

A Theology of Mission

by Ted Slater

Introduction

One of restored man's prime objectives is to act as an agent of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Man is called to be reconciled to his creator and to introduce the message of reconciliation to others. We are called, as the contemporary phrase goes, "to know God and to make him known." If we follow the two key commandments, loving God and loving others, then we will go and offer to others the blessing that the creator has selflessly given us.

When mankind's relationship with God was first disrupted, it was God who called to fallen mankind in the garden, "Where art thou?" (Genesis 3:9). He who desires that all men be saved (see 1 Timothy 2:4), as demonstrated here, is the initiator of the process of reconciliation. The Christian mission, then, is merely to cooperate with this divine expression of love (Weiss, 1976, p. 29).

Definitions

Before going any further, it is important to understand the significance of the words which make up the phrase "theology of mission." The first word, according to the etymologist Klein (1971), means "a treatise, doctrine, or theory" regarding "the science of divine things" (pp. 428 & 759). Mission has to do with going, sending, throwing, hurling, casting (p. 469).

It is noteworthy that we are not simply examining the philosophy of mission, because philosophic discussion takes place mainly in the cerebral realm. Theology, according to Weiss (1976), "is not primarily concerned with tenets that merely receive mental assent but with truths that reach into the heart and affect the life. Any treatise or portion of theology that fails to do this is of little practical value" (p. 12-13).

A "missionary" is one who is sent with a message. Johnstone (1986) defines this word well:

This word of Latin derivation has the same basic meaning as the wider use of the term "apostle" in the New Testament which is derived from Greek. The Christian missionary is one commissioned by a local church to evangelize, plant churches and disciple people away from his home area, and often among people of a different race, culture or language. Modern usage is rather different. We now use this term for all those who are sent across cultural

barriers for Christian service of any kind, even though they may not necessarily be apostles in the biblical sense. (p. 497)

Missionaries, then, are those who go to peoples other than their own with God's message of reconciliation, and the theology of mission has to do with truths which relate to God's command for his people to be missionaries.

A brief biblical background of mission

It is generally accepted that Abraham was the first missionary, although others before him (e.g., Noah) did things characteristic of missionaries. Missionaries are called by God to be blessed and to be a blessing to others. (See Genesis 12:2, 18:18, 22:17-18, 26:3-4, 28:13-14. Before God scattered humanity at the Tower of Babel, it was not possible to deliver God's blessings to "different peoples" because mankind was yet one people — that is why we say that Noah wasn't technically a missionary.)

Abraham was told that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his seed. The Apostle Paul, in Galatians 3, explained that "the seed" referred to Christ. The nations of the earth, then, are blessed through Christ — through knowing him and what he's accomplished. But how can people know him if they've never heard of him? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? "As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news'" (Romans 10:14-15).

The message

The "good news" which missionaries aim to communicate has to do with what Jesus accomplished through his completely obedient life and propitiatory death. Jesus is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" 1 John 2:2. In other words, people can become friends with God through Jesus.

There are other truths which are central to a biblical understanding of the gospel: God is the creator and loves his creation; everyone is separated from fellowship with God because of their sinful disobedience; Jesus is the son of God, Lord of all, and Savior; people must go through a conversion to be saved; the Holy Spirit transforms people; fellowship and mission are important aspects of the Christian church; and Christ will return someday to take his chosen to heaven (Lewis, 1989, part 3, p. 149).

Attitudes about going

One should be motivated by obedience to the mandates of God as revealed in the Bible and confirmed, perhaps, by personal revelation. Weiss (1976) wrote, "The mere spirit of adventure or philanthropy is not sufficient to do this [go to and

remain in the mission field]. But an understanding of the teachings of Scripture and the sound conviction of its demands on believers will not allow the missionary to do otherwise” (p. 8).

Often missionaries naturally feel a sense of reluctance at first. Bruce Olson (1978), for example, had intended to study philanthropy and become a university professor. After a missionary spoke at his church, however, he was plagued with thoughts of becoming one as well. He explained this change in this way: “Gradually my pleasant sane dream of becoming a linguistic professor vanished into this ridiculous idea of going to other countries to talk to savages about God” (p. 37). His studies of the Bible and specific revelation from God (“Bruce, I want you in South America” (p. 39)) led Olson to spend years working with the Motilone Indians in Colombia.

