

Constructing a Theology of Mission

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A theology of mission must be biblical, Trinitarian, and ecclesiological.¹ The starting point of any kind of mission theology must be biblical. This means there can be a Trinitarian theology of mission, an ecumenical theology of mission, and Asian theology of mission. All these and other kinds of mission theology must be grounded in biblical models. They must be what David Bosch calls the “Biblical Models of Mission”² or what Chris Wright calls the “Biblical Foundations for Mission.”³

The need for a biblical theology of mission

A theology of mission must be grounded in the Bible. One of the great developments in recent years is the turn to interpretations of the Bible as a grand story of God’s mission. Within the myopia of reading the Bible, we have long thought the Bible provides only “a basis for mission.”⁴ Wright “boldly maintains that mission is bigger than that—the entire Bible is generated by and is all about God’s mission.”⁵ God is a missionary God and the Bible is “the product of God’s mission”⁶ or what David Bosch calls “a missionary document.”⁷ If Wright and Bosch are right, our primary task is to read the Bible missionally. Reading the Bible missionally helps us see two important things: “biblical indicatives and imperatives in God’s mission.”⁸ If biblical indicatives affirm *what* a missionary God has done within the biblical narrative context, biblical imperatives require *how* we should participate in God’s mission movement.⁹

Beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation, the

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whole Bible is about the mission of what God has done (creation, redemption/new creation), is doing, and will do by calling people to participate in God’s mission.¹⁰ In God’s missional creation of heaven, earth, and humankind, there is no human participation; however, in God’s redemption of the corrupted world, God has called people to participate in this mission.

A human participatory form of mission occurs only within the context of God’s covenantal relationship with humanity—beginning with Abraham and continuing through David to Jesus of Nazareth—who fulfills Israel’s call to be the light to all nations (Isa 49:6).¹¹ Missiologists agree that mission itself is not a biblical term, rather the biblical concept is “sending” (*apostellein* in Greek).¹² God’s sending of Abraham and the prophets in the Old Testament¹³ and God’s sending of Jesus (and Jesus’ sending of the apostles) are the foundations for a biblical theology of mission. Mission is grounded in the idea of sending or commissioning. By centering mission on sending or commissioning, we do not deemphasize God’s calling. Calling and commissioning always go together.

God’s mission happens in how God calls and sends Abraham. As Wright observes: “God’s covenantal calling and commissioning of Abraham is the most significant of all the biblical covenants because it is the origin of God’s election of Israel as the means [God] would use to bless the nations.”¹⁴ The aim of God’s calling of Abraham is to bless him and God’s sending of him is to bless others (Gen 12:1–2). Two themes are important here. First, from a covenantal perspective, God’s calling and election of people have similar meanings. Second, God’s calling and election of Abraham and Israel is for the sake of others. God’s calling and sending of Abraham and Israel is cosmic in intent.¹⁵

What God initiated as mission through Abraham and Israel

1. There was no theology of mission before 1950. A theology of mission was born as a phrase for *missio dei* coming out of the International Missionary Conference meeting at Willingen, Germany, in 1952.

2. David J. Bosch, “Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission,” in James M. Philips and Robert T. Coote, eds, *Toward the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 175–192.

3. Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 34.

4. Wright, *The Mission of God*, inside cover and 29.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 48.

7. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 15. As a New Testament trained missiologist, Bosch regarded the New Testament as a “missionary document,” but he did not exclude the Old Testament, 16–20.

8. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 58.

9. Cf. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 59.

10. *Ibid.*, 327–356.

11. *Ibid.*, 121.

12. Bosch, “Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission.” Bosch argues that “mission means sending and the idea of mission as *sending* is mentioned 206 times in the New Testament,” 177.

13. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 327–352.

14. *Ibid.*, 327.

15. *Ibid.*, 194–221.

is fulfilled through Jesus. In connecting God's mission in the Old and New Testaments, Terrence Fretheim states: "Without the Old Testament, there would be no adequate Christology."¹⁶ One of the primary aims of a biblical theology of mission is the inseparability of the two Testaments and holding in continuity the God of Israel and Christ. Yet the "God of Israel does not finally come to the conclusion that God was incarnate in a human life."¹⁷ It is through the incarnation and death of Jesus that we see the universal form of a Trinitarian mission and a more expansive concept of salvation as God's mission.

The need for a Trinitarian theology of mission

It is almost impossible to talk about mission without the Trinity. The two are inseparably linked. Mission is what the Trinity is all about (both the being and act of the Trinity). According to Bosch, a Trinitarian theology of mission is grounded in the claim that the Father sent the Son (John 3:16; 20:21a) and the Father and the Son sent the Spirit (John 24:16).¹⁸ While I agree about this claim, it would be better to talk about a Trinitarian theology of mission as a combination of God's mission of creation (creation out of nothing) and of redemption or new creation (creation out of the old). In exploring a Trinitarian missiology, four themes are significant.

