

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS AND THE NATURE OF GOD

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ICTS 505 INTRODUCTION TO INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Old Testament and New Testament Texts Related to Mission.....	3
The Nature of God Relates to Mission	5
Mission Theology Relates to Other Aspects of Theology	6
Key Themes and Motifs of Mission Theology	6
Mission Theology Related to the Missionary, Church Leaders, and Lay People.....	8

Old Testament and New Testament Texts Related to Mission

When evaluating the structures of mission theology, and how it relates to scripture, our modern culture often does not go any further than Matthew 28:19-20, when in fact missions can be seen throughout Old Testament and New Testament scriptures. There is perhaps more emphasis on finding applicable text for missions in the New Testament since the Protestant Church is a “New Testament” church, but without knowing and understanding the context for missions as outlined in the Old Testament it would be difficult to come to proper conclusions about missions in the New Testament. In fact, the Old Testament laid “the foundation for what is found more explicitly about mission in the New Testament.”¹

There are a large number of verses in the Old Testament that speak to missions and evangelization, but the greatest collection is really the Bible as a whole, which has created a “mandate for world evangelization.”² This started in Genesis “some 4,000 years ago” when God called Abraham to father a nation (Genesis 12:1-4), and became the foundation for mission work in both the Old and New Testament.³ This continues as scripture moves into the story of the exile. In Exodus 12:38 it is revealed that not only are God’s chosen people of Israel called to follow God, but that a “mixed multitude also went up with them” (ESV). As scripture moves into the monarchal period we see that

¹ Moreau, A. S., Corwin, G. R., & McGee, G. B. (2004). *Introduction to World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (1st Edition ed.). Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Academic, 27.

² Stott, John R. W., “The Bible in World Evangelization”, p. 23-36, In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 4th edition, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009, 21.

³ Ibid.

“foreigners were expected (and allowed) to come to the temple to worship (1 Kings 8:41-43)” and that God’s house was to be a house for all nations (Isaiah 56:6-7).⁴ But one of the greatest single collections of books in the Old Testament to speak about God being a God of all nations is the Psalter. David, as the author of many of the Psalms, especially points this out in writings such as Psalm 66, 67, and 93, and gives us an outstanding example of a call to missions prior to the messiah’s first coming. Missions are an outpouring of worship, an extension of how greatly our God is to be praised, and David was one of the greatest praise writers in scripture. In our culture today, where “He is to be feared above all gods,” is just the opposite of what is done (Psalm 96). David gives even more emphasis to the importance of praise, and therefore, mission.

Tell of His glory among the nations, his wonderful deeds among all the peoples. For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. (Psalm 96:3-4)

In John Piper’s sermon about Psalm 67, “Let the Nations Be Glad”, he concludes the main point of Psalm 67 is that “God blesses us so that the nations will be blessed”, and then again in Psalm 93:3,10 the Psalmist extols to “Tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.” Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."⁵

As can be expected the New Testament is as rich, or richer, in mission theology as the Old Testament, and references can be found throughout the four Gospels all the way into the book of Revelation. Just in the book of John alone there are over sixty references for the term “send,” and while the focus is on God as the center of the mission, God sent

⁴ Moreau, 34.

⁵ John Piper, "Let the Nations be Glad," *Desiring God*, November 7, 1993, http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1993/853_Let_the_Nations_Be_Glad/ (accessed November 9, 2010).

Jesus (17:8), and now Jesus is sending his disciples.⁶ Once we move out of the Gospels, the entire book of Acts begins the greatest example of missional work in scripture, through Paul's three missionary journey's, not only giving us a great example to follow but living out a life dedicated to serving the mission of God. The New Testament then immediately moves into Paul's letter to the Roman's where he writes, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Romans 10:14). From there it is a relentless drive through the Epistles where God is continually calling his people to take the Gospel message to all the nations.

The Nature of God Relates to Mission

As we can see throughout the Old and New Testament scriptures, including the examples above, God's mission is deeply related to His own nature. In fact, the two terms are so deeply related to each other that mission can be defined as being part of the "nature of God." The Latin term *missio Dei* is often translated as the "sending of God" or the "mission of God" and is derived from the very nature of God himself, "encompassing everything God does in relation to the kingdom *and* everything the church is sent to do on earth."⁷ When we examine scripture in context we see that "God is the initiator of His mission" sent to redeem his people through Christ, and then through the Church.⁸ While mission is not the only "nature of God", the nature of God can't be separated from mission. It is in God's very nature, and is played out from the calling of Abraham, to the

⁶ Moreau, 49.

