




Chapter 12

Mission studies: The inevitable for theological studies

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Introduction

When writing about missiology/mission studies within the African context, it is important to take cognisance of the fact that when Christian mission came to Africa at the beginning of the fifteenth century, ‘there was no developed theology of mission’ (Oborji, 2020:6). Currently, we are writing and studying mission and missiology mainly from a post-Christendom perspective in the West, and in the global world with a mixed (syncretistic) perspective of traditional beliefs, Christendom, and post-Christendom societies. But mission is from everywhere to everywhere.

In a post-Christendom society, mission and mission studies are scrutinised by society in general, and by many churches and academic institutions all over the world (cf. Mashau, 2012). Bosch (2012:2) describes it as an attack on mission from the inside and the outside. This chapter attends to the following questions: Does mission studies still belong in theological education as one of the theological disciplines? How does the church in a post-Christendom society, and in an African society, relate to mission? To answer these questions, we first need to understand what mission and whose mission?

Background

The content of mission is always contextually determined since it is God’s engagement with people living in a specific context and in a specific time in history. In this sense, mission is about God’s continuous story of engagement with his

creation. Considering this, we find various descriptions and motivations of mission from different times and persons. John Bavinck writes:

The history in mission shows a great diversity in motivation. Some missionaries were motivated by an ascetic view of life and chose missions as a form of self-denial; others were stimulated by a desire to hasten the return of Christ; and frequently missionary work has been connected with a tendency to spread Western culture, regarded as far more superior to all other forms of life. At times missionary activity became part of colonialism, a task of the government more than of the church (Bavinck, 1960:3).

From this extract, it is clear why in our time, especially in the global world and Africa, mission is scrutinised from the 'inside' and the 'outside'. According to Bavinck (1960:6–7), Dutch Calvinist theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) may be viewed as the father of Reformed mission. Voetius understands the goal of mission, namely the conversion of the heathen, as subordinate to the planting of the church (*plantation ecclesiae*), which in turn is subsidiary to the highest aim – the glory of God. He then also views God alone as the sender of people. In Bavinck's view, Warneck understands the basis of mission not only as biblical but also as historical and ethnological. As such, mission has a twofold basis: first, we are sent by God, and second, heathenism also desires the gospel. Warneck agrees with Voetius 'that God himself must be viewed as the *auctor primaries*, the unique sender'. He differs from Voetius, however, in that he does not view the church as the instrument of God, but rather *Die Gemeinde*, a circle within the church, an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, which is driven to a love of missions by the Holy Spirit (cited in Bavinck, 1960:6, italics in the original).

Anderson (1961:3–16) identifies three trends of theology of mission amongst Protestants in the twentieth century. The first trend is a deepening thrust toward the reformulation of mission theology, which he ascribes to the following two

characteristics: 'the progressively deepening confrontation of church and mission with theology', and 'the progressive narrowing of the gulf between Church and mission from 1900' (Anderson, 1961:4).

The second trend in the developing theology of mission in the twentieth century was the diversity of Protestant attitudes toward people of other faiths. Under the influence of D.L. Moody, at the beginning of the century, we find a passion for souls and emphasis on the approaching judgement day, with the obligation to save people from eternal damnation. In 1932 we see a change when the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry issued a report entitled *Re-Thinking Missions: A Layman's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*, which stated:

[T]he aim of mission is 'to seek with people of other lands a true knowledge and love of God, expressing in life and word what we have learned through Jesus Christ'; that 'the Christian will regard himself as co-worker with the forces which are making for righteousness within every religious system'; that 'the relation between religions must take increasingly hereafter the form of a common search for truth'; and that the missionary 'will look forward, not to the destruction of these [non-Christian] religions, but to their continued co-existence with Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the completest religious truth'. (Anderson, 1961:9)

Dr Hendrik Kraemer acknowledged that God is known through his creation and the conscience of human beings; however, he emphasised that the 'general revelation' can only be discovered in light of the 'special revelation' (Jesus Christ) and, as such, is an object of faith (cited in Anderson, 1961:11).

