
Theological Foundations of Missions

Dr. Donald Dean Owens

The late David J. Bosch has pointed out that most introductions to missiology tend to begin with something like “Biblical Foundations for Mission.” Once these foundations have been established, so the argument goes, the author can proceed by developing his or her exegetical findings into a theology of mission.¹ So, in order that I appear not to be too innovative, I have entitled this study “Theological Foundations of Missions,” and using the outline and some material from a text that I have used for teaching a course on the practice of missions: *Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies: Missions*, by Gailyn Van Rheezen.

For centuries missionary advocates have argued that the missionary enterprise has its roots in Scripture. And indeed, much trouble was taken to find biblical authorization for the missionary enterprise. This was done by gleaning so-called “missionary texts” from the Bible to undergird the contemporary missionary enterprise. In doing this, as far as the Old Testament was concerned, it was often implied that it was “particularistic” and therefore hardly usable to support missions. There is no doubt that the New Testament witnesses to a fundamental shift when compared to the Old Testament. Clearly this paradigm change took place with the advent of Jesus of Nazareth and what followed after that.²

At first sight the Old Testament appears to offer little basis for the idea of missions. However, that record contains stories that show some “universalistic” expressions such as Ruth and Naaman who accepted the faith of Israel. Jonah is often referred to as an unwilling missionary to Nineveh. To put it mildly, Jonah was not a missionary in the normal sense of the word. The prophet is sent to Nineveh, not to proclaim salvation to “non-believers,” but to announce doom. Neither is he himself interested in

¹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Mary Knoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 15.

²Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 15.

mission, he is only interested in destruction. Fortunately, the Sovereign God was interested in the peoples of that great city and opened their hearts for repentance and mercy. One may locate such expressions scattered throughout the Psalms, and earlier scholars believed the second chapter of Isaiah discusses the future of all nations in graphic terms.³

It is striking how often the Old Testament discusses the future of nations and interests itself in the salvation that will one day be their lot. This indeed cannot be otherwise, for from the first page to the last the Bible has the whole world in view, and its divine plan of salvation is unfolded as pertaining to the whole world.⁴ It is salvation history with a universal motif.

Just as theology is the study of God and divine things, this excursion into a theology of mission should begin with the God who identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The one who discloses to Moses his personal name, *Yahweh*; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Mission does not originate with human sources, for ultimately it is not a human enterprise. Mission is rooted in the nature of God who sends and saves.⁵ Let us consider:

I. GOD: THE SOURCE OF MISSION

The God of the Bible is a God who acts, and in doing so reveals His love, His power, and His plans. When Adam and Eve acquiesced to Satan's temptations in the Garden of Eden, God came searching for them, calling, "Where are you?" This question testifies to the nature of God throughout all generations. He continually seeks to initiate reconciliation between Himself and His fallen creation. Genesis 10, a passage listing the table of

³J.H. Bavinck, *Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964), 11.

⁴David J. Bosch, "Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission," in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, eds. James M Phillips and Robert T. Coote. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm B Eerdmans's Pub. Co., 1995), 175-176.

⁵Gailyn Van Rheen, *Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies: Missions* (Grand Rapids, Mich. Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 14.

nations, is important for understanding the universal motif of the creative hand of God who ultimately embedded himself with man in his Son, Jesus Christ.

This is one of the fundamental truths of Genesis 1-11, the record of history's beginning; it is also found in the moving account of history's end, the book of John's Revelation. The very God who revealed himself to Israel and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ identifies himself as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending. He does not lay down his work until "every tongue and nation" and "a multitude without number" have been gathered round his throne (Rev. 5:9-10 and 7:9-17).⁶

After the Bible finishes its account of God's judgment of the nations, so graphically described in the Genesis passage about the Tower of Babel, in chapter 12 it shifts to God's call to Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees. The "God of the whole earth" seems at first glance to narrow his interests to the private history of one family and tribe only. This is not the entire picture, Johannes Verkuyl asserts. He says, "Israel is the opening word in God's proclaiming salvation, not the Amen."⁷

For a time Israel, the "people of Abraham," is separated from the other nations (Ex. 19:3ff; Deut. 7:14ff), but only so that through Israel God can pave the way toward achieving His world embracing goals. In choosing Israel as a segment of all humanity, God never took His eye off the other nations.

