

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Theology of Missions Paper

Submitted to Dr. Eunice Abogunrun in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

GLST500-D03

Global Studies Survey

by

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July 13, 2014

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Scriptural Support for Missions

There is ample scriptural support of the idea of Christian missions found throughout the Bible. While many may not consider the Old Testament a source of scriptural information or inspiration on the topic of mission, a careful study will show that there are several passages that point to the importance of missions. Ultimately the goal of missions is to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. To get to Christ, one must understand and acknowledge the truth of God. The very opening passage of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”¹ provides the greatest expository statement on the existing, transcendence, and power of the Creator of the Universe. “The first and supreme goal of mission is the *glorification* of the name of the one God throughout the entire world and the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, His Son” (emphasis original).² We find much scriptural support for the glory of God in the Old Testament. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” In Exodus as the Israelites were traveling, they saw the glory of God through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21). There is Old Testament scriptural examples of Gentiles converting to Judaism. In Exodus 12:38, we read there was a “A mixed multitude also went up with them...” In the Book of Ruth, we read the story of Naomi, who lost her husband and sons. After Naomi announces decision to return to her homeland without her daughters-in-law, Ruth tells Naomi, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God (Ruth 1:16.”

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

² A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 78.

These passages, and others, show that the ancient Jewish culture was accepting of Gentiles and there are examples of Gentile converts to Judaism. Mission in the Old Testament can best be expressed through scriptural history of creation and the fall; God calling his people through Abraham; God rescuing his people from slavery (in Egypt) and separating them as a holy people in the promised land; and the exile that ultimately lead to fulfillment of scripture (in the New Testament) through the person of Jesus Christ.³

Certainly the New Testament is filled with countless examples of missions. The first such example is when Christ gives his followers the Great Commissions. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:18b-20a).” In Acts we read that news of the church’s growth in Antioch resulted in the Apostles sending Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:19-22), and Barnabas took Saul (Paul) with him (Acts 11:25). We also read that the Holy Spirit plays a role in certain missions (*cf.* Acts 13:4). Luke also describes how Paul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogue at Iconium and “spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed (Acts 14:1).” There are many other such examples throughout the Book of Acts and other books of the New Testament.

God and Christian Mission

The Gospel message is, at its core, a message of hope. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).” While God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfect in his judgment, he is also a God of perfect grace and love. The Gospel is about God reaching down to humanity. Sin

³ Moreau, et al., *World Missions*, 29.

separates us from God. Paul writes in his letter to the church at Rome, “[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).” Later we read, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).” God wants to restore people to him. 2 Peter 3:9 tell us, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Given these facts, that humans are completely separated from God through sin yet God desires that all of humanity would be reconciled to him, it is clear that through missions God accomplishes his purposes. We understand that “God is sovereign over the world and over the mission of his church.”⁴ One of the Holy Spirit’s sovereign acts is his work and actions through Christians in the field of missions. This is not to say that God cannot speak directly to individual humans. He has and continues to do so. But his primary means of reaching lost souls is through the one-on-one mission work of Christians reaching out to a lost world.

Missions and Theology

There are two aspects of theology that are related to missions: apologetics and systematic theology. The Apostle Peter reminds Christians that we must “[a]ways be prepared to give an *answer* to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15, emphasis added).” The word “answer” here is the Greek word *apologia*, which is how the apologetics is derived. *Apologia* is often translated as “defense” or “vindication.”⁵ Apologetics is a branch of theology that seeks to provide rational

⁴ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2010), 32.

⁵ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 24.

reasons and justification for the truth of the Christian faith.⁶ “The goal of apologetics is to defend and commend the truthfulness of Christian belief.”⁷ Apologetics and missions are closely related and often apologetics is precursor to actual evangelism. In some cases, the non-believer has intellectual barriers to accepting the Gospel message. He or she may have some preconceived notions of God, Christianity, or the Bible that must first be overcome before that person will consider the Gospel message. There may be personal issues that an individual may need to overcome. Additionally, there may be religious or cultural barriers to hearing and considering the Gospel. Apologetics can help with all of these challenges. Apologetics is not a justification for missions, but provides support for missions.

