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THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS

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by

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Introduction

A theology of missions is a critical need for any ministry leader, and ultimately, every believer. Every believer is called to live out the Great Commission, a reality too often missed. While missions is often thought of something done by a few in a foreign land, every believer is actually called to be a missionary – some in foreign lands, some in their neighborhoods, communities, schools and workplaces.

Missions in Scripture

The message of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is that of hope and salvation. The gospel message weaves in and out of both the Old and New Testaments, creating one unified narrative through many authors over the centuries that details God's heart for His lost children, the call to missions. Decades ago, New Tribes Mission learned this lesson first hand. Initially in their mission to reach primitive people groups that had not been contacted before, their goal was simple. To immerse themselves in the tribe, learn the language and culture, and then share the message of Christ. However, they were caught off guard by either the lack of response to the New Testament teachings, or the very lukewarm, loose commitment that did occasionally happen.

They went back to the drawing board and developed a one year curriculum, called Firm Foundations, that takes the students from creation to Christ.¹ Over the course of the year, the narrative is built up from Genesis to the New Testament, laying out the foundations for why a

¹ <https://answersingenesis.org/gospel/evangelism/firm-foundations-lasting-faith/>

Savior is needed. The change in response was dramatic; listeners finally understood why Christ was necessary! Over the decades this material has been used in people group after people group, including the Manjui tribe of Paraguay that the author of this paper lived with as a teen.

It is no wonder then that the message of missions saturates both the Old and New Testaments. Genesis 3:15 plants the seeds of this theme with the promise of offspring that will wound the serpent, a prophecy pointing to Christ's arrival and provision of salvation. This was a direct result of the separation between man and God that was caused by Adam and Eve's sin, sin that could only be healed through Christ's death and resurrection.

Another clear moment of mission in the Old Testament is found in Genesis 12:1-3, when Abraham is set apart and given his calling. While he was specifically called to be the beginnings of a great nation, it was a setting apart that symbolized Christ one day setting apart His church. Through Abraham's actions, God promised in verse three that "all peoples on earth will be blessed." All peoples! Abraham was being commissioned for mission, a mission to reach and bless the world with Christ. Hebrews 11 affirms that it was Abraham's faith that saved and guided him, not his actions. The same faith that is tied so vitally to the mission of reaching a lost world.

The gospels build on what the Old Testament began, revealing the God's plan for salvation, and ultimately building up to the Great Commission – the command to spread the word to all the world about Christ and the salvation found in Him, the fulfillment of the promise made to Adam and Eve thousands of years before. From there, the rest of the New Testament gives the believer practical advice on how to live out that calling to worship God and reach the lost.

Christ consistently pointed His followers to the need and our role in being a part of the plan to meet that need. In Matthew 9:38, He told His disciples that “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.” Borthwick points out that there is an undercurrent in scripture that mission is an ongoing task, pointing out that “the command we translate as ‘go’ in Matthew 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15 is actually a participle: ‘as you are going.’”²

Mark 6 and Luke 10 both record instances where Jesus sent out the disciples in pairs of two to preach repentance wherever they could be heard. Before they fully understood the reality of who Christ was, before His death and resurrection, Jesus was already sending them out into the world to pave the way for the promise made to Abraham to be fulfilled at long last. Throughout the gospels, the disciples time and again had the misperception that Jesus was a political messiah for the Jews, while Christ demonstrated over and over His love for all people, regardless of nationality, gender or age, and His desire to see people connected to God.

Nature of God and Missions

The nature of God is far greater than this paper can adequately describe. Man has created words in an attempt to describe His nature; holy, omnipotent, omnipresent, sovereign, immutable, love – the list goes far longer. One of the critical aspects of God’s nature is His worthiness of worship. Passages like Isaiah 43:7, Romans 11:36 and Revelation 4:11 all speak of how mankind was created to bring glory to God, to worship Him. At His core, God’s nature

² Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012), 112.

demands worship. Meanwhile, mankind's core purpose is to worship God. Piper said it well when he wrote "Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man."³ Driving that point home, he also observed that "The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God."⁴

Humans were designed to have a relationship with God, given the incredible purpose of bringing glory to Him. This is why Christ's primary concern was seeing people made right and connected with God. The secondary purpose, why Christ's closing words before ascending to heaven were the Great Commission, having become right with God, is to in turn help others to be made right and connect with God so that in time all creation will be restored to its purpose of bringing glory to God.

Missions and Theology

"There is no more important question in encountering mission theology than this: How is a solid, biblically based foundation for mission theology constructed?"⁵ A theology of missions does not stand in isolation; it is constructed in light of a healthy structure of theology. Theologies of God, humanity, creation, and so on, need to be developed and linked together. Just as God cannot be contained in a few descriptive words, theology needs to be linked to be understood.

³ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), Kindle location 547.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey (Encountering Mission)*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), Kindle location 1809.

Theology of Trinity

The Trinity, while not directly referenced in scripture, is a vital theology, both on its own as well as with regards to missions. “The doctrine of the Trinity is crucial for Christianity. It is concerned with who God is, what He is like, how He works, and how He is to be approached. Moreover, the question of the deity of Jesus Christ, which has historically been a point of great tension, is very much wrapped up with our understanding of the Trinity.”⁶

In understanding the Trinity, believers know both who to worship (God the Father, Son and the Spirit), how God functions, and how He is to be approached. Of particular note in regards to missions is the deity of Christ. Philippians 2:5-11 and Hebrews 1 are two critical passages that affirm the deity of Christ. He was not simply a man. Consequently, His death and resurrection have power for all mankind. His command to mission in the form of the Great Commission, has authority and is relevant to all believers. His approach to mission is an example to both follow and learn from.