⁷ McIntosh, John A. 2000. *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A Scott Moreau, s.v. "Missio Dei." Grand Rapids: Baker.

⁸ Sanders, Van. "The Mission of God and the Local Church," in *Pursuing the Mission of God in Church Planting*, ed. John M. Bailey, Alpharetta: North American Mission Board, 2006, 24.

exile and exodus of the Israelites, to the coming the Son of God the Messiah, to the setup of the New Testament Church in the book of Acts, and on into our modern day evangelical churches. Under close examination, we can see that both the nature of God and mission, or the very mission of God, which is to receive the praise and worship of all nations, is so closely woven together that neither could exist without the other.

Mission Theology Relates to Other Aspects of Theology

In modern day cultural terms, mission is not often thought of as a theology, and is rarely related to other aspects of theology. When scripture is closely examined, we see God indeed calls all nations worship him, which then makes it “natural to build a theology of mission at the core of all theological studies.”⁹ How mission theology relates to other aspects of theology is similar to how the nature of God relates to mission. Mission theology is at the center core of all theology, and the foundation to building a good mission theology stems directly from the Old and New Testament scriptures, especially when read as a whole unit. David Bosch, a late twentieth century missiologists, explained that the “theology of mission concerns itself with the relationship between God and the world in the light of the gospel”, and all other theology constructs either go through mission theology or is built upon the foundation of mission theology.¹⁰

Key Themes and Motifs of Mission Theology

As with every theology, mission theology has several constructs, or themes, that define it’s meaning. Mission theology is generally defined by the themes that include, but are not limited to, the “kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, the glory or God (or worship of

⁹ Moreau, 75.

¹⁰ Bosch, David J. 1980. *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*. Atlanta: John Knox.

God), and the great commission”, and can also include themes like *missio Dei* as discussed above.¹¹ Although these themes are a basis for mission theology they are by no means a complete view, and one’s view often depends upon the lens they look through when it comes to “biblical reflection.”¹²

There have always been wide ranging opinions on theological issues so when discussing mission theology within more liberal theological circles the central theme or motif for mission theology might be “justice or liberation”, where an evangelical view might be more focused on “personal evangelism and church planting”, and a reformed theological view more closely aligned with Luther, Calvin or Edwards, such as with Piper, will see “worship” as a key theme for mission theology.¹³ Piper draws his conclusions based on biblical revelation, where all other aspects of theology are drawn and developed, but emphasizes the fact that God’s mission is dependent on his people, and his people at times have been shallow in biblical doctrine where tradition often dictates that “doctrine” is for scholars and preachers, not missionaries themselves.¹⁴ Biblical revelation then is the basis and most important foundational theme for mission theology. What stems from biblical revelation, the motifs of worship, which Piper and others would emphasize, are “(1) the kingdom of God, (2) Jesus, (3) the Holy Spirit, (4) the church, (5) *shalom*, and (6) the return of Jesus.”¹⁵

¹¹ Moreau, 77.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ John Piper, *A Theology for Missions*, September 19, 1987, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/a-theology-for-missions> (accessed November 11, 2011).

¹⁵ Moreau, 80.

Mission Theology Related to the Missionary, Church Leaders, and Lay People

Bringing all the pieces of mission theology together culminates in the missionary, and the people of the church body. Whether those are the leaders God has put in place in the church, or lay people in the congregation. There is no distinction in mission theology between a senior pastor and a lay person in the church, and therefore no distinction in an understanding knowledge of mission theology. All who are called children of God are “called” to understand mission theology since all are called to worship God. Piper explains that the “notion prevails that deep understanding of biblical doctrine is for advanced saints or just for scholars, but not for simple missionaries. But this is not true.”¹⁶ It states in Ephesians 4:13-14 that even ordinary people are to feast upon the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and in doing so, gain understanding of mission theology.

In addition to knowledge in biblical revelation, William Carey in the introduction of his famous book on mission work, *An Enquiry*, states a similar notion that we should all become acquainted with the religious state of the world, gaining in knowledge of those we intend on serving.¹⁷ Carey goes on to examine the duty of Christians to consider doing more than is currently being done. It was Christ who “a little before his departure, commissioned his apostles to Go, and teach all nations, to Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”¹⁸ Christ was not speaking to the preachers or scholars of his day; he was speaking to ordinary people whom God chose to fulfill the *missio Dei*, and each gained a better understanding of mission theology.

¹⁶ Piper, 1987.

¹⁷ William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, To Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, Kindle ed. (London, England: Leicester, 1792), location 8 of 1112.

¹⁸ Carey, location 32 of 1112.

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