

Why I think missional theology is the future of theology, or, why I think theology must become missional or perish

By David W. Congdon

Theology must become missional or perish. That is my thesis. By “missional,” I refer to the recent development in theology which defines God as a “missionary God” who commissions a “missionary church.” Mission is first and foremost proper to the being of God, and secondarily a concept in ecclesiology. Both dimensions—the theological and ecclesiological—are grounded in the missional life history of Jesus Christ. The interest in missional theology arises in the wake of two realities: the rejection of colonialism, and the shift of Christianity’s global “center” from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere. With these two modern developments, missional theology arises as a way of thinking theologically which is both post-colonial and sensitive to cultural particularity, without simply collapsing theology into a post-colonial anthropology. Instead, missional theology is steadfastly rooted in the Christian gospel of the triune God, and in the proclamation of humanity’s reconciliation with God in Jesus of Nazareth. Missional theology is missiological and ecclesiological by being first and foremost theological, speaking about the God of mission while also attending to the apostolic community of the church as those commissioned by God. My argument is (1) exegetical, (2) historical, and (3) dogmatic in nature, and I will proceed in that order as I make my case.

1. Exegesis and Missional Theology

One of the great developments in recent years is the turn to theological interpretations of Scripture, in part because it seeks to rectify the modern split between systematic theology and biblical studies within the academy. While there are many positive consequences of this development, a key consequence has been, I think, the interest in missional theology. This is because when one looks at Scripture theologically and canonically, beyond the myopia of historical criticism, one sees a missional narrative. Many scholars have already examined this in depth, so I will not rehearse the exegesis here. One of the best efforts is by OT scholar, Christopher J. H. Wright, in his massive work in missional-biblical theology, *The Mission of God*. Works like Wright’s argue that from beginning to end, Scripture presents a missiological narrative. This mission occurs within the context of God’s covenantal relationship with humanity, beginning with Abraham and continuing through David to Jesus of Nazareth, who is the actualization of God’s mission of reconciliation and the covenant of grace. Jesus fulfills Israel’s call to be a blessing to all nations. In him, the mission of God finds its origin and *telos*.

Another virtue of missional theology in terms of biblical exegesis is that, unlike other theological frameworks, it highlights rather than ignores the role of Israel in the economy of grace. Israel is not just a sacred bypass on the way to Jesus. On the contrary, Israel’s *raison d’être* is grounded in God’s mission to the nations. The exodus from Egypt is a liberation from Pharaoh for the purpose of establishing Israel as a royal priesthood among the nations of the world. Israel is liberated by God for the sake of its mission as the covenantal community. The wrath of God is poured out whenever Israel loses sight of its mission and compromises its ability to witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The prophetic texts not only call Israel back to this

mission, but they also describe the eschatological fulfillment of this mission in passages like Micah 4, in which we read about how all the nations will gather together at Zion in peace and worship.

While Wright focuses his attention on the OT texts in his missional interpretation of Scripture, others focus on the NT, for obvious reasons. Throughout the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus sends his disciples out on missions which correspond and reflect Christ's own mission to the poor and the weak (cf. Luke 9-11). Jesus begins his ministry in Luke by identifying himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . ." (Luke 4:18ff.). The Synoptics present a Jesus who identifies himself with the hungry and the naked, and who calls his disciples to follow him in faithful obedience by "taking up their crosses" in radical discipleship (cf. Matt. 10:38, 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Taking up one's cross thus means living in mission: it is a life *in via*, a life that follows the way of the cross. And, of course, any account of mission in Scripture has to take account of the so-called "Great Commission" (Matt. 28:19-20), where Jesus sends the church out to baptize the nations. Those who are disciples of Christ are sent out to disciple others. We are called to be "ambassadors for Christ," as Paul puts it (2 Cor. 5:20), which takes the doxological shape of baptism and eucharist. Most importantly, though, we are called to "love God" and "love others," including both neighbors and enemies (cf. Matt. 5:44, 22:37-39 and par.). In this twofold commandment of love, the so-called "Jesus Creed," we find the NT summary of our mission as God's people.

In recent years, the Gospel of John has become the central text for grounding missional theology. Whereas the "Great Commission" was once the rallying cry for a theology of mission, now missiologists turn to John 20:21, in which Jesus declares, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (cf. John 17:18). The primal mission is therefore the one in which Jesus, the Son of God, is sent *by* the Father *into* the world. The Father is identified as the authoritative sender by Jesus himself throughout the gospel of John. The fact that the Father is the sender grants authority to Jesus as the one who reveals the Father and sends the church in his name. The divine mission has its basis in the Father's missionary will to save the world rather than condemn it (3:17). Jesus, the one sent by the Father, is the one who then acts as sender of the church (cf. 13:20). In correspondence to his own mission, Jesus sends the church "into the world" (17:18). Just as Jesus is the plenipotentiary of the Father in the world, so too the church is the plenipotentiary of Jesus in the world. Jesus is sent in his Father's name (5:43), while the church is sent in the name of Jesus (14:13, 15:16). Interestingly, Jesus speaks of the church as those "given to him" by the Father (17:2, 11-12), and because they are given to him, Jesus can then send them out as "his own" people, his own flock (10:14).

