotion."<sup>14</sup>

The prophet Amos also offers a wonderful ray of hope in an otherwise dreary book when he alludes to all the Gentiles who are to be called by the Lord's name (Amos 9:12) – a hope to all who are not descended from Jacob. It is not just a possibility, but a promise, that those outside of Israel will have access to God.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Hall Glover, "The Bible and Missions: The Missionary Character of the Scriptures, Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93, no. 369 (1936): 104.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Nelson Publishers., *What Does the Bible Say About-- : The Ultimate a to Z Resource Fully Illustrated*, Nelson's a to Z Series (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 270.

## THE MISSIONARY IDEA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is unarguably the greatest missionary volume ever produced. Every section of it was written by a missionary, with the primary object of meeting a missionary need and promoting missionary work.<sup>16</sup>

The New Testament reveals that God is seeking people to worship Him (John 4:23), and it is for this very reason that He calls believers to preach the gospel everywhere (Matt. 28:19, 20; Acts 1:8). They have an obligation to be ambassadors of Christ (Rom. 1:14–16; 2 Cor. 5:20), having been entrusted with the gospel (1 Thess. 2:4), and sent forth (John 17:18) into “the lands beyond” (2 Cor. 10:16). Believers are compelled by God to preach the gospel (Acts 10:42, 43) using every means possible (1 Cor. 9:16, 22). As missionaries, they are to be helped by prayer (2 Cor. 1:11), and supported by their home churches (1 Cor. 16:1, 2) as workers together with God (2 Cor. 6:1).<sup>17</sup>

We celebrate with Glover that, “In its authorship and message, in its whole design and spirit . . . whether viewed in its entirety or in its component parts, it is essentially and emphatically missionary.”<sup>18</sup>

## KEY THEMES AND MOTIFS OF MISSION THEOLOGY

Any mission theology will have an organizing or guiding theme. Scriptures provide a backdrop for several possible themes including the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, the glory and

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Hall Glover, "The Bible and Missions, Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93, no. 370 (1936): 194.

<sup>17</sup> William Evans and S. Maxwell Coder, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, Enl. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 305.

<sup>18</sup> Glover, "The Bible and Missions, Part 2," 200.

worship of God, and the Great Commission.<sup>19</sup> However, the themes representing the *sine qua non* of mission theology are God's glory and our reflection of His glory through worship.

Reflecting God's glory through worship is (1) to engage in evangelism and church planting, as well as (2) discipling those who enter the kingdom thus enabling local churches to thrive and grow, (3) all the while bringing glory to God by living lives that act as salt and light in a hurting world.<sup>20</sup>

Reinforcing these central themes are several recurring patterns or motifs. As with the various theme possibilities, there are also a number of motifs that emerge from our analytical studies. Examples of such motifs are: 1) the kingdom of God (an attitude toward life that puts God first in all that Christians do, enabling personal and corporate growth); 2) Jesus (the center of the Christian faith who also commands missions); 3) the Holy Spirit (the agent who empowers Christians for mission and makes mission work possible for the Church); 4) the church (the agent that God has chosen to call the world to repent and to turn to Christ; 5) a sense of personal and corporate peace and wholeness (our ability to face circumstances around us knowing God is walking with us and, when necessary, even carrying us); and 5) the return of Christ (the blessed hope of believers that spurs them to evangelism and Christ-centered living).<sup>21</sup> These central themes and motifs provide us with a broader understanding of mission theology.

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<sup>19</sup> Van Engen provides a multiplicity of additional possible themes or integrating ideas such as the conversion of the heathen, the planting of the church, the lostness of humanity, the praise of God, the people of God, making disciples of "all the nations," the God of history, God of compassion, God of Transformation, humanization, the pain of God, the cross, bearing witness in six continents, ecumenical unity, the covenant, and liberation (Van Engen, 20).

<sup>20</sup> A. Scott Moreau, Gary Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions : A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, c2004), 79.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-85.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF MISSION THEOLOGY

So what is the outworking of Christian missions now that we have a functional theology as our guide? Quite simply, the outworking of Christians missions functions on three levels: 1) the vocational (believing layperson in their personal sphere of influence); 2) the local (the local church, including those called to leadership as pastors, teachers, and evangelists, and laypersons); and 3) the national and global (the Christian missionary, whether inter-cultural or cross-cultural).<sup>22</sup>

On the vocational level, Christian laypersons bear personal, verbal testimony of their salvation in Christ. They live lives that show that their reconciliation to God is complete and are to call on the unrepentant to seek and worship Christ.

The mission of the local church is clearly evangelistic, but just as important is the discipleship role it serves. Church leaders are tasked with feeding people God's Word, thereby strengthening and encouraging them to continue to reflect God's glory in their lives. As the sender, the church provides training and encouragement to those called to missionary service.

Missionaries reflect the glory of God by honoring His commission. They are sent and should be supported by the local churches, and as do all believers, they serve a mediatorial role to reconcile two estranged parties...the lost to the Lord.

## CONCLUSION

We have woven our way through biblical exegesis, rational analysis, and argument to understand, explain, and develop a mission theology. We have established the very nature of

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<sup>22</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 31-34.

God as its foundation and have shown ample biblical support for its practical implementation by the Church.

Missiology in its nature involves crossing frontiers, both literal and figurative, to introduce and establish the truth of the Gospel among all peoples. Moreau notes that the church is “essentially a missionary enterprise of God, and every member of the church is to be engaged in that enterprise. Therefore, until all have been given the opportunity to worship God in spirit and truth, missiology cannot be relegated to the fringe or be seen as having relevance only to cross-cultural Christian workers. Rather, it is a critical discipline for all Christians in all cultures at all times.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A. Scott Moreau, "Missiology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Baker Academic ; Paternoster Press, c2001), 781.

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