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"What Is Theology of Mission"

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[1] In The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Mission, Gerald Anderson defined theology of mission as, "concerned with the basic presuppositions and underlying principles which determine, from the standpoint of Christian faith, the motives, methods, strategy and goals of the Christian world mission" (Neil, Anderson and Goodwin, edits: 1971:594).

Theology of mission is a multi- and inter-disciplinary enterprise. It is a relatively new discipline, with its first text appearing in 1961, in a collection of essays edited by Gerald Anderson, entitled, The Theology of Christian Mission (Anderson: 1961). In that volume the tri-partite nature of theology of mission was clearly represented.

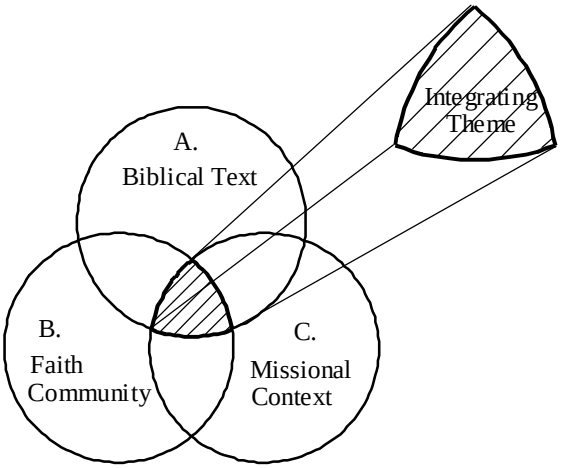

Figure 1. The Tripartite Nature of Theology of Mission

As shown in Figure 1, the theology of mission has to do with three areas, shown graphically by three inter-locking circles. Biblical and theology presuppositions and values (A); are applied to the enterprise of the ministry and mission of the church (B); and are in the context of specific activities carried out in particular times and places (C).[2]

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[1] The following is taken from a larger chapter on "Constructing Theology of Mission for the City," in Charles Van Engen and Jude Tiersma, edits. God So Loves the City. Seeking a Theology for Urban Mission. Monrovia: MARC, 1994.

[2] The three-arena nature of this method is not original with me. A number of others have highlighted something similar, particularly those who deal with contextualization from a missiological perspective. See,

Theology of mission is THEOLOGY (circle A in the diagram), because fundamentally it involves reflection about God. It seeks to understand God's mission, God's intentions and purposes, God's use of human instruments in God's mission, and God's working through God's People in God's world.[3] Thus theology of mission deals with all the traditional theological themes of systematic theology — but it does so in a way that differs from how systematic theologians have worked down through the centuries. The difference arises from the multi-disciplinary missiological orientation of its theologizing.

In addition, because of its commitment to remain faithful to God's intentions, perspectives, and purposes, theology of mission shows a most fundamental concern over the relation of the Bible to mission, attempting to allow Scripture not only to provide the foundational motivations for mission, but also to question, shape, guide, and evaluate the missionary enterprise.[4]

Theology of mission is THEOLOGY OF (circle C in the diagram). In contrast to much systematic theology, here we are dealing with an applied theology. At times it looks like what some would call pastoral or practical theology, due to this applicational nature. This type of theological reflection focuses specifically on a set of particular issues — those having to do with the mission of the Church in its CONTEXT.

Theology of mission draws its incarnational nature from the ministry of Jesus, and always happens in a specific time and place. Thus circle C involves the missiological use of all the social science disciplines that help us understand the context in which God's mission takes place.

We begin by borrowing from sociology, anthropology, economics, urbanology, the study of the relation of Christian churches to other religions, psychological issues, the study of the relation of Church and state, and a host of other cognate disciplines to understand the specific context in which we are doing our theology of mission reflection. Such contextual analysis moves us, secondly, to more particular understanding of the context in terms of a hermeneutic of the reality in which we are ministering. This in turn, thirdly, calls us to hear