All of this is only a taste of the missionary material in the Gospels, which is itself only a taste of the missionary material in the rest of the NT. While missional theology finds plenty in the Gospels to exegetically substantiate its claims, no missional theology could possibly ignore the Acts of the Apostles. As the continuation of the Luke's Gospel, Acts narrates the incipient mission of the church. Together, Luke-Acts encapsulates the twin emphases in missional theology: the mission of God in Jesus Christ, and the mission of the church in pentecostal correspondence to Christ's mission. It is one of the great failures of Jaroslav Pelikan's commentary on Acts that he entirely ignores mission as a topic of discussion. Remarkably, he

disregards Acts 1:8 altogether, which functions as the “thesis” of the book as a whole: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The Pauline and Johannine letters are no less missionary in nature, though to discuss them here would take far more space than we can allow. Suffice it to say that Scripture is a thoroughly missional text. In the narrative of Holy Scripture, we learn that God is a missionary God and the church is properly a missionary church.

2. Church History and Missional Theology

The history of the church, however, shows that we have departed rather far from the text of Scripture. While the church has always engaged in mission, the understanding of mission in the church has primarily been shaped by a non-missional, Constantinian interpretation of Scripture. A lot of this can sound like theologian sloganeering, but there is serious content behind the faddish use of language like “Constantinian” or “Christendom.” Missional theology helps refocus our look at church history. Instead of aiming our polemic at the Hellenization of theology—as true as this may be in certain respects—we might rather wish to aim our polemic at what David Bosch calls “the ecclesiasticization of salvation” (*Transforming Mission*, 217) and the corresponding institutionalization of mission.

Bosch argues that the problem has its historical origin in the Donatist controversy. While Augustine rightly argued that the church is not a “refuge from the world,” pure and without sin, he ended up identifying the ecclesiastical institution as the sole bearer of salvation. Augustine fought against the Donatist schism by arguing that one’s relationship with God was dependent upon one’s relationship with the visible, institutional Catholic Church. As Bosch puts it, “authority and holiness were regarded as adhering in the institutional church whether or not these moral and theological qualities were in evidence.” As Cyprian famously put it: “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,” “there is no salvation outside of the church”—meaning, outside of the institutional Catholic Church. The consequence of this position is that the mission of the church is equated with the spread of the institutional structure of the church. Hence, the church fulfills its mission through cultural imperialism: “converting” others by making them members of the visible ecclesial structure via the necessary rites, regardless of whether or not they become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. It is only a short step from this to the unification of the church’s structure with the structure of the state, so that the spread of the political empire is also the spread of the church’s empire. While Augustine was wise enough not to collapse the kingdom of God into the empirical, visible church, in later centuries this is precisely what the church did.

Missiologists often refer to this as Christendom or Constantinianism, because the essence of Emperor Constantine’s influence was to establish the church as an arm of the state, thus making the church primarily a visible, institutional, and political structure. Mission under the aegis of Christendom takes the form of Western imperialism, i.e., ecclesiastical, cultural, and political expansion. Within Christendom, Christianization and colonization are “two sides of the same coin,” according to Bosch. Salvation means being included within the visible church, which effectively meant becoming part of the Roman empire, or becoming part of whatever empire was later symbiotically joined to the Catholic Church. Bosch notes that even in 1919, Josef

Schmidlin could say that mission is determined “by the doctrine of the visible church and its hierarchical structure.” Salvation is defined by one’s location within the hierarchical order of the church, since the church, according to Catholic theology, holds the “power of the keys.” They are the dispensers of salvation and damnation. Those who are included within its visible institution are “saved,” while those who remain outside of that structure are damned.

Missional theology is a post-Christendom, post-Constantinian theology. That is, it seeks to understand mission in the context of the separation between church and state and the corresponding marginalization of the church from sociopolitical life. Missional theology asks anew what mission and salvation look like when the church is not wed to the visible structures of imperial culture. To put it simply, missional theology seeks to give Scripture a fresh hearing beyond the shackles of a symbiotic relationship between church and state. For centuries, Scripture’s witness to the church’s “ministry of reconciliation” was silenced or ignored because of the presupposed Constantinian constitution of the church and the corresponding ecclesiasticization of salvation. As a result, one sees that, throughout the history of the church, theologians and church leaders have claimed that the apostolic ministry of the church ended with the original apostles. With the conclusion of Paul’s ministry, the church’s mission took the form of institutional expansion. Such a reading allows biblical exegetes to acknowledge the witness of the early church without applying their example to the church today.

Missional theology seeks to critically expose the problematic assumptions involved in this reading of the Bible, while at the same time providing an exegetically rich counterproposal: one that acknowledges the way the church has sought to extricate itself from the missionary call of God upon all Christians, while at the same time learning anew what it means to be the obedient and apostolic people of God. Missional theology argues for a dialectical understanding of the church as both visible and invisible, both a manifestation of God’s reign and a human witness to a kingdom that remains wholly other. Missional theology rejects the split between an apostolic era in which the Spirit blew freely and an institutional era in which the Spirit works only through the hierarchical structure of the clergy. Missional theology thus seeks to reconceive the nature of the church beyond Christendom and the nature of mission beyond institutional propaganda. Finally, missional theology understands both God and the church as intrinsically and primarily “missionary” in nature: God is a missionary God who commissions a missionary church. This is the insight which was lost to the church during its Constantinian captivity, and it is precisely this insight which we must recover anew today.