As one committed to an understanding of the precious Wesleyan-Holiness doctrine of "prevenient grace," across the years, I have often wondered, when Abraham was moving out of Ur of the Chaldees, twenty-one centuries before Christ, what was God doing in China during the Hsia Dynasty (2205-1766 B.C.)?

Whenever Israel forgot that God chose her with a view to speaking to the other nations and turned away from them in introverted pride,

⁶Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans' Pub. Co., 1978), 91.

⁷Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology*, 91.

prophets like Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah lashed out at the people's ethnocentric pretension and charged them with subverting God's actual intentions (see especially Amos 7:9-10). This ethnocentrism dies hard. It still persisted, and graphically disclosed, when Peter visited Cornelius, a Gentle centurion living in Caesarea (Acts 10-11). Fortunately, that episode produced a note of liberation for Gentile Christians as Peter defended the work of the Apostle Paul and his colleagues in their ministry to the non-Jewish world (Acts 15).

The soteriological theme of the Bible, that is God's work of rescuing and saving both Israel and other nations, is tied closely to the Exodus; in fact the Israelites define God's mission to save by His actions in delivering them from Egyptian captivity. God's mission of deliverance was based on His eternal attribute of love (Ex. 34:6-7). The deliverance account reveals that the Israelites' cry of desperation was "heard" by God, who "remembered His covenant with Abraham" and "looked on" the Israelites and "was concerned" about them (Ex. 2:23-25). The mission was not instigated by the Israelites' cries, but by the ever present God who responded to their groaning.

At this time, I must insert a practical application for potential missionaries. The story of the exodus is illuminating. When God, the originator of the mission of deliverance, decided to act, He sought for a person to carry out His mission. At the burning bush Moses was given the commission to be God's missionary of deliverance (Ex. 3:10). God took the initiative. And He found an appropriate vessel, the man Moses.

Forty years previous to God's call, Moses was being prepared for his role in salvation history. He was well trained in the culture and organizational skills of the Egyptians—training that he would be able to use later. I personally do not know of many aspects of knowledge that, in one way or another, will not be useful to the missionary. Moses identified the Israelites as "his own people"; and felt for them; not through pity, but empathy.

Following his aborted attempt to take the salvation of Israel in his own hands, Moses had forty years of field experience in Midian—experience

that would prove essential in his role as an agent of deliverance. There is no substitute for actual experience, especially in roles where human relationships test the metal of potential Christian workers. There seems to be some advantages sending out missionaries who are older with experiences outside of the classroom. God revealed Himself and the appointment of Moses through a burning bush while Moses was taking care of his father-in-law's flocks. It is almost axiomatic that God chooses busy, occupied people for His work.

Moses feared God's call, perhaps because he failed to realize that the mission was not his, but God's. Moses initially objected to God's mission in four ways. There may not be any burning bush, but many of us have struggled with counterparts in our call to God's mission. Let us consider these four ways: *first*, Moses asked, "Who am I that I should go . . .?" (Ex. 3:11). The Bible does say that Moses "was more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). This is as it should be. However, God answered this first objection by saying, "I will be with you" (v.12). In essence, God was telling Moses that the mission was greater than the missionary.

Moses' second objection had to do with the Israelites' understanding of Yahweh. Moses asked, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (v. 13). This is the same type of questions that the Jews asked Jesus (Matt. 21:23) and later his disciples (Acts. 4: 7). The answer to both instances referred back to God the Father as the authority for mission. The missionary task must always be recognized by what it is: it is the mission of God. The missionary is an agent, and important one, but an agent in the redemption process.

Moses' third objection was "What if [the Israelites] do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'" (Ex. 4:1) Moses' objection was once again on him. God responded by indicating that "the missionary credentials" would be provided to help the missionary fulfill the mission. May I say that before the missionary arrives on the field, God in prevenient grace is already there? The Holy Spirit creates response in

grace and goodness. God would not leave His messenger without the means to create belief in the hearts of those to whom he would minister.