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for example, Eugne Nida: 1960; Louis Luzbetak, 1963; José Míguez-Bonino, 1975; Shoki Coe, 1976; Harvie Conn, 1978, 1984, 1993a, 1993b; Arthur Glasser, 1979; Charles Kraft, 1979, 1983; Charles Kraft and Tom Wisely, edits.: 1979; Bruce Fleming, 1980; Stott & Coote: 1980; Harvie Conn: 1984; Paul Hiebert: 1978, 1987, 1993; Robert Schrieter: 1985; C. René Padilla and Mark Lau Branson: 1986; Alan R. Tippett: 1987; Daniel Shaw: 1988; Dean Gilliland, edit: 1989; David Hesselgrave: 1989; Lamin Sanneh: 1989; Charles Van Engen: 1989; William Dyrness: 1990; Stephen Bevans: 1992; and Donald R. Jacobs, 1993.

[3] See, for example, Daniel T. Niles: 1962; Georg F. Vicedom: 1965; John V. Taylor: 1972; Johannes Verkuyl: 1978, 163-204; and John Stott: 1979.

[4] See, e.g., Robert Glover: 1946; G. Ernest Wright: 1952; J. H. Bavinck: 1960: Gerald Anderson: 1961 in loco; Harry Boer: 1961; Johannes Blauw: 1962; Roland Allen: 1962; Richard De Ridder: 1971; George Peters: 1972; Orlando Costas: 1974, 1982, 1989; John Stott: 1976; Lesslie Newbigin: 1978; J. Verkuyl: 1978, chapter IV; David Bosch: 1978, 1991, 1993; Dean Gilliland: 1983; Gailyn Van Rheenen: 1983; William A. Dyrness: 1983; Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller: 1983; Roger Hedlund: 1985; Marc Spindler: 1988; Ken Gnanakan: 1989; Arthur Glasser: 1992; and Charles Van Engen: 1992, 1993. A combined bibliography drawn from these works would offer an excellent resource for examining the relation of Bible and mission.

the cries, see the faces, understand the stories, and respond to the living needs and hopes of the persons who are an integral part of that context.

A part of this contextual analysis today includes the history of the way the church in its mission has interfaced with that context down through history. The attitudes, actions, and events of the Church's mission that occurred in your context prior to your particular reflection will colour in profound and surprising ways the present and the future of your own missional endeavors.

Thus you will find some scholars dealing with the history of theology of mission[5] who, although they are not especially interested in the theological issues as such, are concerned about the effects of that mission theology upon mission activity in that context. They will often examine the various pronouncements made by church and mission gatherings (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Ecumenical, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Charismatic) and ask questions, sometimes polemically, about the results of these for missional action.[6] The documents resulting from these discussions become part of the discipline of theology of mission.

Thirdly, theology of mission is specially oriented toward and for MISSION (circle B in Figure 1). The most basic reflection in this arena is found in the many books, journals, and other publications dealing with the theory of missiology itself.[7] However, neither missiology nor theology of mission can be allowed to restrict itself to reflection only. As Johannes Verkuyl stated,

> Missiology may never become a substitute for action and participation. God calls for participants and volunteers in his mission. In part, missiology's goal is to become a "service station" along the way. If study does not lead to participation, whether at home or abroad, missiology has lost her humble calling. ... Any good missiology is also a *missiologia viatorum* — "pilgrim missiology" (1978:6,18).

Theology of mission, then, must eventually emanate in biblically-informed and contextually-appropriate missional action. If our theology of mission does not emanate in informed action, we are merely a "resounding gong or clanging cymbal" (I Cor. 13:1). The intimate connection of reflection with action is absolutely essential for missiology. At the same time, if our missiological action does not itself transform our reflection, we have held

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[5] See, for example, Rodger Bassham: 1979; David Bosch: 1980; James Scherer: 1987, 1993a, 1993b; Arthur Glasser and Donald McGavran: 1983; Arthur Glasser: 1985; Efiong Utuk: 1986; James Stamoolis: 1987; and Van Engen: 1990.

[6] See, for example, Donald McGavran: 1972; Donald McGavran, edit.: 1972; Arthur P. Johnston: 1974; Harvey Hoekstra: 1979; Roger Hedlund, edit.: 1981; and Donald McGavran: 1984; and David Hesselgrave: 1988. One of the most helpful recent compilations of such documents is James A. Scherer and Stephen Bevans, edits.: 1992.