3. Dogmatics and Missional Theology

To say that we will now deal with the dogmatic *loci* in relation to missional theology is a bit misleading, in that we have been speaking theologically from the start. Theology is not something that we do only after exegeting Scripture and examining history; we are theological from the beginning. And yet I place it here only because it helps to understand that missional theology has some radical implications for our approach to Scripture and the history of the church. With that said, I will now briefly explicate the implications of missional theology for some various issues in dogmatics today.

3.1. *The doctrine of the divine attributes: God is a missionary God*

The central refrain of this paper is that God is a “missionary God.” Missional theology makes mission primarily about God, and only secondarily about the church. Missional theology’s most important contribution to theology, perhaps, is found in its radical re-conception of the divine being. While I will explore the implications of missiology for the doctrine of the Trinity in the next subsection, here I will suggest that one of the most significant contributions of missional theology is its addition of “missionary” as a divine attribute and its elevation of this attribute to central, even primary, importance.

Stephen R. Holmes, in his article, “Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology of God as Missionary” (*IJST* 8, no. 1 [2006]: 72-90), presents the case for understanding God as a missionary God. Traditionally, as Holmes says, “God *has a mission*, but God *is not missionary*” (72). The reason is that, for theologians like Augustine (with whom Holmes interacts in his article), the sending of the Son by the Father is an economic action only without any significance for God’s inner triune life. Holmes thus asks the following question:

When Jesus says ‘As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you,’ is he speaking of a merely economic event, essentially foreign to the life of God, or is he linking the life of those who participate in the apostolic mission with the very life of God from all eternity? (79)

Holmes argues, on the basis of a theological exegesis of John 20:21, that the latter is in fact the case. As he states, “the apostolic mission is a reflection of God’s own nature and character, reflecting who God is from all eternity” (82). Clearly, we are already speaking about the doctrine of the Trinity, which is unavoidable. Here I only wish to point out that missional theology takes for granted an important biblical hermeneutic: the economic acts of God *ad extra* reveal and correspond to the immanent life of God *ad intra*. This is, of course, a thoroughly “Barthian” move. It’s no coincidence that *missio Dei* theology has an historical origin in a 1932 essay by Barth (“Die Theologie und die Mission in der Gegenwart”), in which he discusses the relation between mission and the Trinity.

The point here is that if we accept this hermeneutical move that identifies Jesus as God’s self-revelation, then it becomes clear that God is, within God’s own being, a God who sends and is sent, who commands and obeys, who witnesses and is witnessed to, who loves and is loved. As Barth puts it, God is the one who goes into the far country in Jesus Christ. And it is this concrete sending of God which is constitutive of the word “mission.” Our understanding of mission has to flow from God’s own mission in Jesus. God defines what it means to be missionary.

3.2. *The immanent and economic Trinity: God elects to be a missionary God from all eternity*

We have already waded into the deep waters of the doctrine of the Trinity. If God is missionary, then this means that we have already established an identification of the immanent and economic Trinity. What God does *ad extra* is definitive for who God is *ad intra*. This is a kind of dogmatic starting-point for any missional theology, because unless we are able to say from the start that God is a missionary God, we are not doing missional theology.

The more complex issue for theology today is the nature of the relation between immanent and economic. In current Barthian circles, there is a debate raging over Bruce McCormack's essay, "Grace and Being" (*Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 92-110), in which he argued that in Barth's mature theology of reconciliation, the doctrine of election logically precedes the doctrine of the Trinity. Opponents of McCormack argue that this compromises the freedom of God, because it implies that God is dependent upon humanity for God's own triune being. Proponents of McCormack's position respond that divine freedom is the freedom to become human, the freedom to reconcile the world in the history of Jesus. Furthermore, humanity is itself posited by God in eternity in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the subject and object of election, according to Barth. For this reason, Barth rejects the notion of an abstract *logos asarkos* in favor of a *logos incarnandus*, the Logos who is *to become incarnate*. The eternal Son exists from all eternity for the sake of the history of reconciliation actualized in the life of Jesus. Barth makes this point rather clear in his famous essay, "The Humanity of God," in which he says that God's divinity includes humanity. True humanity is the "humanity of God." Opponents will still maintain that we must have a logical priority of the Trinity in order to ensure that God could still be God without us. And so the debate rages on.