The third trend Anderson refers to is the development of a theocentric point of departure with a trinitarian perspective of mission theology (we will attend to this later).

There have been attempts from the culture-centered, man-centered, revelation-centered, eschatology-centered,

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kingdom-centered, Bible-centered, Church-centered, and Christ-centered points of view. ... when any one of them has been made the central point of focus and orientation for the theology of mission, it has proven inadequate for the task, tending to narrow the scope of the mission, and causing it to go astray. (Anderson, 1961:15)

Mission in general, but more specifically the traditional understanding of mission, came under heavy attack particularly from the 'mission field' when decolonisation in Africa started in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In one year alone, 1964, four books attacking mission and missionaries appeared, all written by missiologists or mission executives: R.K. Orchard, *Mission in a Time of Testing*; James A. Scherer, *Missionary, Go Home!*; Ralph Dodge, *The Unpopular Missionary*; and John Garden, *The Ugly Missionary*. More recently, James Heissig (1981), ..., has even characterised Christian mission as 'the selfish war'. (Bosch, 2012:2)

However, without going into much detail, the paradigm shift to the theocentric and trinitarian understanding of mission by Barth and others that developed into what is known today as the *missio Dei* (mission of God), brought some important corrections to mission and mission studies.

Whose mission?

When we need to answer the question of whose mission, we, as Christians, are obliged to answer the question about mission and missiology from a *missio Dei* perspective. The discussion does not start with the church (what she should do), or with the missionary (what she or he must believe or do), but with God – with who God is, what God has done, and what God is doing. An important perspective for understanding the mission of God from a trinitarian perspective is provided next. Although there are also other important insights from the trinitarian perspective, these will not be discussed here.

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To think and talk about mission from a trinitarian perspective helps us to escape the danger of thinking about mission only in soteriological or ecclesiological terms. *Missio Dei* was not a crisis response from God to the fall of humanity and therefore does not start with the incarnation of Christ. *Missio Dei* starts with creation – when God sent God’s Word to create everything that is and will be (Gen 1 and Jn 1). Cilliers quotes the following translation of Luther:

God the Father began and accomplished creation through His Word, and He also sustains it through the same Word. He abides in His handiwork ... How long could the sun, the moon and the whole sky continue to move as it has had done so for many thousands of years, how long would the Sun have been able to rise and set at its fixed time and place year after year – if God, who made it, did not sustain it daily? If God withdrew His hand, would home and earth and all things not soon fall apart in a heap? All the power and wisdom of all the angels and men would not have been able to sustain the creation for one moment. The Sun would not have shone in the sky for long, no child would be born, no grain of wheat, grass or anything else would sprout from the earth or be renewed, if God did not keep it. If the Creator withdrew His hand for a moment, everything would soon break apart and perish. Therefore, we confess: I believe in God the Father, the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth...If God, who created us, also not sustained us, then we would have died and perished long ago, even in the cradle and in birth (Cilliers, 2021:22).

In this light, we understand that ‘God’s mission is creation, and God’s creation is God’s mission’ (Cilliers 2021:22, italics in the original). It is clear from Scripture that God’s Word is not only focused or directed at humans and sin but also creation, the wind, snow, rain, etc. (examples in the Book of Psalms). Understanding God’s mission as creation prevents us from understanding the *missio Dei* only as spiritual or heavenly; it is about everyday life in this world with all its brokenness.

The incarnation of Christ does not contradict God's mission as creation, but rather underlines or even fulfils it. The Word became flesh; it became human for the sake of creation, humans, and human bodies.