Missionaries should not be motivated by the possible results of their going and preaching. In other words, missionaries mustn't be pragmatists. As Colson (1989) wrote, “[I]t is not the prospect of success nor some grand vision of changing history and saving the world that should motivate the Christian. No, it is duty alone that should compel us to act in the arena in which God has placed us” (p. 112). Jesus emphasized the importance of maintaining an obedient attitude when he said, “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

It also seems imperative that missionaries embrace Isaiah's attitude of humility. “Woe to me,” he cried when he was in God's presence. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5). God immediately atoned for the prophet's sins, and Isaiah responded by offering to go on his behalf. Missionaries may feel hypocritical telling others about God's blessing while continuing to fall short of complete obedience themselves, but God is faithfully merciful. He uses these jars of common clay to deliver blessing, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

God empowers his chosen

Many of those in the Old Testament, not just Isaiah, felt unqualified to be messengers for God. Moses felt unprepared to be a blessing to others, but God provided a way for him to speak (Exodus 3:10-16). Jeremiah felt unprepared to be a missionary, but God touched his mouth and gave him the ability to speak as well (Jeremiah 1:6-9).

Just as God enabled those he called to communicate then, he has made a way for his chosen to communicate his blessing now. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). Immediately upon giving this command, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (verse 22). Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to those he sends in order that they might carry out his will.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus said, "[R]epentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in [Christ's] name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). Two verses later Jesus said, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." The command to go is consistently accompanied by the Lord's promise to provide power to proclaim his message.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). A few verses later Jesus said that various miraculous signs would accompany those who believe, including the ability to drive out demons, speak in new tongues, and see sick people recover after laying hands on them in prayer.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus sent his twelve disciples out to preach that the kingdom of heaven was near. In addition, they were instructed to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who had leprosy, and drive out demons (Matthew 10:7-8). It seems that Jesus went to extremes to minister to people and get them to believe in him. "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me," he said. He then added, perhaps in exasperation, "Or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (John 14:11).

Jesus, just before he left the earth, said very concisely, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). What an honor to be used by God to bless others! He provides the message, as well as the ability to communicate that message.

The Holy Spirit is not merely a power-giver, though. According to John 15:26-16:15, he also testifies about Jesus — and so his disciples testify about Jesus as well. The Holy Spirit convicts people of their sins, guides Jesus' disciples "into all truth," and tells them what is yet to come. He is the comforter, the teacher, and the sanctifier. The Holy Spirit is also responsible for providing things such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22-23a). Without the presence of the Holy Spirit in a missionary's life, their work would not only be very difficult, but fruitless as well. After all, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1).

Things that missionaries do

As Jesus saw the crowds of harassed and helpless people, he felt compassion on them. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38). The Apostle Paul wrote, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone" (1 Timothy 2:1). Missionaries pray.

Johnstone (1986) highlighted a different aspect of prayer when he posed the question, “Do you realize that prayer may have brought about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?” (p. 21). The invasion was both a judgment on the country which had resisted Christianity and a redemptive act because it enabled Afghans to hear the Gospel as never before. It is not unlikely that God’s response to prayer also brought about the apparent fall of communism in the East. As Johnstone (1986) put it, “It is a solemn thing to intercede for the nations of the world” (p. 21). Again, those whom God has burdened to bless the nations of the earth pray for the nations of the earth.

Missionaries use innovative techniques. As Lewis (1989) wrote, “The truth must be communicated, and men and women persuaded to become followers of Christ. Old ways of doing things are not adequate in keeping up with an increasingly complex and changing world” (part 3, p. 38). Reaching the unreached often requires a “unique solution strategy” (part 2, p. 90). The goal of this strategy is to know the people as God knows them, attempt to meet their need as they see it, and communicate the saving power of Jesus Christ in their language and in their cultural understanding and in terms of where they are (p. 91). While the goals remain the same, the process of achieving these ends may require innovation.

According to Lewis (1989), the ultimate objective of all missionary work is church planting (part 1, p. 91). “Only through the establishment and functioning of local churches scattered throughout the populations centers, integrated in part to the culture of the area and independent of all outside control and support, can an area originally designated as a ‘mission field’ lose that title” (p. 91). The text defines a church as a community or people rather than an institutional structure. Church planting, then, is the process of bringing redeemed people into fellowship with each other so that they might better serve God and others by, among other things, carrying out the Great Commission.

As shown in the previous section, signs and wonders might accompany the work of a missionary. Recall this prayer by the early believers after some persecution:

“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”
After they prayer, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (Acts 4:29-31)

The miracles drove the disciples to speak God’s message of reconciliation boldly. Similarly, miracles and gift such as speaking in tongues enable missionaries to communicate God’s love to peoples who might otherwise not listen or understand.

Conclusion

Jesus commanded his disciples, “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 28:19, 20). Jesus’ command is simple and clear. He had not only made it plain what his followers are to do, but he has provided the Holy Spirit who gives his chosen the ability to carry out his instructions.