Moses' fourth objection was that he had "never been eloquent" but was "slow of speech and tongue" (4:10-11). I will be suggesting some qualifications of those whom God uses in His mission in a future paper. Let me say that humility is a marvelous virtue; it gives God something to work with, however we may feel about ourselves and our perceived gifts, or lack of them. The real issue with Moses, as it often is with us, whether we stand available to God's call to service or not? May I suggest that the outcomes of our calling are in God's providence; our responsibility is to live a life of obedience and faithfulness. When Moses continued to object, God became angry. Moses' objections demonstrate the human tendency to make God's mission a mission of self.

The mission of God originated in the mind of God; The mission flowed from Him to Christ, who proclaimed God's kingdom message and in His death enacted God's kingdom plan. He prayed that the Father would send the Spirit. This Spirit empowered the church for mission to the world.

I have previously referred to Georg Vicedom's significant book, *Missio Dei, the Mission of God*. From this concept at least five applications may be made:

First, if mission flows from the character and nature of God, it cannot be neglected by the church, Mission, because it is of God, cannot be aborted!

Second, since the mission is of God, God will equip people for the task. "Not our ability, but our availability." Professor Ada Lum has said, "A missionary is a prepared disciple whom God sends into the world with his resources to make disciples for the kingdom."⁸

Third, the "mission of God" enables Christian missionaries to understand themselves under God's sovereignty. Christians should not undertake God's mission for self-glorification or the aggrandizement of a denomination or religious order, but to glorify God. The unifying theme

⁸Ada Lunn, *Missions in the Modern World*, eds. A Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 18.

of the mission is the Kingdom of God. “The good news of the kingdom” is to be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations, and then “the end will come” (Matt.24:14). A correct understanding of mission focuses on the kingdom of God.⁹

Fourth, the “mission of God” implies sacrifice. This fact is supremely evident in the giving of his son as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. Helen Virginia Blakeslee encapsulates this thought by saying,

I go to Africa not for fame or prominence, but because I am attached to Jesus Christ in love that knows no sacrifice too great to be made, that men and women everywhere throughout Africa may know of and come to possess the wonderful inheritance He has won for them on the cross of Calvary. I go to Africa because I believe the Africans to be worthy of the most heroic effort that can be put forth to save them. I believe this because Jesus Christ believed and proved to the world that it was true.¹⁰

Finally, this perspective enables the Christian communicator to recognize that because the mission is God’s, it will succeed. In an eloquent paragraph, missiologist Arthur Glasser writes, “...God Himself, the Ruler of world history, will finally triumph. The satanic empire will be overcome and the kingdom of God will be fully manifested in power and glory. On this the New Testament is most clear” (I Cor. 15:24).¹¹

II. CHRIST: THE MESSAGE OF MISSION

The coming of Jesus Christ formed the watershed of the ages, a turning point in history, and a time for the breaking in of the mighty reign of

⁹Arthur F. Glasser, “The Whole Bible Basis of Mission,” in *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, eds. Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 31.

¹⁰Glasser, “The Whole Bible Basis of Mission,” 137.

¹¹Glasser, 45.

God in his Messiah. Christ's ministry reflected two interrelated purposes. *First*, Christ *proclaimed the message of the kingdom of God*. John prepared the way for Jesus Christ's appearance and message by admonishing people to, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 3:2). Christ's message paralleled that of John (Matt. 3:11). His message is given in Mark's Gospel: "The time has come . . . The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (1:15). The term "near" has both present and future connotations. It means "drawing near," "breaking in," or "in the process of becoming."

The biblical concept of kingdom predates the coming of Christ. The word means the "rule, reign, or sovereignty of God." The nature of the kingdom of God is beautifully sung in Psalm 145:11-13. God's kingdom is one of glory and splendor. Synonymous parallelisms equate the kingdom with power, mighty acts, and dominion. God does not merely sit on a throne, but he reigns by performing mighty deeds . . . expressed in acts of power."¹²

But Christ did more than merely proclaim the message of the kingdom. Because of who He is—the Son of God—and His willingness to die for sinners, He became the very *message of mission*. The message taught by the early church was that Jesus was "the Christ," the Anointed One of God (Acts 5:42). In the book of Acts Christian proclamation was described as "preaching Christ." The message of Christ was not distinct from the message of the kingdom but parallel to it. Philip, for instance, "preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" in Samaria (Acts 8:12).