The incarnation could be called a 'supernatural' event, that is, an event 'above and beyond' nature; but it could also be called a 'natural' event – Jesus being born as a baby, a real baby. This baby is not 'above and beyond' nature, not supra-natural, but rather 'with and within' nature, rather intra-natural. (Cilliers, 2021:23)

This implies that the *missio Dei* is about being and becoming human. 'We are not human in order to become Christians, rather Christians to become human' (Cilliers, 2021:23). In Christ we are recreated/reconciled to the image of God, as we were originally created by God. The *missio Dei* is about people – people living on the edge, suffering, and trying to survive life. But the *missio Dei* is also about inhumane people, self-directed people, living *incurvatus in se* (turned inward on oneself). However, Christ did not only come for the sake of human beings but all of creation. The apostle Paul reminds us that the whole of creation is suffering and yearns for the fullness and final unification of all creation under Christ (Rom 8; Col 1).

Pentecost is a further underlining and fulfilment of God's creational mission. Although the outpouring of the Spirit might be viewed as a supernatural event, the Spirit is not poured out on the supernatural, but the natural.

'Spirit' here does not indicate a type of 'spirituality' that hovers above and beyond humanity or contradicts our bodily existence. It rather sanctifies our bodies, indeed sanctifies life, or better reminds us of the sanctity granted us on the grounds of our being-created-by-God. (Cilliers, 2021:24)

God's Word had one body, but the Spirit expands this one body. Through the Spirit, God sends his Word into all flesh. As

believers, we have the privilege to participate in the *missio Dei*, when the Spirit speaks, like Jesus did, in human words.

The Spirit now speaks in a *polyphonic* manner, with a variety of (human) voices, and in a *pluriform* array of spaces and places. This means that it can be misunderstood and misused, as proven by history. (Cilliers, 2021:24)

Missio Trinitatis Dei is about this life, this earth, and these people; it is about the Alpha and the Omega; it is about a relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, here and now and forever.

What mission?

In attending to the question, ‘What mission?’ this section will provide some definitions of missiology and mission to elucidate the theme to assist the reader in forming an understanding of these concepts.

According to Oborji (2020:3) and Verkuyl (1981:19), missiology studies the salvation acts of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit focussed on the whole world to bring the existence of the Kingdom of God into being. It studies God’s command to the church throughout the world, to preach the whole gospel, in word and deed, in dependence on the Holy Spirit to all mankind.

Sunquist describes missiology as follows:

Missiology is then a major dimension of theological study. It is a study that moves toward an understanding of God; it’s a study of God’s nature and activity in sending to his creation prophets, priests, kings, and even his own Son to bring about and then announce the redemption of his world (Sunquist, 2013:8).

Ott, Strauss & Tennent propose the following:

In a sense, all theology is mission theology in that nearly all biblical-oriented theology will, or should, in one way

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or another relate to God's missional purposes in the world and the missionary character of God. In the words of Martin Kahler, 'The earliest mission became the mother of theology because it attacked the contemporary culture.' (Ott et al., 2010:xviii)

Kirk describes the theology of mission as follows:

The theology of mission is a disciplined study which deals with the questions that arise when people seek to understand and fulfil God's purposes in the world, as these are demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus Christ. It is a critical reflection on attitudes and actions adopted by Christians in pursuit of the missionary mandate. Its task is to validate, correct and establish on better foundations the entire practice of mission. (Kirk, 1999:21)

The following extracts give further definitions of missiology/mission:

So, to be 'missional' has everything to do with the sense of having a 'mission', to be 'sent' or 'commissioned'. It points towards attempts to establish meaningful contact with other people with the purpose of influencing their lives. (Paas, 2019:5)

Still, what God has provided for us in Jesus Christ and what the church proclaims and embodies in its mission and evangelism is not simply an affirmation of the best people can expect in this world by way of health, liberty, peace, and freedom from want. God's reign is more than human progress on the horizontal plane. So, if on the one hand, we assert God's 'yes' to the world as expression of the Christian's solidarity with society, we also have to affirm mission and evangelism as God's 'no', as an expression of our opposition to and engagement with the world. (Bosch, 2012:11)

Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as

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God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation. (Wright, 2006:22-23)

Mission is part of life; as humans, we cannot not 'missionize'. Moreover, mission is intrinsically connected with the Christian core experience of Jesus and his story. (Paas, 2019:8)

Missions is the term usually given to those undertakings by which the heralds of the Gospel are sent by the Church and go forth into the whole world to carry out the task of preaching and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ ... The special purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization and the planting of the Church among those peoples and groups where she has not yet taken root (*Ad Gentes* [AG 6], in Oborji, 2020:135)¹

Thus, we can summarize 'mission' as everything the Church is called to say, do and be in this world, as a witness to what God has done in Christ with a view to the coming of his kingdom. (Paas, 2019:13)

We must acknowledge that there is still only one mission, the *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* can be described as the outreach of the trinitarian God to his creation, to sustain, liberate and save his creation. As the church, we have the privilege of being elected to participate in this mission. 'A missionary is an apostle, one who is sent from the heart of God to proclaim the present and coming Kingdom of God to all the nations of the earth' (Sunquist 2013:8). The church, the congregation, is also sent as a missionary into this world, and not only a few individuals.

1 It is important to notice the difference in understanding between the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the Protestant churches in the current understanding of mission. Where the protestants focus on God as the sender, the RCC focuses on the church as the sender. While the purpose, according to AG6, is the planting of the church, Voetius goes further and says the purpose is the glory of God.

However, in a post-Christendom society, mission and missiology are more complex; being incarnated in different contexts and cultures asks for a multidimensional and pluriverse understanding of mission and missiology (Saayman, 2013:135). It is in this regard that Bosch (2012) referred in his ecumenical paradigm to mission as ‘mission as’ adding an applicable ‘action word’ for the context, for example, as liberation, as a quest for justice, as contextualisation, and as liberation. From these examples, it is clear that mission has to do with the transformation of societies so that people may experience the fullness of life.

Salvation

Although creation and salvation are the head and tail of the same coin, salvation is a fundamental concept of every religion. However, if we understand the *missio Dei* as God’s creating, sustaining, liberating, and saving actions in creation, as argued above, then missiology is the studying of these actions of God, and mission is participating in these actions. Paas (2019:197) states that experiencing God and knowing about God is not the same as receiving salvation. Salvation entails a forgiving and healing relationship with God and the participation in the local, national, and international community of believers in restoring relationships in society. The essence of salvation is the restoration of relations and community.

We are created *imago Dei*, which implies that we are relational beings since the trinitarian God is a relational God. Therefore, salvation is not an end in itself, but salvation to participate in the *missio Dei* as a member of the community of believers. As Christians, we believe that God has brought salvation for all of creation in and through Jesus Christ. It is this conviction that has motivated Christian mission throughout history to mediate salvation for all. Bosch (2012:402) sees the soteriological motif of the gospel as the ‘throbbing heart of missiology’. Therefore, the scope of salvation, however we define salvation, will determine the scope of our missiology.

When we think and talk about evangelism and salvation, Christians should do it from a trinitarian and *missio Dei* perspective. Sunquist (2013:335–339) discusses this perspective by mentioning the following important points.