Missionaries should be “motivated not by a desire to make an impact on society but by obedience to God’s Word and a desire to please him” (Colson, 1989, p. 136). After all, if we love God, we will do what he commands.

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Appendix A

During the 1991-1992 Christmas break I directed a short-term mission project to Mexico City. Malcolm Patterson, a Latin America Mission worker whom I met during Urbana '90, helped coordinate the work once we arrived in the capital of Mexico. Fifteen of us drove from Marquette, Michigan to the U.S.-Mexico border and then took a bus from there to Mexico City.

The following are responses to survey questions I distributed in January 1993, a year after the mission trip. Not all of the answers are missiologically correct; however, these answers may provide insight into the effects of short-term mission projects such as the one I conducted one year ago. They've also given me ideas of how I can better conduct future short-term mission projects.

1. What is your most vivid memory from your experience in Mexico?

The complete lack of wealth so common in the U.S. — the vast difference in standard of living, lifestyle.

The long but enlightening trip down and the food, HOT!

Most of my vivid memories about Mexico are sparked by things like the smell of cinnamon coffee, shoveling, my blanket, Christmas break and of course my pictures. Peanuts also remind me of Mexico. Hm? The coffee reminds me of the kitchen & the many kinds of food that we tried. Shoveling anything (even MQT snow) reminds me of Mexico for obvious reasons. My blanket reminds me of shopping & our night on the town. The approach of Christmas break gives me the desire to serve God in an out of the ordinary way. The pictures help me remember the events that don't have physical things attached to them.

The architecture which ranged from pyramids to modern. It's hard to narrow the trip down to one memory.

When I first arrived at the bus station I felt scared. I was in another country where I didn't speak the language and because of my color I stood out.

Probably being sick. Other than that I would have to say it was on New Year's Eve when we taught each other songs and games from each country.

The love & kindness was overwhelming to me. Even though we spoke different languages, it was very evident.

Sitting in that church we went to when we 1st got to Mexico City (when we were w/Mack & Kathy). We were singing in Spanish & all of a sudden I realized we were singing "Great is the Lord." Holy cow! We were praising God in a different country, in a different language yet the God we all praise is the SAME!

2. In what ways do you think the trip was worthwhile?

All ways.

This trip made me wake up and realize what I have, and I appreciate it even more. It gave me a good feeling to know that I could actually do something worthwhile and help other people. It doesn't take a brainy person to show love & compassion. Anyone can do it.

We were able to help provide a place for people to worship.

It was worthwhile because we were able to help fellow Christians and show them what our culture was like compared to theirs.

Meeting people from a different society and culture.

I learned first hand about life in Mexico. I was able to actually experience another culture instead of just reading about it. We went down to do some work for God, as a result of our efforts the Mexicans were one step closer to finishing their church & we were all one step closer to God. Anything that brings people closer to God is worthwhile.

In the fact that I learned some of another language. The fact that my countries [sic] way of living isn't the only way to live. That God is all over.

I felt we were able to help the people with their work, make new friends, and share the love of God with others. I was encouraged by their faith in God, and their dedication.

3. Were you able to mention in any classes (papers or classroom discussion) anything that you experienced or learned as a result of having travelled and worked in Mexico City? Please explain a bit.

Not that I recall.

No.

I talk about Mexico whenever I get the chance. I have shown my pictures to my whole family & half of Marquette. One of the girls from fellowship went to Mexico this Christmas. She was worried at first, but it helped her to know that I came back in one piece & was even willing to go on another trip. I also did a presentation about Mexico for a fourth grade class at Whitman school.

Heidi, Jenny and I put on a 30 min. lecture slide show on Mexican architecture in a class.

I took a Spanish class and from my experience in Mexico I had a desire to learn the language and some of the culture.

I talked a lot about the people and the place itself in my Spanish class.

I have been able to share since the day I got back. I was able to share a little in my English class, but it was not an opportune time.

Not that I recall.

4. If you participate in another cross-cultural experience of this type, what do you hope to do differently? What do you want to remain the same?

Different? I don't think I would have changed a thing! The next time I'd fly but I'm glad we took the van this past time.

I would like to learn the language just a little bit. It would also be nice to correspond w/the people we worked with. When you don't know the language, it makes it hard. I also think I would fly. At least to the border, 'cause the bus ride is an experience.

I would hope that I could work directly with the children. I would want the openness to other cultures (from both sides) to remain the same.

I would want to fly so I could spend more time helping the people and less time traveling.

Fly. The closeness and fellowship that developed between us and the natives.