While I do not wish to enter into the full complexity of this debate, I will suggest here that missional theology offers a way to get beyond this impasse. If God is by nature missionary, then this means that God's very being is oriented toward the act of sending and being sent in the history of Jesus Christ. If, with Barth, we then ground the missionary being of God in the divine decision of election, we see that missional theology leads us in large part to affirm McCormack's position, but with the advantage of integrating McCormack's insight into a larger theological framework that connects the doctrine of God with the doctrine of the church. And so we can say that in the decision of election, God determines Godself to be God for us in Jesus Christ. God determines to be the God who goes into the far country, who sends and is sent. God protologically determines Godself for mission. Because the subject of this decision is Jesus Christ, the God-human, and because this decision is God's *self*-determination, we can affirm as a consequence that God's eternal being is determined by the divine mission of Jesus Christ, by the primal decision of election accomplished in him. Mission is constitutive of God's being, because God has determined that this should be the case. In the election of Jesus Christ, therefore, God elects to be *Deus pro nobis* (God for us) and *Deus pro missionibus* (God for mission).

Another way of putting this debate is in terms of the relation between being and act. The traditional position which denies that God is missionary in the eternal being of God depends upon a priority of being over act. God's being is primary and prior, and God's act is secondary and derivative. Against this, Barth argued that God's being is *in act*, meaning that God's being is not some substance which then results in acts, but that God's act is God's being and vice versa. As Barth puts it, God's being is "actualized" in the history of God in Jesus Christ; or as Eberhard Jüngel puts it, explicating Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, God's being is *in becoming*. By positing mission at the heart of God's being, missional theology takes its bearings from this actualized doctrine of God. There is no room for a gap between God's being *ad intra* and God's mission *ad extra* in a missional conception of God. As John Flett puts it in his 2007 dissertation:

The distinction between God's act of redemption and God's being in himself . . . is demonstrated to be false at the outset. . . . The Father's sending of the Son in the power of the Spirit is not a remedial work for a fallen world. It is God's self-declaration of who he is in himself from eternity. . . . God is a missionary God; in his self-determination, the apostolic mission belongs properly to the eternal life of God. (*God is a Missionary God: Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 327-28)

At the heart of missional theology is the rejection of a split between being and act in dogmatic theology, beginning with the doctrine of God but continuing throughout the other *loci* as well. While I will explore some of the implications of this move for other doctrines below, here it should suffice to point out that missional theology proffers a way of overcoming the present impasse regarding the being of the triune God in Barthian theology. Such debates have focused on the doctrines of election and the Trinity without understanding both in the context of the eternal *missio Dei*, a mission grounded in God's eternal election of Jesus Christ. In that primal decision, God determined to be God for us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the Father who sends and commands, the Son who is sent and obeys, and the Spirit who empowers and unites both. God's missional decision to go into the far country is therefore one that is constitutive, primarily, of what it means to be God, and, secondarily, of what it means to be human. In other words, God protologically determines to be a missionary God, while God determines humanity eschatologically to be the missionary people of God. Both are actualized in the missional history of Jesus Christ as the God who is with us and for us from all eternity.

3.3. *Christology: hypostatic union as mission*

I have spent most of my time on the doctrine of God only because I think some of the most radical and lesser known implications of missional theology are found in that doctrinal *locus*. That said, if God is indeed a missionary God, then no dimension of theology will be untouched by having a missional starting-point. Certainly, christology is no exception. We could spend a great deal of time examining the nature of Christ's life of ministry as the actualization of both the divine and human dimensions of mission: as true God and true human, Jesus actualizes God's mission of reconciling the world to Godself as well as the corresponding human mission of faithful obedience. We could also investigate how the atonement should be understood as the fulfillment of God's mission, standing as it does within the larger framework of God's covenant relationship with humanity. These and other topics are all worthy avenues of theological inquiry which demand further exploration.

In this brief section, I only wish to demonstrate the way the incarnation itself is redefined within the context of missional theology. Towards this end, it is worth highlighting a much overlooked comment by T. F. Torrance, who wrote back in 1954 that it is "one of the most pressing needs of theology to have the hypostatic union restated much more in terms of the mission of Christ" ("The Atonement and the Oneness of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7, no. 3 [1954]: 246). Torrance suggests that we connect the actualism of Barth's theology with missiology. The actualism is well attested by Barth himself, and has been explored by numerous scholars of Barth, most notably by McCormack. As Barth states in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2: "We have 'actualised' the incarnation" (105). Barth posits an historical event in which divinity and humanity can only be understood in the light of the mission of reconciliation accomplished in

this unique, concrete history. According to Barth, “In the existence of Jesus Christ it is a matter of the *common* actualisation of divine and human essence” (*CD IV/2*, 115). The hypostatic union is not a static reality fixed at conception, as the traditional formulations portray it; on the contrary, the union of divinity and humanity is a dynamic event realized in the history of Jesus Christ. Again we encounter the split between being and act. Against the notion that Christ’s being is prior to his active existence, Barth’s mature christology—which is a thoroughly *missional* christology—understands the *unio hypostatica* as an event in which Christ’s being is in act. In the context of a truly actualistic ontology, there can be no gap between the reality of Christ’s two natures and his personal life history. For this reason, McCormack argues that “we would do better to think of the hypostatic union in actualistic terms as a *uniting*, rather than as a completed action, a union” (“Participation in God, Yes, Deification, No,” 355).