- It is important not to get caught up in conversations and questions for which we do not have the answers, for example: What is the actual state, place, or condition of heaven or hell? We do not know, and we will never know, but we must not get sidetracked by these and other unanswerable questions. What we do not know may not prevent us from faithfulness in what we do know.
- Salvation is much more than only spiritual.
- Salvation involves a redeemed life lived now, in Christ, as well as our life of suffering faithfulness for others, and our eternal life in Christ. Salvation ‘wholeness’ comes through confession of sin and repentance, but it has physical, emotional, social, and spiritual implications (Ps 32). Salvation divides us from some people and unites us to others ... Salvation has comprehensiveness ... It relates to all of a person ... A person or culture cannot be redeemed quietly, on the side with no one noticing. (Sunquist, 2013:337)
- All salvation is in and through Jesus Christ.
- We must be clear about what salvation is from. We are saved from something and to something. ‘Whether people realise it, acknowledge it, or avoid it, sin is the ever-present enemy of every human being, dragging us down to sickness, death, and separation from God. We are saved from our sins and the results of sin’ (Sunquist, 2013:337).
- Paul preached that all people will be resurrected, but not all people will be resurrected to the same place. Therefore, resurrection is a key term in both salvation and judgement.
- God uses people to bring other people to salvation. Although God can and might use other means to save people, his normal way is through human relations.
- Salvation is part of God’s calling. Salvation is never an end in itself, but for the purpose of declaring God’s glory and living fully in and for Jesus Christ.

Ott et al. (2010:318) ask three important questions regarding mission, namely:

- Is it too narrow and intolerant to advocate that Christ is the only way to salvation?
- How could a good and righteous God under any circumstances condemn people to eternal conscious punishment in hell?
- Is it not unfair of God to condemn people who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?

From these questions, it is clear that from the modern and postmodern paradigm, the idea of salvation from the outside, from God, and totally out of reach and control of humans, became problematic. This led to questions like the above as well as to different views on salvation. However, these questions and views are misleading because they are based on an abstract concept of 'truth' and a modern concept of 'religion', instead of on the Saviour, the person of Jesus Christ. In relation to this we need to take cognisance of the following positions regarding religion and its implications for our understanding of salvation as described by Sunquist (2013:334):

- The atheists' position: No religion is true, or all religions are equally untrue.
- The absolutists' position: Only one religion is uniquely true. One form of this is the earlier Roman Catholic theology of *extra ecclesia, nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church).
- The relativist's position: Each religion is true, or all religions are equally true.
- The inclusivists' position: One religion is true for all, or all religions have some part of the truth of the one religion.

In a post-Christendom era, we must rethink the meaning of salvation guided by the trinitarian understanding of God. Bosch (2012:405) argues that salvation remained the motivation in the lives of modern people, but it was radically redefined. There were mainly two reactions to modernity and

postmodernity. The first reaction was to ignore the challenges of modernism and postmodernism and continue defining salvation in traditional terms. The second reaction was responding to the challenges of modernity and postmodernity:

By rejecting the view according to which Jesus died a substitutionary death for humankind and thereby propitiated God. ... Here not the person of Jesus was at the center but the *cause* of Jesus; the *ideal*, not the One who embodied the ideal ... In this paradigm, sin is defined pre-eminently as *ignorance*. People only had to be *informed* about what was in their own interest. The Western mission was the great educator, which would mediate salvation to the unenlightened. (Bosch, 2012:405)

Yet a third reaction is the view of salvation as 'shalom', and the establishment of the kingdom of God, which is more comprehensive. Diverse contexts and various cultures bring to the fore different understandings of salvation. It is important to realise that a 'pure' supracultural Christianity is impossible; Christianity only exists as an ever-increasing variety of cultural expressions (Paas, 2019:17). Thus, all paradigms – traditional, modern, and postmodern, and all cultures and contexts, need salvation. As such, in a modern industrialised and secularised West with all its technological processes, salvation would look different to the majority world where many struggle with poverty. In the majority world, salvation 'manifests itself in the struggle for (1) economic justice against exploitation; (2) human dignity against oppression; (3) solidarity against alienation; and (4) hope against despair in personal life' (Bosch, 2012:406). Therefore, we may and cannot limit salvation to an individual's relationship with God; relationship influencers like secularisation, hatred, injustice, oppression, war, and other forms of violence all represent evil. For this reason, 'concern for humaneness, for conquering of famine, illness, and meaninglessness is part of the salvation for which we hope and labour' (Bosch, 2012:406).