As you know I have already been on another mission trip. You did a great job as a leader even though it was your first time leading. If you plan to do this again, something you might keep in mind is a time for worship and devotions. In Haiti we had 20 min. devotions every morning (led by a different person each morning). We also had a worship service on a couple different evenings. They really kept our focus on God & off of our inconveniences & personality conflicts. Mexican translators may have been a good idea. I realize that there may not have been any, but it would have taken some of the pressure off of you. I would have also liked to spend more time with Mexican people. The best thing about Haiti was the people. I really miss them. I feel like I left a chunk of my heart there. I don't really have that kind of affection for Mexico.

Reading that long list of things to do differently may be a little discouraging, but I really believe that actions speak louder than words. The incredibly positive experiences that I had in Mexico were my motivation to go to Haiti. Going to Mexico assured me that Haiti was not an impossibility.

The initial cost overall so that it would be saved and/or earned to not be a concerned about during the trip. Be informed about what the culture will be like or weather and people. The fun and togetherness of people I would like to remain the same.

I felt in general the trip was a good experience. I felt within the group there was some bickering because of the lack of a clearly defined decision making process.

5. Are you more likely to work in another country because of the trip? If so, what do you hope to do?

Yes. I'm not planning anything, however, I would be much more open to another short term mission project or even a long term one because of our trip.

If the Lord sends me to another country to do his will then I hope to learn about the place the culture and meet new people to show them how wonderful the Lord is if they don't know.

I have been bitten by the travel bug & I now have missionary fever. I will be going on more mission trips, if they are in God's will for me. I have never doubted my career choice. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God wants me to be a teacher. I can't say where God wants me to teach, but I do know that even if I teach in the States, my summers could be spent on the mission field, possible in another country.

Yes. I don't know yet, but I would like to do it again.

Yes. I hope to continue to help others any way that I am needed. I would like to work with children as well as the adults.

I would like to but I don't think I will be able to because I'll be married when I graduate.

I'm not sure what I would do. But I would like to do many more short term missions in the future, maybe different countries. I would do whatever God asks of me.

YES! I'd like to do missions works in Africa. Maybe hook up w/InterVarsity & help run short-term mission projects.

6. Has your experience in Mexico affected you in any other ways? How?

Yes. Well, I love to travel so I got to see so much new stuff. Pyramids, cathedrals, dead dogs in the middle of the road, etc. Mexico also put into perspective that huge

difference between material needs & wants. I can survive & be happy with so much less than I think.

I think I am more aware of how other races act now. People do the things they do because of their culture and I can understand it better after being submerged into that culture.

Because of the negative attitudes towards Catholics it has caused me to search deeper into my faith, thus strengthening it.

It has helped me to not take for granite [sic] what I have. I realized that I live a lot better than the Mexicans and that has made me look twice. I also thank God for providing me with luxuries I have.

Yes. Made me realize how rich we really are.

The people in Mexico were poor by American standards. The same is true of the Haitian people. Yet both groups have a quality of life that can't even compare to anything I have seen in America. They appear to have nothing, but there is a peace in their eyes that springs from the very depths of their souls. From that peace comes a joy & a spirit of giving that is a true reflection of Jesus. The Christian Haitians & Mexicans have learned to appreciate God & they see our presence in their country as just another sign of God's love for them. They are content with what they have, because what they have is God.

That I really appreciate our country even how messed up it may be. Only because I don't have to worry about being mugged or fondled or the feeling of insecurity. Even in some cities in the U.S. it's the same but I don't

I was made much more aware of cultural differences in other parts of the world. I think the carefree attitude of the people we worked with has influenced me positively personally.

7. Please write any other comments that you think might give me a better idea of how your experience in Mexico has influenced you.

It helped me know that God loves everyone no matter how bad they are. God also loves me for my shortcomings. That people can live so impoverished and still think they're the richest people on earth.

It has given me more compassion for those less fortunate than myself.

I realized that no matter how Mexican people live, Christians still love God and praise him the same way we do. It made me really see how awesome our God really is. I thank God for showing me this and for being about [sic] to help others see how great he is.

The trip to Mexico has definitely drawn me closer to God and has challenged me to reevaluate what I hold up as being valuable.

God has definitely opened my eyes to how he works. This trip showed me a lot about love. Something that has been lacking in my life. It helped me to not only give it, but to receive better. I know that may sound trivial, but is a very important part of our lives. We need to be receptive to the love God has for us.

I learned that God's people are God's people no matter where you are! People say we should stay here right where we are & be missionaries — what's the difference? People in the US need to hear about Christ & so do people in Africa. Just so long as you're doing!