

# THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS

By Samuel Hugh Moffett

There was a time when nobody had to give lectures about the theology of the world Christian mission. A Christian did not feel the need to re-examine the theological foundation of world outreach for Jesus Christ. They did not need to ask why they had missionaries. They did not even ask very often what missionaries had to do — were supposed to do. It was axiomatic; it was simple; it was dangerous; and above all, it was overwhelmingly urgent. It was as simple as the command of Jesus Christ, and as urgent as life and death for millions upon millions who are dying without Christ. Every second saw more souls slipping into a Christless eternity. No one had ever given them a chance. No one had ever told them that they could live forever — in Christ. And faced with a challenge as simple as that, the Christian church exploded into what has been called the “modern missionary movement.” It could be almost described as a race against time and against the devil for the greatest of all prizes, the eternal salvation of the human soul. That’s the classic, perhaps the most familiar, theology of missions. It’s a salvationist theology.

Now if you are expecting me to ridicule that challenge, you are going to be disappointed, because it has never seemed ridiculous to me. In fact, it was basically that challenge that turned me into a missionary. I wanted to be a professor of classical Greek; and my father had often told me that if you could be anything except a missionary or a minister, be it. It’s not that he did not want me to be a missionary. I knew that. He did not want me to be a missionary for the wrong reason, that is, just because he was a missionary. My mother was a classicist, and so I majored in classical Greek. I wanted to be a professor of that fine subject.

And then the chairman of the board of Princeton Theological Seminary (in the 1940s) stood up in chapel one day. His name was Robert E. Speer. And he gave one illustration that I could not get out of my mind. He took off his wristwatch and he held it up, and he told those seminary students, including me, “Your watch could tick for nine and one-half years without numbering the lost souls in China alone.” Nine and a half years! A tick for each soul. Somehow I could not get that out of my mind, and I became a missionary to China.

I’m not going to ridicule that challenge — it still means the basic mission of the church to me. But you know as well as I that there came a day of the shaking of the foundation. The old urgencies were denied, or at least ignored. No one seemed sure of anything eternal anymore. So in a great deal of the world’s missionary thinking, the challenge

changed. The Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council in 1928 put it this way: "Our fathers were impressed with horror that men should die without Christ. We are equally impressed with horror that they should live without Christ."

I think most of those who accepted that statement were not considering it a denial of the old urgencies, but some of them were. And at least, it was a change of emphasis. My father was a delegate to that conference, and I can remember him coming back shaking his head. He was not quite sure about theological underpinnings. He had been at Edinburgh in 1910, and he came away from that exhilarated. Jerusalem left him a little shaken.

It was, I suppose, a strategic withdrawal to what was considered firmer ground. You may be able to deny — at least you can not prove to an unbeliever — that millions are dying into eternity without Christ. But, no one can deny that millions upon millions are living in misery and in filth and in hunger. No one can deny that. No one has ever given them a chance. No one has ever helped them to the life abundant that Jesus came to give. This was a challenge to a future not in the unknown beyond or outside of history. It was a challenge to a hopeful future in history. A future without hunger, and without hate; without sickness and without tears; where all men are brothers and all women sisters; and the nations shall study war no more, and justice shall roll down as the rivers roll into the sea.

So the church went forth to build the kingdom. That is the second, the more modern, theology of missions — the theology of the Kingdom. In its most popular form, in Latin America, it has emerged with some changes as a theology of liberation — liberation from all the injustices of life in this world.

Now, I am not going to ridicule that view either. It has never seemed ridiculous to me to feed the hungry, and to heal the sick, and to work for peace and against injustice and oppression. But, again, you know as well as I that the paralysis of doubt has struck again. The foundation shook; the roof fell in; the revolutions did not accomplish all they were supposed to accomplish. Human promises are not even as safe as God's promise to unbelievers. The unbelievers are beginning not to believe in their own revolutions (in addition to beginning to have their doubts about God). And this has happened within what too many had believed was the Kingdom — Christendom, the West. Here is the Kingdom of God. We build it here; we spread it around the world. And we have lost that kind of confidence, thank heaven. The Kingdom refused to stay built, and the builders of the Kingdom began to lose hope.

You see, the problem of our time in a theology of missions is that

neither pattern seems to be able to win a complete consensus within the church. We tend to move either in one direction or the other with our theology of missions. The savers of souls; the builders of the Kingdom. Now theologically, I think we have to begin by admitting that we do not save souls. The salvationist theology does not rest upon our efforts — it rests primarily and fundamentally in the grace of God. But, so also with the building of the Kingdom. No matter how well-intentioned your motives are, as you vote for one man or the other for president, neither one of them is going to build the Kingdom. You will have to take a lesser choice, and you will have to get back to theology, not political science. In fact, today, it is the older theology of mission that is picking up strength again — the classical theology of salvation — rather than the newer “kingdom” theology of mainline churches like mine (if you have to separate them).

It is the salvation theology that for the last twenty years has been the basic driving power behind contemporary world mission outreach. Contrary to popular church opinion, the number of overseas missionaries sent from North America across the world is not declining. It continues to leap upward. In five years, from 1975 to 1979, overseas missionary personnel from North America, calculated on a year of service per person basis, so that you could include both short termers and career missionaries, shot up from about 35,000 to 53,000 in just five years, an increase of almost 50 percent. That means that the North American missionary force is actually growing year after year at an average rate three times that of the United States’ population. That is the good news.

The bad news comes from my side of the American church scene — the mainline denominational side. The bad news is that none of this dramatic explosion in contemporary North American missions can be credited to the mainline churches as denominations (the larger ones). The increase is mainly outside the so-called religious establishment. David Stowe who was with me in China, a Congregationalist, a United Church of Christ executive of the United Church’s Board for World Missions, and very much mainline, reported just three years ago three things: First, the traditional missionary sending system is stronger than ever. Second, the foreign missionary force in North America is at an all-time high. Third, the center of gravity of Protestant missionary sending is shifting constantly away from the ecumenical agencies toward conservative and fundamentalist ones. That is David Stowe’s report.