First, the Triune God is involved in one mission of creating heavens and earth. In describing the Triune God as the creator of heavens and earth, we see God's character as relational and God's vocation as relationship to the world. God is not in heaven alone but is in relationship to the world. This "relational God is not first and foremost the God of Israel but of the world."¹⁹ This must not be contradictory to God's calling of Israel as covenantal participants in God's mission of redeeming the world. The point is to see how the Triune God's "mission is evident from creation to new creation."²⁰ By virtue of connecting between creation and new creation, John and Paul allow us to see not only a redemptive but also a creational Christology (John 1:18; Col 1:15–17).

The second theme is the inseparability of the immanent and economic Trinity. The immanent Trinity (being) reflects an inner communion among the persons of the Triune God, while the economic Trinity reflects the external expression of the Father's sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit by the Father and the Son (action). The distinction between the being and act of God results that the sending of the Son and the Spirit is an economic action without any significance for an internal communion among the

persons in the Triune God.²¹ In order to combine the immanent and economic Trinity for a model of mission, one must make reference to Karl Barth's concept of Trinity.

To preserve the inner unity of the being and act of God, Barth developed the concept of "Tri-unity."²² Barth's notion of Tri-unity is found in God's revelation of Godself as Lord (Father, Son, and Spirit) within the relational functions of creating and redemptive mission.²³ Barth joined the immanent and economic Trinity: "God is who He is in the act of His revelation"²⁴ through Jesus. For Barth, love is not only the being of God (1 John 4:8), but the motivating act of God's sending of Jesus (John 3:16).²⁵

Third, Jesus is the witness of God's love in terms of incarnation and crucifixion. John states that Jesus reveals the unseen Father's heart of love to the world (1:18). The only way to know God is based on God's self-revealing through Jesus by the power of the Spirit. Barth spoke of the whole process of God's revelation in one mission: "The Father is the revealer; the Son is the act of revelation, and the Spirit is the revealed."²⁶ Barth's description of the Trinity is this: God the revealer is the subject and source of mission, God the Son is predicate and actor of mission, and God the Spirit is the empowerer.²⁷ The self-revealing God is identical with God's act of revelation (the incarnate Jesus) and also with its effect (the empowering Spirit).²⁸

Fourth, the Triune God is involved in one mission of redeeming the world. God sent Jesus not to visit the world as a tourist but to redeem it as a Savior. "God so loved the world that he gave [sent] his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). John's use of love and giving/sending is missional in intent and cosmic in scope.²⁹ Paul expressed the goal of Jesus' coming by saying God sent his only Son to redeem us "so that we might receive adoption as children" (Gal 4:4). Christ's redeeming the world and restoring us into a union with God lies at the heart of God's mission. Christ's mission is to be carried out by the apostolic church (John 20:21).

The need for an ecclesial theology of mission

Mission and the church are married by covenantal love. They are inseparably linked. Bosch rightly said: "the church is essentially

16. Terrence E. Fretheim, "Christology in the Old Testament," in Mark A. Powell and David R. Bauer, eds, *Who Do You Say that I Am? Essays on Christology: In Honor of Jack Dean Kingsbury* (Louisville: John Knox, 1999), 201–215.

17. *Ibid.*, 212.

18. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400.

19. Fretheim, "Christology and the Old Testament," 208.

20. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 47. See also Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Mission: Christian Mission in Postmodern World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

21. Cf. Stephen R. Holmes, "Trinitarian Missiology: Towards A Theology of God as Missionary," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 8:72–90.

22. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 1.1: 368–374.

23. *Ibid.*, viii.

24. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 2.1: 275. Barth stressed the combination of the "being and act of the Triune God" in #28, 2.1: 257–321.

25. *Ibid.*, 276–280.

26. *Ibid.*, 291.

27. See Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2010), 105–458.

28. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2.1: 296.

29. See Craig S. Keener, "Sent Like Jesus: Johannine Missiology (John 20:21–22)," in *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 21 (2009): 21–45.

missionary by its very nature and mission is essentially ecclesial by its very nature.”³⁰ However, Jesus did not explicitly define the concept of the church. By virtue of the connection between the mission of God and the mission of the church, Jesus’ use of the disciples can best be understood as the conceptual foundation for the [apostolic] church. My aim is twofold: 1) to explore how Jesus’ calling and commissioning of the disciples shapes the missional identity and act of the church as a calling and commissioning apostolic community, and 2) to examine the goal of Jesus’ calling and commissioning of disciples in God’s mission.