In I Corinthians 15:1-4 Paul defined the gospel he *preached*, the *message* the Corinthians had *received*, on which they had *taken their stand* and by which they were *saved*. This message is described to be of *first importance*:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel
I preached to you, which you received and on which

¹²Everett Ferguson, *The Everlasting Kingdom* (A.C.U. Press, 1989), 7; quoted in Van Rheen, *Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies: Missions*, 21.

you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

Thus the fundamental message of Christian proclamation is Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ (I Cor. 3:11). And again, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (2:2).

Cultural and theological relativism is the perception that there is no absolute truth in the world, and that diversity in religious orientation should be tolerated since all perceptions of truth are valid. There are many voices that object to the seeming exclusivism found in the Christian faith. Some refer to claims of the uniqueness of Christ as “the scandal of Christianity.” But we close this section by a passage from John R. W. Stott. He forcefully says,

Because God has exalted Jesus and given Him the name above every name, the rank above every rank, the dignity above every dignity that every knee should bow to Him and every tongue confess that He is Lord. And every knee and every tongue means every knee and every tongue, and we have not liberty to place any restriction upon that repeated ‘every.’ It means every secular knee, every Marxist knee, every Muslim knee, every Hindu knee, every Jewish knee, every Christian knee [my add], that every knee should bow to Christ . . . that is the will of God.¹³

¹³John R. W. Stott, “Our Challenge for Today,” in *World Evangelism* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism 15, No. 55, November-December, 1988), 34.

Peter surrendered his life because he believed, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by whom we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The fundamental Christian teachings of the sovereignty of God and his distinctive work in Jesus Christ are foundational to all other Christian beliefs and must, therefore, be given priority in the presentation of the gospel. We have not proclaimed the gospel until we have identified its essential truth, Jesus Christ.

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT: THE POWER OF MISSION

Luke, physician and historian, described the work of the Holy Spirit in the mission of God to such an extent that the book of Acts might be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. The topic of the Holy Spirit is introduced in Christ’s pre-ascension discussion with His apostles (Acts 1:5-8). Instead of the political power formerly sought by those of a first-century Jewish heritage, Christ promised them a far greater and nobler power. Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witness in Jerusalem, and all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

God’s Spirit is behind His mission! Through the Spirit, the missionary enjoys the *presence of the Lord* as Jesus promised in the words of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:20, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” In the Book of Acts the Spirit of God guided evangelists to those seeking the way of God. The “Spirit told Philip” to flag down the chariot in which a searching Ethiopian was reading a prophecy about the suffering servant (8:29). The Spirit is active in *prevenient grace* as the Spirit directed Peter to go with the three servants sent by Cornelius (10:19-20).

Lesslie Newbigin, in commenting on Cornelius’ conversion, says:

It is certainly true that this story shows how God’s mission is not simply an enterprise of the Church. It is a work of the Spirit who goes ahead of the Church, touches the Roman soldier and his household, prepares them for the message, and teaches

the Church a new lesson about the scope of God's grace.¹⁴

The Spirit's prevenient grace and guidance may be seen further by the way He opens and closes doors for the missionary. In Acts 16 the Spirit closed the doors of Asia and Bithynia (vv 6-7) but opened the door to Macedonia (v.7). Although the Apostle Paul had a definite strategy for evangelism and church planting, he was wise in allowing the Holy Spirit to exercise sovereignty over the work of mission.

A final thought in this section is to indicate that the Holy Spirit sets aside and appoints leaders for mission. In Acts 13:1-4, the record shows that after fasting, praying, and laying their hands on Barnabas and Saul in the church in Antioch, we see the hallmark of the missionary appointment. "The Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" The church's sending (v.4) and the Spirit's speaking (v.3) were not incompatible, but rather are indicative of the way God seems still to be working to a remarkable degree. That is, the church commissioned and sent out (released, if you will) those selected by a praying and fasting fellowship of believers.