Already we have the basis for a missional redefinition of the incarnation. While an actualistic ontology is certainly right to note the way being is constituted in act, we must go further and define this act concretely as mission. Actualistic thinking is right as far as it goes, but we must remember that we are concerned with a particular kind of act, viz., the act in which God goes into the far country, in which Jesus ministers to the poor and sinful, the sick and needy. We must define act in missional terms. And this will mean that we not only have an actualistic ontology, but a *missional ontology* in which divine and human being is a *being-in-mission*. Consequently, in our dogmatic thinking, we must not only actualize being, but *missionize* it as well. And this applies as much to the hypostatic union as it does to the being of the church or the being of God.

3.4. Ecclesiology: worship as mission

The implications of missional theology for ecclesiology are, not surprisingly, numerous, so I will only mention a couple here. The first is another instance of the split between being and act. In ecclesiology, this gap takes the form of a split between worship and mission. The church is ontologically “located,” so to speak, in the liturgical worship of the community, traditionally in the eucharist. This liturgically established community then engages in mission in the world. In other words, worship precedes mission, in the same way that being precedes act. Evidence of this gap is found wherever we find theologians speaking of the eucharist as that which “makes the church,” which is common among the Catholic and Orthodox, but also among many Lutherans and Anglicans. These so-called “high church” communities make liturgy, and not mission, constitutive of the church’s being.

Missional theology redefines the church on the basis of a missional ontology. The church has its being in act, which means it has its being *in mission*. The church worships precisely as it participates in the mission of God, and the church’s mission of proclamation *is* its worship. The liturgy and sacraments not only exist for the sake of the church’s mission, but they need to be grounded in mission. Worship flows from mission just as much as mission flows from worship. Worship and mission both conform us into faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Ideally, however, and this leads us toward eschatology, worship and mission ought to be identical with no gap at all between them. In the kingdom of God, worship *is* mission.

Here and now, worship and mission form a dialectical pair: the church not only sends out; it also gathers together. Missiologists refer to this as the centripetal and centrifugal dimensions of the

church's identity. A centripetal force is one that moves toward a center, while a centrifugal force is one that moves away from a center. Worship is the centripetal aspect of the church, while mission is the centrifugal aspect of the church. We “gather together” for worship, and are “sent out” in mission. We need both movements together in our ecclesiology. Any priority of one over the other would result in a lopsided doctrine of the church and most likely reflects a misunderstanding about the relation between being and act. And yet the dialectic of centripetal and centrifugal is not a static Kierkegaardian dialectic. On the contrary, the dialectic moves dynamically toward the eschatological reign of God. Worship and mission do not exist for the sake of the church but for the kingdom of God. Mission does not “gather together” simply to expand the institution of the church. Instead, the institution of the church worships together and engages in mission as part of its ongoing witness to the reigning Jesus Christ. Insofar, then, as the “center” is located in the earthly ecclesial community, then both centripetal and centrifugal forces will be transcended by and sublated into the center that is Christ. But even if our “center” is Christ and his reign, we are still sent out in mission as his ambassadors, even as we come to him in worship and adoration. For Jesus never gathers the community together without sending them out as his faithful witnesses.

3.5. Ecclesiology: mission as translation

In this important subsection, I will highlight the influence of a post-Christendom perspective upon ecclesiology. I noted above how the history of the church is marked by the “ecclesiasticization of salvation” and the corresponding institutionalization of the church. Part of this legacy involves what we now refer to as cultural imperialism: the replacement of one culture by another through the use of force. This occurred in Christendom because of the mistaken notion that the church itself is a culture. As a result of the Constantinian lack of separation—or, positively articulated, symbiotic union—between church and state, the institutional Catholic church grew to understand itself as a particular culture: the culture of those in power. To be “Christian” meant to act and live in a particular way, defined by whatever socio-cultural power the church had aligned itself with, whether Roman or German or French or American. The practices of the church became manifestations of a general “Christian culture.” Hence the uniform use of the Latin language in liturgy and Scripture, to take just one example. In the American evangelicalism within which I was raised, there was a similar union between Protestant Christianity and conservative politics made in the late 1970s. This is another form of Constantinianism, in that it weds the gospel to a particular culture, whether British imperialism, German fascism, or American conservatism. The result is an ideological pseudo-gospel, one that turns God into an object for our use, an object which we can control and exploit to justify our own practices and enforce those practices upon others. In this context, mission becomes what Lamin Sanneh calls “diffusion”: the spread of a cultural institution which imposes the imperial culture upon the receiving culture. Diffusion begins with a cultural norm and then subsumes all other cultures within its structure as it spreads.

By contrast, at the center of missional theology stands what Andrew Walls calls the “translation principle.” According to Walls, the uniqueness of Christianity is found in the fact that “God chose translation as his mode of action for the salvation of humanity. Christian faith rests on a divine act of translation: ‘the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.’ . . . Incarnation is translation. When God in Christ became man, Divinity was translated into humanity, as though

humanity were a receptor language” (*Missionary Movement*, 26-27). Central to the “translation principle” is that in any translation, we move from particularity to particularity. We move from one specific language to another specific language, from dialect to dialect. As Walls notes, “no one speaks generalized ‘language’; it is necessary to speak a particular language” (27). We see this most clearly and profoundly in the event of the incarnation itself: God “became *a person* in a particular locality and in a particular ethnic group, at a particular time and place” (*ibid.*). If we then allow the incarnation to define for us the essence of any theological form of translation, we must conclude that translation is always “culture-specific.”