Systematic theology is “the collecting, scientifically arranging, comparing, exhibiting, and defending all the facts from any and every source concerning God and His works.”⁸ Systematic theology provides from an understanding of God from a wide range of sources, not just the Bible; although the Bible is of foremost importance in the study of God. Systemic theology is important because it provides for an explanation of Christianity, supports Christian apologetics, and is a means of growing and maturing for believers.⁹ Systematic theology provides a backdrop of support for missions. In missions, one must start with explaining the “why” behind the Gospel message. The unbeliever is separated from God and, upon his or her death, will spend eternity separated from God without accepting the free gift of salvation. Systemic theology provides an explanation of the doctrine of soteriology. As previously mentioned, apologetics provides important support for missions. Apologetics is derived from

6 William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Weaton: Crowsey, 2008), 15.

7 2 James K. Beilby, *Thinking About Christian Apologetics: What It Is and Why We Do It* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 20.

8 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1947), 1-6.

9 Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 151.

systemic theology. Finally, systemic theology provides the mature Christian the information and knowledge to support him or her in missions.

Key Motifs of Mission Theology

Two key motifs of mission theology are Jesus Christ and the church. Christ is the primary motif because he is this central focus of Christianity. Christ is supreme, and worship of Christ (who is God) is of primary importance. The person and work of Christ is at the very core of the reason that Christian missions exist in the first place. Christ did not come to establish a Christian “social club” or a organization. He came to pay the penalty for sin for all of humanity and to provide a way for salvation. “Having enabled mission through his sacrificial death, Jesus defined all mission-oriented Christians to be witnesses through the Spirit in their own Jerusalem (sic)...to the very ends of the earth.”¹⁰ Christ is not just central to Christianity; he is the focus and central theme (or motif) of Christian missions. Christ is the reason that Christian missions exist in the first place. Followers of Christ are commanded to spread the good news (gospel) to all people.

The church, or the universal body of Christian believers, is another key motif of mission theology. It is through the church that missions actually take place. The church is not a place or a building. It is the whole body of believers, “including all those who are still in the world.”¹¹ When Christ was speaking to his disciples prior to his ascension, he instructed them to “make disciples of all nations...(Matthew 28:19).” This established the church as the body through which the gospel would be spread to the entire world. Christians understand that Christ is the

¹⁰ Moreau, et al., *World Missions*, 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

head of the church and the church (Colossians 1:18) and that the church must be in submission to Christ (Ephesians 5:23-24). The English word “submission” has interesting connotations in this context. The church has a mission that is under (sub) Christ, e.g.: in submission. Christ’s mission is to bring salvation to all who will accept him and place their trust (faith) in him and his substitutionary atonement and death on the cross. The church’s secondary (sub) mission under Christ’s mission is to bring the knowledge of Christ’s mission to the entire world. Thus in being in submission to Christ, the church is fulfilling its sub-mission. Other aspects of the church are important, but these “must not detract from the missionary purpose of the church.”¹²

Conclusions

Missionary theology has several important connections to those who are actually in missionary work, church leaders, and lay people who are not in full-time ministry. Those who are engaged in full-time missionary work are in the fore of the church’s primary calling to spread the gospel to all people and make disciples for Christ. Missionary theology provides them with the knowledge of God to assist in their work. Evangelism is a key aspect of missionary work; “however, mission is more than evangelism. Mission that does not include incorporating those led to Christ into a local body of believers...is at best, truncated mission.”¹³ It is the responsibility of local church leaders to continue the discipleship of new converts to Christianity. In a sense, the missionary hands the new believer off to the local church. The church leaders take over from there. The church leaders have the important responsibility of teaching, training, and developing disciples to become the “salt and light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). It is the church leaders’ responsibility to provide an environment for which believers in Christ can grow

¹² Moreau, et al., *World Missions*, 84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 89.

as Christians. They provide the leadership within the local church, manage the physical aspects of the church, provide Biblical-based teaching and preaching, and provide an example of Christ that church members and others can look up to. Finally, those laypersons who are not in full-time ministry have responsibility to missions as well. The layperson should support missions through prayer and giving. Additionally, the layperson can give their time in support of missions. Finally, the layperson can prayerfully consider short or long-term mission work himself. Through these roles, missionaries, church leaders, and lay people all play a part in bringing Christ to a lost world and help spread the good news of Jesus Christ to all people.

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