These examples from Acts demonstrate that mission is not a human endeavor. God, who is the source of mission, continues to guide His mission through His divine Spirit.¹⁵

IV. THE CHURCH: THE EMBODIMENT OF GOD'S MISSION

Few Christians are able to describe vividly in biblical terms what the church is and what it should be. Avery Dulles has identified five major ecclesial types. The church, he suggests, can be viewed as *institution*, as *mystical Body of Christ*, as *sacrament*, as *herald*, or as *servant*. Each of these

¹⁴Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Raids: Eerdman's Press, 1989), 168.

¹⁵Van Rheenan, 27-28.

implies a different interpretation of the relationship between church and mission.¹⁶ The development of the mode of church government is not the issue: if the church is mission, the embodiment of Christ, we have something to work with. It seems abundantly clear that when we speak of God's people in terms of missionary purpose, we are speaking not of an ephemeral, invisible, universal body, but of real, visible congregations of the redeemed.

Drawing on the use of the New Testament term *ekklēsia*, the process of the development of the concept in the New Testament, and the indications in the New Testament of the mode of church government, we may come to a working definition of a church as suggested by H. E. Dana, a late professor from the Central Seminary in Kansas City. Dana's definition of a church is as follows:

A New Testament church is a body of believers, baptized upon their profession of faith in Jesus Christ, who have joined together voluntarily in the Holy Spirit for the purpose of promoting Christ's redemptive purposes for humanity.¹⁷

According to this definition, the church is visible, composed of baptized believers, voluntary organization, and in mission. This is not to deny divine origin or living relationship with the Vine through the Holy Spirit. The incarnational aspect of the church is clearly seen as the mission of God, initiated through Jesus Christ and continued through His disciples. Christ prayed about this identification as recorded in John 17:18, "As you sent me into the world, I have also sent them into the world." He reiterated the statement after His resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). The church, then, should conceive of itself as "the outcome of the activity of God who sends and saves."¹⁸

¹⁶Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976); quoted in Bosch, "Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission," 368.

¹⁷H. E. Dana, *A Manual of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, Kans.: Central Seminary Press, 1944).

¹⁸Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to the Science of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 80.

Vicedom has written that the greatest problem with Christians today is that “they do not know that they are Christians.” Instead of permeating the world with its eternal message, the church being permeated by the world.¹⁹ The church may lose its identity as God’s distinct people through worldliness. At the same time, it may lose its distinctiveness by neglecting its witnessing. Those redeemed by God’s mission and incorporated as His distinctive people become witnesses to His nature and mighty acts. They have been given “the ministry of reconciliation” standing in God’s place inviting lost humanity into His embrace.

The basis of all mission is sending. Listen again to the Apostle Paul. He says that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” This is the Gospel, the good news! But to be news, it must be heard; to be good news, it needs to be heard in time to be beneficial. Paul’s rhetorical questions show the role of mission in the church:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? (Rom. 10:14-15).

The church most frequently establishes its rationale for being—its purpose for existence—while articulating its faith. The church reflects the eternal nature of the kingdom of God. Its continuance is rooted in its being God’s people under his eternal sovereignty. And he is the God who sends.

¹⁹Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, 80.

Bibliography

- Bavinck, J.H. *Introduction to the Science of Missions*. Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964.
- Bosch, David J. "Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission." In *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, eds. James M Phillips and Robert T. Coote. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm B Eerdmans's Pub. Co., 1995.
- _____. *Transforming Mission*. Mary Knoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Dana, H. E. *A Manual of Ecclesiology*. Kansas City, Kans.: Central Seminary Press, 1944.
- Glasser, Arthur F. "The Whole Bible Basis of Mission." In *Contemporary Theologies of Mission*, eds. Arthur F. Glasser and Donald A. McGavran. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983.
- Lunn, Ada. *Missions in the Modern World*, eds. A Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Newbiggin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Raids: Eerdman's Press, 1989.
- Van Rheenán, Gailyn. *Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies: Missions*. Grand Rapids, Mich. Zondervan Pub. House, 1996.
- Stott, John R. W. "Our Challenge for Today." In *World Evangelism*. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism 15, No. 55, November-December, 1988.
- Verkuyl, Johannes. *Contemporary Missiology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdman's Pub. Co., 1978.
- Vicedom, Georg F. *The Mission of God: An Introduction to the Science of Mission*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965.