TRANSFORMING MISSION THEOLOGY



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CHAPTER 1
WHO DOES MISSION THEOLOGY?

THESIS

In this chapter I will suggest five different agents who do mission theology: the Holy Spirit, the Church of Jesus Christ, the local congregation, the sent ones who participate in God's mission, and the recipients of the church's mission praxis.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we are asking the question, who does mission theology (MT)? In the previous chapter, I characterized MT as an activity to be done, not a static set of propositions with which folks may or may not agree, nor a set of verbal affirmations that can promptly be forgotten.[1] MT is an activity of reflection and action—of praxis.[2] It is, therefore something the whole church does, not the domain of a single professional "missiologist." God's mission is too extensive, too complex, and too profound to be encompassed by the thought of one person. Rather, MT is an activity of the Church of Jesus Christ seeking to understand more deeply why, how, when, where, and wherefore the followers of Jesus may participate in

1. In mission theology today we need to keep in mind the words of James in James 1:23–25: "Any one who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."

2. The term "praxis," though not new at the time, was popularized—and the concept expanded—by Latin American theologians of the 1970s, especially by those who followed Paulo Freire's perspectives on education and by a number of Latin American proponents of Liberation Theology of the day. Generally, it refers to a spiral-like process of action-reflection-new action-new reflection in which action transforms reflection and subsequent reflection leads to new, transformed action. How this process may work itself out in mission theology will be dealt with later in this book.

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God's mission, in God's world. Professional "missiologists" are invited and needed to stimulate, examine, summarize, draw out the assumptions, and reflect on the implications of the Church's MT—both that which has been articulated and that which has not yet been expressed. A description of those who do MT would include at least the following five agents.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Since Jesus' ascension, the first and primary agent of mission theology has been—and is—the Holy Spirit. Prior to his passion and resurrection, Jesus had explained this matter to his disciples. In his farewell discourse, Jesus told his followers that, "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26–27; see also John 14:16–17, 26; 16:7–16).

These words of Jesus have often been understood as referring to orthodoxy, to the Holy Spirit's illumination that would enable the disciples to understand the teachings of Jesus concerning God's revelation in Jesus the Christ, including a new understanding of their Scriptures, the Old Testament. That is one element of what Jesus was teaching his disciples, but there is another aspect of Jesus' teaching that we sometimes miss. Although a missiological reading of this passage is beyond the scope of this book, it is important to note that throughout Jesus' discourse in John 14–17, the concept of *sending* is a dominant theme. The chapter has to do with Jesus' mission and therefore the mission of the disciples once Jesus has "gone to the Father." The key to the passage is the role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will teach the disciples about Jesus' mission and empower them to "bear witness" (John 15:27), a clear reference to their mission, so I believe it was no surprise to the disciples to hear the resurrected Jesus tell them, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

In Luke 24:49, Jesus tells the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke repeats this in Acts 1:4, where Jesus tells the disciples that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit and they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, and Judaea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Throughout the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit's actions and revelation provide the content for the disciples of Jesus to construct a mission theology. This is clearly

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seen in the way Luke tells the story about the first Jerusalem Council where the radical decision was taken by those gathered there that the gospel was for all peoples and the Gentiles did not need to become Jews in order to follow Jesus. The mission theology foundation for such an earthshaking decision? Four times (an intentional emphasis) Luke mentions the coming of the Holy Spirit to the household of Cornelius in Acts 10 as the basis—the mission theology, as it were—for the decision of the Jerusalem Council. The episode of Acts 10 is retold by Peter in Acts 11:5–17, again in Acts 15:7–11, and referenced again by James in Acts 15:13–17.

Since then, throughout the history of revivals and awakenings of the Church, one can perceive the work of the Holy Spirit not only in mobilizing and energizing the Church in mission, but also guiding, teaching, illuminating, and transforming the Church's understanding of its mission—its mission theology. The traditional Pentecostal movement, born at the beginning of the twentieth century, had it right. The coming of the Holy Spirit is inseparably intertwined with the mission of the Triune God, and the mission of the Triune God is mobilized, expounded, and shaped by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

Harold Dollar said it this way.