This primal act of translation is fundamentally basic and paradigmatic for all other translations within the Christian narrative. Any further examples of translation will be concrete and culture-specific. The effect of this is most clearly seen in the church’s mission of evangelism and witness to Jesus Christ. Within Christendom, mission took the form of institutional expansion, which effectively meant that cultural particularities were dissolved into the universal imperial culture of the church. The concrete details of language, custom, dress, and rituals, among other things, were all swept away to make room for the one “correct” culture, the ecclesiastical culture which was the bearer of salvation. Against this, missional theology conceives of mission as cultural translation: the church translates the good news of Jesus Christ into a form that communicates to particular people in particular times and places. The mission of the church thus exists in concrete correspondence to the mission of God in Jesus Christ. And because the church serves a missionary God, we have to reorder the relationship between God, church, and mission: it is not that God gives the church a mission in the world; on the contrary, *the God of mission has a church in the world*. Mission is primarily what God realizes in the history of Jesus Christ, and the church participates in this mission through its faithful and contextual witness.

Andrew Walls clarifies the nature of mission as translation through a dialectical pair of terms: (1) the “indigenizing principle” and (2) the “pilgrim principle.” According to the “indigenizing principle,” God accepts us “as we are,” which includes the fact that “we are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by ‘culture’ in fact” (*Missionary Movement*, 7). Mission thus affirms the unique cultural particularities of each person. We see this confirmed in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. In contradistinction to the Judaizers of the early church, the leaders of the council decided that Christianity is self-indigenizing: the gospel indigenizes itself in specific cultural communities. Consequently, “no group of Christians has therefore any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place” (*ibid.*, 8). This has radical implications for how we conceive conversion. Missional theology destigmatizes the foreign concepts and practices of other cultures, recognizing that the gospel is infinitely translatable. Christianity does not conduct a Borg-like assimilation of other cultures; rather, the church engages in the process of translating the gospel in ways that affirm the unique particularities of other people groups.

Standing in a necessary dialectical tension with the “indigenizing principle” is the “pilgrim principle.” If the gospel indigenizes itself in other cultural communities, the gospel also enters these communities as a disruptive and apocalyptic presence, calling them outside themselves (*extra nos*) and into the kingdom of God. The gospel of Jesus Christ makes every person a pilgrim. It interrupts us with a new *telos*—a new divinely ordained end—one that leads out of

our sinful incurved existence (*homo incurvatus in se*) toward the eschatological reign of Christ. The word of God comes to us as both affirmation and negation, both a No and a Yes. It says Yes to our concrete particularities, while saying No to the human impulse to remain safe and comfortable, to refuse the radical call of discipleship which invariably involves death and resurrection. The gospel seeks both affirmation and transformation, both indigenization and pilgrimzation. According to Walls, the pilgrim dimension of the gospel “whispers to [the Christian] that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system” (ibid.). The word of Jesus Christ is an incarnation which is also an in-breaking, a translation which is also a transformation. In other words, where the indigenizing principle emphasizes *particularity*, the pilgrim principle emphasizes *universality*; the former acknowledges our embodied identity, while the latter acknowledges that our identity is redefined by our participation in the covenant people of God, the universal body of Christ. As Christians, we are given a “common inheritance,” welcomed into the one kingdom of God, and yet we are welcomed as culturally distinct individuals shaped by our families, groups, and societies. Both principles must be held together in a necessary tension; they cannot be sublimated into some higher synthesis.

Lamin Sanneh adds two further principles under the notion of translation. He begins by noting that Christianity is “polycentric,” meaning that in the process of translation, the church does not move from one central cultural norm to other cultures that are, in themselves, alien to the gospel. Rather, the church moves from one center to another center, in that the gospel finds a home in every culture. From this he derives two important principles or ideas: (1) destigmatization and (2) relativization. First, according to Sanneh, the gospel *destigmatizes* those cultures which may have been identified as “pagan,” “profane,” or somehow excluded from the mission of the church. Every culture can be a witness to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ; no culture is precluded or disbarred from the proclamation of the gospel. Second, the gospel *relativizes* all cultures, so that no one language or culture becomes the sole bearer of revelation. Sanneh writes:

The fact of Christianity being a translated, and translating, religion places God at the center of the universe of cultures, implying free coequality among cultures and a necessary relativizing of languages vis-à-vis the truth of God. No culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive access or advantage to the truth of God, and none so marginal or inferior that it can be excluded. All have merit; none is indispensable. (*Whose Religion*, 105-06)

According to Sanneh, no culture or language can be absolutized as the normative vehicle for the Christian message. While each culture presents the gospel in its own unique way, the divine word of revelation relatives these concrete forms of Christian faith. No culture is divinized, including the Jewish culture assumed by the Son in the incarnation. No culture is closed to radical interruption and transformation; a translatable gospel is antithetical to any fossilization of culture. Instead, the gospel calls for the continuous conversion of all cultures to the reign of Jesus Christ. Finally, all cultures are both friends and foes of the gospel. As Walls notes, the Christian gospel says both Yes and No. Translation always involves this dialectical relationship with language, culture, and the world.