Matt 4:18–21 relates the story of Jesus’ calling of the first disciples to be his followers. The missional idea of Jesus’ calling of the disciples echoes God’s calling and election of Israel to be God’s people.³¹ “Jesus’ calling of twelve disciples symbolizes the gathering of twelve tribes of Israel for mission.”³² Since the Triune God is relational by nature, the purpose of God’s calling of Israel and the disciples is for God to have a communion with them as they have communion with one another. Communion as reconciliation with God is salvation. God’s act of salvation as reconciliation shapes an ecclesial theology of mission.

There is an inseparable relationship between ecclesiology and soteriology within God’s mission. Barth’s concept of ecclesiology and soteriology is foundational as he defined the church in terms of its “apostolic gathering (justification), its upbuilding (sanctification), and its sending (vocation).”³³ God by the Spirit calls people in Christ to become Christians or apostles of Christ. As we gather as an apostolic community of faith, we reflect the Trinitarian inner communion of love and embody God’s reconciling Gospel by way of worship and preaching (Matt 5:23–24). Orthodox Christians see worship as mission accordingly: “Mission is the church breathing: we inhale in worship, and exhale in witness.”³⁴ Protestants do not normally consider worship as an act of mission. Centering our liturgical lives on God, we also should see worship as an act of mission.

Second, the church is not only called from the world as a “gathered community,” but also is sent out to the world as “missionary.” This echoes Jesus’ words: “as my Father has sent me, so I sent you” (John 20:21). The missional vocation of going into the world lies at the heart of Jesus’ Great Commission (Matt 20:28). Jesus’ commission must be of primary concern to the church’s missional vocation of going out. But going to where? And going

for what? If the whole world is the scope of God’s redeeming mission (John 3:16), then there is no limitation to the scope of the church’s mission. One field will be the world of other faiths, those who have not yet heard the reconciling and redemptive gospel of Christ. The purpose of going out is for proclaiming the good news of salvation, redemption, and reconciliation.

As we go into the world of other faiths, breaking boundaries is essential in this missionary work. Jesus has broken divine-human boundary. To save the Gentiles Paul broke Jew-Gentile boundaries (1 Cor 9:20–23). Likewise, we must break the cultural boundary between Christians and non-Christians if we want to win them to Christ by the power of the Spirit (Acts 17).³⁵ Yet the primary mission goal is not simply to bring non-Christians to Christianity, but for Christ to transform them within their cultures. The church needs to strengthen new converts for spiritual growth, equipping them to become church leaders to co-translate the Gospel/Bible using their local languages.

The church is grounded in both “centrifugal and centripetal identity and vocation.”³⁶ Moving inward toward worship as a called community lies at the heart of the church’s centrifugal mission, while moving outward as a sent community lies at the heart of the church’s centripetal mission. In being centrifugal, the church is particular; and in being centripetal, the church is universal. These two principles are not opposed to one another, but rather complementary.

Conclusion

This article has explored three inextricably linked themes for constructing a theology of mission: a biblical theology of mission, Trinitarian theology, and an ecclesial theology of mission. A biblical theology provides a way to address both a Trinitarian theology of mission and an ecclesial theology. The Bible affirms not only the missional nature and act of the Triune God within the narrative context of creation and new creation, but the Triune God calls the church to participate in the economic mission of redemption and salvation.

Mission is first and foremost God’s initiative in creating and redeeming the world and God’s invitation in calling and sending the church to reflect the nature and act of the Trinity in the world.³⁷ The Triune God as a missionary God calls the church out of the world as an apostolic community to worship and faith and sends her into the world as a missionary of love to witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do. A theology of mission reflects what God has done within the biblical narrative, what God is doing now, and what God will do through the church by the power of the Spirit.

30. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 318.

31. The relationship between Jesus’ mission in the NT and God’s mission in the OT is developed by Dean Flemming in what he called “reading Matthew from the back.” See Dean Flemming, *Why Mission?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), 1–6.

32. Ibid.

33. Quoted by Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 100. On the relationship between ecclesiology and soteriology, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 4.1: 481–613.

34. Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, “Mission as Liturgy Before Liturgy and as Contestation,” in Patros Valliliadis, ed., *Orthodox Perspective on Mission* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 175.

35. For a persuasive study of mission as crossing-frontiers, see Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Vulnerability and Empowerment in Crossing Frontier: A Christian Theology of Mission,” in *Asbury Journal* 68 (Fall 2013): 78–94.

36. Quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 549. For the term, “centrifugal and centripetal,” see Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962).

37. Cf. Tennent, *World Missions*, 485–495.