> The Holy Spirit is the missionary Spirit, sent from the Father by the exalted Jesus, empowering the church in fulfilling God's intention that the gospel become a universal message, with Jews and Gentiles embracing the Good News. The Spirit leads the mission at every point, empowering the witnesses and directing them in preaching the gospel to those who have never heard, enabling them with signs and wonders. (Harold Dollar 2000, 451)

Another way of saying this would be as follows: the Church is the Body of Christ, the physical presence of the risen Jesus on earth (e.g., Rom 12; 1 Cor 12, Eph 4). That being the case, the mission of the Church today is to participate in Jesus' mission, the Head of the Church. The mission does not belong to the Church. The Church participates in Jesus' mission. Therefore, Jesus' mission defines the motivation, message, means, agents, and goals of the Church's mission. How does this come about? By the presence, action, illumination, and transformation of the Holy Spirit, the one sent by the Father and the Son. One way to illustrate these relationships might be to state that Jesus Christ is the head of the Body; the Church as the Body comprises the muscles, arms, legs, face, etc. that

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do the mission; and the Holy Spirit is the nervous system that communicates the commands of the Head to the muscles of the Body and mobilizes the Body to action. Thus, one may say that the Holy Spirit is the first and primary agent in the process of transforming mission theology. How this happens will be a matter of interest throughout the rest of this book.[3]

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

Earlier we mentioned that God's mission works primarily (though not exclusively) through the Church to the world. Beginning with God's call to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3)[4] through whom all the nations would be blessed, God's mission has primarily worked through God's people.[5] Although Israel often missed the point and too often wanted to keep God's grace for itself rather than be an instrument of God's grace to the nations, yet God's clear intention, repeated time and again from Genesis to Revelation, was that Israel was to be God's instrument to bless all peoples.[6]

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3. The relationship of pneumatology to mission theology is an important issue. One of the early Protestant mission thinkers to reflect on this relationship was Roland Allen (1868–1947), Anglican missionary to China at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. A classic work in this regard that drew from Roland Allen's thought is Harry Boer 1961. Rob Gallagher did his PhD dissertation in missiology at the School of World Mission of Fuller Seminary on this topic. His research, coupled with a number of recent publications in mission theology by Pentecostal and Charismatic scholars, has helped churches and missions around the world grasp more deeply the essential role of the Holy Spirit in clarifying, directing, and empowering Christ's mission. See, for example, the works of Gary McGee. The works of J. Edwin Orr in the history of revivals and awakenings are important in this regard because they show the intimate relationship between revivals and mission. A. T. Pierson (1837–1911) was an important American pastor and mission thinker who closely associated spirituality and mission theology in his preaching and extensive writing.

4. Concerning the "Abrahamic Blessing" theme that courses its way throughout the Bible as a primary motivation and shaper of biblical mission theology. See Sarita Gallagher 2014.

5. Helpful resources to inform a missiological reading of God's mission as it flows throughout the Bible include, Arthur Glasser et al. 2003; Christopher Wright 2010; Michael Goheen 2011.

6. It is beyond the scope of this book to develop this major biblical theme that is foundational for mission theology. For many years I taught a course that I inherited from Arthur Glasser concerning the "Biblical Foundations of Mission." In that course we examined this theme and its many profound implications for mission theology. Arthur Glasser et al. 2003 grew out of and became the basic text for that course.

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Following Augustine of Hippo, we may say that the Church of Jesus Christ is made up of everyone who everywhere, always, has believed in, and been followers of, Jesus Christ. This great company of believers, spread over the entire globe in many different cultures and contexts, has carefully and thoughtfully expanded, deepened, developed, and refined its understanding of God's mission and mission theology over the past twenty centuries. As the Body of Christ, the Church has not only done mission activities, for better and sometimes for worse, but has also constantly reflected on that mission and sought to articulate its understanding of such over time. Today, this includes more than 1.5 billion believers who think, speak, and act with reference to mission theology in a multitude of languages, drawing from a myriad of cultures around the world. Though they read the same Bible and are illuminated and guided by the same Holy Spirit, their understanding of mission theology differs markedly, as that is influenced by their particular historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts, as well as their experiences over time, as they participate in God's mission. Andrew Walls has been very instructive in helping us more clearly understand these developments in mission theology around the world, over time, something he called "the Ephesian Moment."[7] See, for example, Andrew Walls 1996, 2002.

In the twenty-first century, we seem to be tempted—on all continents—to assume that our mission theology is new and possibly superior to that which was articulated in earlier centuries. Maybe we need to reexamine that presumption and ascribe greater wisdom and importance—and listen more intently—to what we can learn from those who have gone before us. The Church of Jesus Christ has been doing mission theology for a very long time and has much to teach us. There is much for us to critique and many unbiblical, heretical, and destructive thoughts and actions that did not honor Jesus the Christ, but there were many other expressions and much praxis that did honor our Lord and can serve to guide us into the future.

THE LOCAL CONGREGATION OF FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

The Church (capital "C") that includes everyone, everywhere and always, who have followed Jesus is a wonderful idea, but no person experiences the capital-C

7. Andrew J. Walls, "The Ephesian Moment: At a Crossroads in Christian History," in A. J. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (NY: Orbis) 2002, 72–81. 2002, 72–81.

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