3.6. Eschatology: the eternity of mission

We come finally to the subject of eschatology. It is widely held as self-evident that mission is only something God engages in as part of salvation history. Mission is the task God accomplishes in order to bring humanity into a reconciled relationship with God, and once this task is complete, mission will end. Most people simply take this idea for granted. But again we have to notice that this position depends upon the same disjunction between being and act in the life of God. God's act of mission is limited to the space of world history, while God's eternal being continues throughout eternity. If, however, we accept the notion that God's being is in act, and thus God's being is in mission, then we cannot hold the position that mission ends with the world history, because then God's own being would end.

Missional theology answers this dilemma by understanding the historical actualization of God's mission as the temporal manifestation of who God is from all eternity. The word "missionary" is descriptive of God's eternal being, as I argued above in the first subsection. And in the second section, I argued that God is missionary precisely because God is defined by this divine orientation toward the historical event of Jesus Christ. God is missionary by nature, because God is the one who goes into the far country by nature. God is the one who goes to the cross. This attribute of God is not limited to temporal world history; on the contrary, this is descriptive of God's eternal reality, including both pre-temporal and post-temporal eternity.

The eschatological implication for reconciled humanity is that we are not finished with mission when we are finished with our earthly lives. If we were, then the gap between worship and mission in the church would be perfectly acceptable. Our ecclesial worship would be a proleptic realization of what we will experience throughout eternity, while our ecclesial mission is limited to what the church accomplishes within time and space. And this is precisely what churches like Eastern Orthodoxy assert: their eucharistic liturgy is a participation in the divine worship in the heavens, while mission is the institutional expansion (or "diffusion," to quote Sanneh) of the church. By contrast, missional theology asserts that our eternal destiny is mission. Our participation in God now takes the form of mission, and so our participation in God in eternity will take the form of mission. The problem most people have with this view stems from the fact that we naturally identify "mission" with "conversion," as if the two are essentially synonymous. But conversion is only a subset within the larger framework of mission. If we understand "mission" in terms of cultural translation and centripetal and centrifugal actions, then perhaps we might begin to sketch an alternative missiological eschatology.

Missional theology interprets our eschatological participation in God as the consummation of our apostolic existence. Since conformity to Christ takes the shape of mission, our being-in-eternity will involve the fulfillment of this conformity. We will become what we are in Jesus Christ. In him, we are all apostolic witnesses to the good news of our reconciliation; in our eschatological being, we will become the image of the Son and thus our identity as God's adopted children will become manifest in the eternity of our missional existence. Mission is thus never completed. Instead, mission continues throughout eternity as the unfolding of the inexhaustible plenitude of the gospel. We are eternally sent out into the new creation and gathered together in the New Jerusalem. The eschaton does not nullify but rather glorifies the cultural particularity and

diversity of God's redeemed creation. The concrete, indigenous particularities of our earthly existence are taken up into eternal fellowship with God. In the same way that the resurrection eternalizes the humanity of Christ in the context of his being-in-mission, so too the general resurrection of the dead eternalizes our own culturally diverse human nature in its being-in-mission. We are not resurrected into some generalized reality. The same specificity seen in the incarnation is evident in the resurrection as well. Jesus remains a unique human person. The resurrection is another instance of the translation principle, one in which human particularity is now elevated and exalted into its proper mode of existence in communion with the triune God. Our eschatological resurrection dignifies each distinct cultural community, ushering each person into the repletion of God's mission. A missional eschatology recognizes that apostolicity does not end with temporal history; rather, in eternity, we become truly apostolic. We enter into the fullness of our faithful obedience as witnesses to the glory and grace of God. And like the four living creatures of John's Apocalypse, we will proclaim throughout the new heavens and new earth: "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come."

5. Conclusion: Why Missional Theology?

This essay has explicated why I think missional theology could be a revolutionary force in modern theology. But why is this the way forward? A theology can be radical but still be unhelpful and even wrong. In this concluding section I will briefly explain why I think missional theology is the future of theology.

First, missional theology upholds many of the key dogmatic insights of the so-called "radical Barthians" (Bruce McCormack, Robert Jenson) while augmenting their positions with a far more robust ecclesiology. Barthians tend to be weak on the church, primarily because of their emphasis on natural theology, the divine attributes, election, christology, and soteriology. Jenson, in particular, separates the church from the gospel. For him, the church receives the gospel as an act of cultural interpretation, which constitutes the task of theology, and then the church engages in the mission of witnessing to this interpretation of the gospel in the world. As a result, mission takes the form of diffusion and replication of a gospel wedded to a particular culture. The church exists, in Jenson's theology, to pass on the old word in new forms, but these forms are determined by the "culture" of the church before the church ever engages in the task of mission. Consequently, Jenson upholds the doctrine of apostolic succession, which creates a split between the apostles in the past and those who simply carry on the word of the apostles in the present. Even more surprising is Jenson's identification of the risen Jesus with the body of the church, the *totus Christus*. But this christological identification of Christ with the church makes sense in light of his own non-missiological ecclesiology. When the church replicates and interprets Jesus to the rest of the world, the church becomes the authority, instead of standing with the rest of the world under the authority of Jesus Christ. Against Jenson's disjunction between worship and mission, between church and gospel, missional theology carries through the actualistic ontology of these "radical Barthians" into every dogmatic *loci*, including ecclesiology. Moreover, missional theology offers a possible solution to the current debate between "radical Barthians" and "traditionalist Barthians" regarding the relation between Trinity and election. In short, missional theology is the future of Barthian theology.