The crisis in a modern society like the West is the understanding of salvation when the world's needs and

solutions are presented as independent of Jesus Christ. Paas (2019:xv) describes it as follows:

[It] hit[s] you with double strength when you notice that people can be really happy without religion, and that they do not need God either to care deeply about fellow humans, or to give to charity. In most of them you do find this sense of emptiness, or the vague sense of guilt that can be found among non-believers or ex-churchgoers in more religious areas. ... but it is purely a matter of individual appeal.

The modern and postmodern culture, which no longer accepts the reality of the spiritual world as experienced and believed in most global world countries, working with an abstract concept of 'truth' and a modern concept of 'religion', also experiences and creates a (spiritual and salvation) crisis in and for the global world. I am referring here to what people like Myers (2011) and Moon (2017) refer to as the missing/excluded middle. The missing/excluded middle refers to the West's non-recognition of the spiritual world, the world of 'curses, amulets, charms, etcetera'. It is easy for the West and the North to ignore the 'spiritual world' because in modernism and postmodernism, we live with a dualism between the spiritual and the physical world. Myers gives the following example: 'Loving God is spiritual work, and loving neighbours takes place in the material world. So, evangelism (restoring people's relationship with God) is spiritual work, while social action (restoring just economic, social, and political relationships among people) is not.' While in the Bible and the majority world there is no division between the spiritual and the physical, they have a holistic worldview, 'with the spiritual and the material worlds interrelated in a seamless whole' (Myers, 2011:7).

The dualistic worldview also creates some controversial arguments in the West and post-Christendom about what is mission and what is not, as is clear from the example given by Myers.

Salvation may never be seen as salvation out of this world, but always the salvation of this world. Salvation is also always in and through Christ, and in the human community focused on the whole and healed world. This brings us to another challenge described by Paas (2019:187), that modern Christians, particularly Protestants, tend to separate their Christian identity from participation in a local faith community here and now.

Church

As disciples of Christ, the church, and individual members of the church, have the privilege to obediently participate in God's mission with gratitude and joy. Thus, mission belongs to God. God's church does not have a mission, but God's mission has a church (cf. Bosch, 2012; Wright, 2006). The church, the congregation, is sent as a missionary into this world.

Salvation is impossible apart from the church, not because the church has received salvation as a possession and is now in the position to dispense it or withhold it from others. *It is instead because salvation is, in the first place, a distinct form of social existence.* To be saved is to be made part of a new people and a new politics, the body of Christ. (Paas, 2019:192, italics in the original)

Just as salvation is impossible apart from the church, so is mission impossible apart from the church, because the church is the 'visible and present' body of Christ in this world. We have already argued that mission is the restoration and/or the renewal of relationships. The church is not just any group of people coming together, sharing their lives and experiences as a sort of 'therapeutic group' focussing on the individual needs of the participants. Thus, the church or faith community must have a positive and definite missional vision to participate in what God is doing not only in their faith community but more especially in society, to qualify as a church. For this reason, *'The church is seen as essentially missionary: [...]* Its mission is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent

and in building up itself for the sake of its mission' (Bosch, 2011:381).

As such, Christian identity is received through participation in the church. 'God has first and foremost a relationship with the Church and through the Church he builds relationships with individuals. To be a Christian means to belong to the Church, and so belong to God' (Paas 2019:191). Our Christian identity is found in our participation in the *missio Dei*.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that mission can only be understood as *missio Trinitatis Dei*. Mission comes from the being of the trinitarian God, and theological study is studies about God. Then it becomes clear, according to the understandings of missiology mentioned in this study, for example, as the study of God's nature and salvation acts in creation, that all theological study must have a mission intention and dimension. As was stated, mission is the mother of all theology. Missiology is a major dimension of all theological study; thus, any theological curriculum without missiology would be incomplete. This chapter therefore concludes that missiology or mission studies is essential to the theological curriculum, even more so in a postmodern, post-Christendom, and global world.

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