[7] Examples of some readily-accessible works would include J. H. Bavinck: 1977; Bengt Sundkler: 1965; Johannes Verkuyl: 1978; C. René Padilla: 1985; James Scherer: 1987; F. J. Verstraelen: 1988; David Bosch: 1980, 1991; Phillips and Coote: 1993; and Van Engen, Gilliland and Pierson: 1993. Clearly the most comprehensive work that will be considered foundational for missiology for the next decade is David Bosch: 1991.

great ideas — but they may be irrelevant or useless, sometimes destructive or counter-productive.

So our missional orientation that comes forth as a fruit of our theology of mission must translate into action. And missional action always occurs in a CONTEXT. This brings us back to circle C — and our pilgrimage of mission on-the-way begins again to reflect on a hermeneutic of the context, which in turn calls for a re-reading of Scripture that flows into new missional insights and action.

One of the most helpful ways to interface reflection and action is by way of the process known as "praxis." Although there have been a number of different meanings described to this idea,[8] it appears that Orlando Costas' formulation is one of the most constructive.

"Missiology," Costas says,

> is fundamentally a praxeological phenomenon. It is a critical reflection that takes place in the praxis of mission... (It occurs) in the concrete missionary situation, as part of the church's missionary obedience to and participation in God's mission, and is itself actualized in that situation... Its object is always the world, ... men and women in their multiple life situations... In reference to this witnessing action saturated and led by the sovereign, redemptive action of the Holy Spirit, ... the concept of missionary praxis is used. Missiology arises as part of a witnessing engagement to the gospel in the multiple situations of life (1976: 8).

The concept of "praxis" helps us understand that not only the reflection, but profoundly the ACTION as well are part of a "theology-on-the-way" that seeks to discover how the church may participate in God's mission in God's world. The ACTION is itself theological, and serves to inform the reflection, which in turn interprets, evaluates, critiques, and projects new understanding in transformed action. Thus the inter-weaving of reflection and actions in a constantly-spiraling pilgrimage offer a transformation of all aspects of our missiological engagement with our various contexts.

The reader may see from Figure 1, above, that the three circles are brought together by means of an "Integrating Theme" that constitutes the central idea interfacing all three circles. Because of the complexity of the inter- and multi-disciplinary task that is theology of mission, mission theologians have found it helpful to focus on a specific integrating idea that would serve as the hub through which to approach a re-reading of Scripture. This "Integrating Theme" is selected on the basis of being contextually-appropriate and significant, biblically relevant and fruitful, and missionally active and transformational.

Clearly we are trying to avoid bringing our own agendas to the Scriptures and superimposing them on Scripture. This was the mistake made by liberation theologians, from which they have not recovered. Rather, what is being sought is a way to bring a new

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[8] See, e. g., Robert McAfee Brown: 1978, 50-51; Raul Vidales: 1975, 34-57; Spykman et al: 1988: xiv, 226-231; Robert Schreiter: 1985, 17, 91-93; Orlando Costas: 1976, 8-9; Leonardo and Clodovis Boff: 1987, 8-9; Waldron Scott: 1980: xv; Leonardo Boff: 1979, 3; Deane Ferm: 1986, 15; René Padilla: 1985, 83; Rebecca Chop: 1986, 36-37, 115-117, 120-121; Gustavo Gutierrez: 1984a, 19-32; Clodovis Boff: 1987, xxi-xxx; and Gustavo Gutierrez: 1984b, vii-viii, 50-60.

set of questions to the text, questions that might help us see in the Scriptures what we had missed before.[9] This new approach to Scripture is what David Bosch called, "critical hermeneutics."[10]

As we re-read Scripture, we are faced with new insights, new values, and new priorities that call us to re-examine the motivations, means, agents, and goals of our missiology. This, in turn will call for re-thinking each one of the traditional theological loci. Thus we will find ourselves involved in a contextual re-reading of Scripture to discover anew what it means to know God in context. Robert McAfee Brown called this type of reflection, "Theology in a New Key" (1978), and "Unexpected News" (1984).