Theology of Inerrancy

The authority of scripture to speak into people’s lives is in part based on the theology of inerrancy. This directly impacts the theology of mission as that is shaped by the words of scripture. Why is inerrancy important? The dependability and reliability of scripture is critical both to the integrity of faith, but also to the development of faith practices and theology. The truth of scripture impacts each of the following:

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3 ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 292.

- Truth of scripture frees from Satan; John 8:32, 2 Timothy 2:24-26.
- Truth of scripture mediates grace and peace; 2 Peter 1:2.
- Truth of scripture sanctifies; John 17:17, 2 Peter 1:3-12, 2 Timothy 3:16-17.
- Truth of scripture serves love; Philippians 1:9.
- Truth of scripture protects from error; Ephesians 4:11-15, 2 Peter 3:17-18.
- Truth of scripture saves; 1 Timothy 4:16, Acts 20:26-27, 2 Thessalonians 2:10.
- Truth of scripture is the ideal of heaven; 1 Corinthians 13:12.
- Truth of scripture is approved by God; 2 Timothy 2:15.

If the believers call to mission and support of mission, both locally and globally, is based on scripture, theology of inerrancy is a key part of that call.

Two Themes of Mission Theology

There are a number of themes that are tied to a healthy theology of mission; the Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, contextualization, liberation, justice, mission Dei, and others.⁷ Particularly relevant to this paper are the themes of worship and the Great Commission. These two themes drive both the purpose and the scope of missions.

Worship

Piper wrote, “Missions is not first and ultimate; God is. This truth is the lifeblood of missionary inspiration and endurance.”⁸ Worship defines the theme behind why missions exists. When confronted with even glimpses of God’s glory, the only natural response is worship. Over and over throughout scripture, both the lost and saved, the demons and angels, always respond

⁷ Moreau, Corwin, McGee, *Introducing World Missions*, Kindle location 1887.

⁸ Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!*, Kindle location 594.

the same; they drop to the ground in worship and awe. So many behaviors and disciplines have to be learned, compelled, or practiced. In describing His people, God said in Isaiah 43:7, "I created for my glory ... I formed and made." The drive to worship God should motivate all that we do; "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Our natural response to God is to worship Him, and that ultimately, when we are faced with His glory in eternity, there will be no other response possible. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, worship, or giving glory to God, is tied to all that we do - even activities as mundane as eating and drinking. How we work in our jobs, how we interact with others, how we serve in our neighborhoods and in our churches, all should bring glory to God. Even Piper's comment describing the motive behind missions bears relevance; the Great Commission, the calling to reach a lost world is ultimately based on the reality that not all creation worships God.

The Great Commission

The Great Commission, Jesus final words to His followers before ascending into heaven, define the task itself and the method; "Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Luke records these final words slightly different in Acts 1:8, conveying the same theme but with some additional insight to the method; "[Jesus said] you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." From these two passages,

we get the Great Commission, the command to reach the world. This is done through making disciples; in other words, creating students of Christ who in turn create students of Christ. The scope? It begins locally, spreads nationally, and ultimately reaches the world.

Practical Mission Theology

Theology of mission is primarily lived out in three contexts; the missionary serving away from home, church leadership in their support and example of mission, and the lay believer not in full time ministry.

Missionaries

For many, the traditional missionary defines what missions is. The individual or couple who moves to a different location with the intent of being a witness for Christ to those there. Often times this is accomplished through learning language and culture, building relationships and understanding of the region they are in, and finally as opportunity arises, presenting the message of Christ, planting a church, and eventually moving on once the newly planted body of believers is self-sustaining.

The danger of not having a theology of mission while serving as a missionary is in losing sight of the purpose of missions. A healthy theology guides and directs the missionary, giving them both a plan for action as well as the purpose behind it. It becomes the source of encouragement and endurance as they struggle through the challenges of immersing themselves in a culture not their own, the time and effort it takes to learn languages and preach Christ, and so on.

Church Leadership

One of the roles for leadership in the church is that of equipper. Ephesians 4:12 charges pastors and leaders to equip the congregation for acts of service. This is important when it comes to missions; leadership must have both a theology and plan for missions, as they are in the unique role of facilitating every level of the Great Commissions – locally, nationally and globally.

Leadership should provide opportunities for growth, education, understanding and for living out the call to mission in the local environment and community. While not all are called to full time ministry elsewhere, every church should be raising up and sending some. In addition, they should be challenging the congregation in their giving to support missions at every level of the Great Commission financially. Paul frequently touches on this point; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8-9, Philippians 4:10-20, and 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

Lay Believers

Finally, lay believers active in the local church live out a healthy theology of mission when they understand that each individual is called to be a missionary in the Great Commission – not just the ones who go to other countries and immerse themselves in other cultures. Believers are “aliens and strangers” (1 Peter 2:11) called to reach their Jerusalem for Christ. So often, the church prays for God to move in their communities but fail to recognize that He has already placed His missionaries in every community, school, and workplace. Believers truly worship and serve God when they recognize their vital role in both supporting missionaries abroad through prayer and finances, and serving as missionaries to their community.

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