Second, missional theology rescues mission and evangelism in a post-colonial era. It is commonly felt that the entire topic of missiology is inextricably linked to colonialism, and sadly much of what passes for missiology in conservative American circles, at least, still amounts to the same Christendom rhetoric. What missional theology attempts to do is redefine “missionary” from the ground up, neither dispensing with the notion (as the so-called “liberals” advocate) nor assuming that it involves the replacement of a “pagan” culture with a properly “Christian” culture (as others advocate). To engage in mission is to do the work of translation, and that involves attending with care to cultural particularities and seeking to proclaim the gospel in the context of each unique cultural community. This approach offers a new future for mission beyond the shackles of colonialism and Western imperialism.

Third, missional theology can help mend the divisions between more “conservative” and more “liberal” approaches to the task of theology. The former take a more so-called “biblical” approach, grounding theology in the exegesis of Scripture. The latter take a more “contextual” approach, in which the reading of Scripture takes place within particular cultural contexts—hence giving rise to the term “cultural hermeneutics.” Both sides are fundamentally mistaken in their one-sidedness. The “biblical” method (for lack of a better term) is naïve to think that a reading of the Bible can somehow stand outside of any cultural context. Moreover, their approach results in a divinization of the Bible—parallel to a Catholic or Orthodox divinization of the church—and fails to see that the Bible itself is a product of cultural contexts. The “biblical” approach fails precisely because it does not begin with the contextual nature of the incarnation, but instead begins with quasi-divinized text in which all cultural particularities, whether on the part of the text or the interpreter, are disregarded.

The “contextual” camp, by contrast, fails to hold the “pilgrim principle” in dialectical tension with the “indigenizing principle.” While contextual theology is correct in its acknowledgement of our cultural frameworks and their significance for biblical exegesis, it fails to see that these frameworks are not ultimate. The contexts within which we articulate the gospel are subordinate to the eschatological reign of God actualized in the mission of Jesus Christ. The gospel comes as an interruptive presence in the midst of our cultural communities. We need both a “cultural hermeneutic” and an “apocalyptic hermeneutic,” together grounded in a “christological hermeneutic.” Jesus Christ is the unity between human culture and apocalyptic in-breaking. Our interpretation of Scripture thus needs to start from God’s self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, not by finding a *via media* in the “conservative”-vs.-“liberal” debate, but by transcending that debate altogether. Against both sides, missional theology holds out the promise of a theological hermeneutic which takes Scripture and culture into constructive consideration. By sublating both positions into the missional event of Jesus Christ, we discover a way of thinking theologically which recognizes the gospel as both self-indigenizing and pilgrimizing, both embracing and disruptive.

Fourth, missional theology is thoroughly ecumenical without sacrificing theological distinctives or dogmatic concerns. Missional theology was born in the age of the World Council of Churches and twentieth-century ecumenism. While the ecumenical movement has largely faded from view, missional theology is still growing and maturing. It suggests that we might see a renewed passion for ecumenism, one that acknowledges denominational and theological particularity while finding its starting-point in the universal *missio Dei*.

Fifth, missional theology takes pneumatology with utmost seriousness. I might have given some the impression in the third section of this paper that pneumatology is somehow marginal, but just the opposite is the case. I did not add a section on pneumatology here only because there is nothing particularly unique about how missional theology approaches the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, other than the obvious point that the Spirit empowers and sustains the mission of Jesus Christ and the mission of the witnessing church. In the Spirit, the mission of God is held together. The Spirit is the future of God and the future of the church, and in the power of the Spirit, God and the people of God are propelled toward their common future in the covenantal communion of the new creation. If missional theology adds anything to our pneumatology, it is that we cannot think about God or the church without attending to the Holy Spirit.

These are only five of the ways missional theology represents the future of modern theology. I have attempted to be thorough but not exhaustive in my treatment of this subject. While it might be hyperbolic to suggest that theology should become missional or die, I do think that missional theology provides a way of addressing most of the major theological problems that we face today. Moreover, if Barth was right that all theology is church theology, in that theology must serve the mission and witness of the church, then we can hardly do better than to adopt the insights of modern missiologists and missional theologians. This will involve rejecting false dichotomies between being and act, worship and mission, clergy and laity, sacred and profane, time and eternity, God and humanity, as well as others. Most importantly, however, it begins by recognizing that we serve a missionary God—the God who was, is, and always will be the sending and sent God—and we serve this God as a missionary church sent by the Father to witness in faithful obedience to the incarnate Son in the power and love of the Holy Spirit.

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