In Latin American theology, this theological process has especially focused on issues of christology and ecclesiology. In today's missiological enterprise, it appears that we need to allow our re-reading to offer us new insights into the scope of content of our missiology, derived from a profound re-thinking of all the traditional theological loci.[11]

Due to the complex nature of the enterprise, it seems to work best to allow one's reflection to flow through the focus of the "Integrating Theme," that can help hold the various ideas together — particularly when we are moving from a re-reading of Scripture (circle A) to a praxiological action-reflection process of discovering the missiological implications of our re-reading of Scripture — toward circle B.

In 1987, the Association of Professors of Mission discussed at length what missiology is, and how it does its reflection. In the subsection dealing with theology of mission, it was said that,

> The mission theologian does biblical and systematic theology differently from the biblical scholar or dogmatician in that the mission theologian is in search of the "habitus," the way of perceiving, the intellectual understanding coupled with spiritual insight and wisdom, which leads to seeing the signs of the presence and movement of God in history, and through his church in such a way as to be affected spiritually and motivationally and thus be committed to personal participation in that movement...
>
> Such a search for the "why" of mission forces the mission theologian to seek to articulate the vital integrative center of mission today... Each formulation of the "center" has radical implications for each of the cognate disciplines of the social sciences, the study of religions, and church history in the way they are corrected and shaped theologically. Each formulation supports or calls into question different aspects of all the other disciplines... The center, therefore, serves as both theological content and theological process as a disciplined reflection on God's mission in human contexts. The role of the theologian of mission is therefore to articulate and "guard" the center, while at the same time to spell out integratively the implications of the center for all the other cognate disciplines (Van Engen: 1987, 524-252).

[9] For a more in-depth discussion on this issue, with supporting bibliographical comments, see Van Engen: 1993, 27-36.
[10] See David Bosch: 1991, 20-24.
[11] Harvie Conn has given us a summary form of just his sort of thing in 1993a, 102-103.

Conceptually we are involved here in something that philosophy of science has called "paradigm-construction" or "paradigm-shift."[12] We know that paradigm-shift is normally understood (especially in Philosophy of Science) as a corporate phenomenon that occurs over a rather long period of time and involves the reflective community interacting with reference to a particular issue. However, David Bosch has initiated many of us into seeing paradigm-formation as a powerful way of helping us re-conceptualize our mission with reference to specific communities, in specific contexts.

In these terms, a paradigm becomes "a conceptual tool used to perceive reality and order that perception in an understandable, explainable, and somewhat predictable pattern" (Van Engen: 1992b, 53). It is, "an entire constellation of beliefs, values and techniques, ... shared by the members of a given community" (Küng and Tracy: 1989, 441-442). Thus a paradigm consists of "the total composite set of values, world-view, priorities, and knowledge which makes a person, a group of persons, or a culture look at reality in a certain way. A paradigm is a tool of observation, understanding and explanation" (Van Engen: 1992b, 53).

The mission theologian takes utterly seriously the biblical text as text (circle A) and tries to avoid super-imposing particular agendas on the text. However, it is equally true, as Johannes Verkuyl has said, "if study does not lead to participation,.. missiology has lost her humble calling" (J. Verkuyl: 1978, 6). Thus we find that theology of mission is a process of reflection and action involving a movement from the BIBLICAL TEXT to FAITH COMMUNITY in its CONTEXT. By focusing our attention on an Integrating Theme, we encounter new insights as we re-read Scripture from the point of view of a contextual hermeneutic. These new insights can then be re-stated and lived out as biblically-informed, contextually-appropriate missional actions of the FAITH COMMUNITY in the particularity of time, worldview, and space of each particular CONTEXT in which God's mission happens.

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[12] See, e. g., Carl Hempel: 1965, 1966; Stephen Toulmin: 1961, 1972; Ian G. Barbour: 1974, 1990; Thomas Kuhn: 1962, 1977; James H. Fetzer: 1993a, 147-178; 1993b, Hans Küng and David Tracy, edits.: 1989, 3-33; and David Bosch: 1991, 349-362.

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