And when I look at the stunning percentages of decline in overseas career missionaries in the major denominations, I have to report figures like this: Episcopal Church — 79 percent decline between 1972 and 1979. 79 percent decline in seven years! My own church, U.P.C., at that time

it was U.P.C.S.A., United Presbyterian Church, 72 percent decline. United Church of Christ — 66 percent. Methodist — 46 percent. By contrast, here are some statistics from churches outside the National Council: Southern Baptist, plus 88 percent. Assemblies of God, plus 49 percent.

Well, actually in basic theological motivation and purpose, there may not be much difference between the savers of souls and the builders of the Kingdom. It is their theological substructures that seem to be so different. Basically both are operating on the principle of love. I will give credit to those who differ from me — their intentions are good. One is a concentration on love for individuals and concern for each human being's eternal welfare; the other is more generalized — love for all humanity, a concern for its present well-being. But, if you will forgive me, I am beginning to question how far one should go in making "love" the theological motive of the Christian Mission.

I know that sounds heretical, but was "love" the motive of the original mission of the church of Jesus Christ? On both sides, I think, of this missiological divide between the so-called liberals and the so-called conservatives, there has arisen a questioning about the absolute foundation. A search for a deeper, theological base for mission, a mission based not on love for individuals, not on our love of the church, not even on our love for all humanity in this disordered world, but a mission based squarely on God's love, not ours. Some have called this a new missionary theology. They have given it the name "missio dei" theology, the theology of the mission of God — the trinitarian God.

Unfortunately, it is hard to pin it down. It has produced so many contradictory interpretations that "missio dei" is virtually useless as a defining term. To some it means that mission is God-at-work-in-the-world-independent-of-the-church as in the other world religions. God at work in Hinduism; God at work in Buddhism; God at work in Islam. "Missio dei". Now that was not the idea of the one who coined that term, but it is partly true. The Christian need never be afraid or surprised to find the true, the good and the beautiful in other religions.

My father was a strict, old-school Presbyterian, very orthodox. He had a small statue of Buddha in his study. I often wondered how a man as orthodox as my father could carry around a heathen god. And he used it in an object lesson to Korean Christians — pastors who would come in and be equally shocked. And father would say, "Well it is beautiful, though, isn't it? And you really should be proud of everything in your own wonderful, national culture if you can remember that this is not a god. And if you do not give the impression that you are worshipping this as a god. If you can accept it as a beautiful piece of art, you do not need to be afraid of it. Remember the weaker brother. Sometimes people

misunderstand. Make very clear that they do, that this is not Jesus Christ, and Buddha is not the savior." But there is beauty; there is goodness; sometimes there is even truth in the other higher religions. Don't be afraid of that. Sometimes you can use it as a bridge if you are careful.

But any form of "missio dei" theology which bypasses the incarnate Son, the Savior Jesus Christ for other names, however good, however true, however beautiful they may be, runs the frightful risk of demonizing what is good and true and beautiful, which was, of course, the original sin. Remember, the demonization of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is still good and evil, but it can be demonized.

George Vicedom has a book simply called *Missia: The Mission of God (Missio Dei)*. He was the first to popularize the term, and he recognized this danger. He warned that we cannot minimize the power of evil even in the higher religions — power which can turn everything base into light and pervert everything good. That is why he writes, "Jesus understood the Lordship of God and the purpose of his sending to be this: that the works of the devil must be destroyed. And the prince of this world must be judged." "To this," said George Vicedom, "we must cling even at the risk of being fundamentalistic."

And he was no fundamentalist. His own interpretation of "missio dei" theology, which was the interpretation endorsed at a very important missionary consultation in 1952, is not a multi-religious mission. It was rather God's mission through Jesus Christ and the church. It appreciates truth wherever truth is found, but its mission centers in the truth as revealed in the One who said, "I am the Truth." Put very simply, this would say that the Christians' world mission is to break through any barrier that separates any part of the world from Jesus Christ and to tell the good news about Him to anyone who will listen in any possible way that they can understand. Any possible way they can understand! It is Christ-centered, but it begins with the love of God the Father, not your love for the perishing heathen.

Of course, love is fundamental. It was love that started the mission. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." It began with love. But that was the love of God the Father, and the missionary was God the Son. What is the missionary's motive? Can we find one in the Son? I am treading on dangerous theological ground when I begin separating the persons of the Trinity, but do it as an exercise, not as final truth.

I am not prepared to deny that it was love that brought Christ into the world on his mission of reconciliation. However, it may be worth noting that the Bible does not say so. It is full of His love for the world, His compassion that knows no bounds. But where are we told that He came

to the world because He loved it? Insofar as the Bible does distinguish between the Son and the Father in reference to mission, it tells us, it seems to me, that the Father founds the mission because He loves; the Son goes on the mission because He is sent. There is a difference. The motive of the Son, the missionary, is obedience. Look at the glimpse that Paul gives us into the mind of Christ before His mission. Philippians. The lesson is not love. The lesson is humility and obedience, even unto the death at the cross. He loves the world, of course, but He goes because He is sent. He loves the whole world, but He goes to the Jews because He is sent. That is the only explanation He gives of the apparent narrowness of His mission. "I'm not sent, but to the lost sheep in Israel." He loves the world enough to die for it, but He goes to the cross because He is sent. ("Not my will, but Thine be done.") It seems to me that the compelling, insistent motive of mission — a going mission — is obedience. God is love, but it was Christ's obedience that forged and incarnated that love into a mission.

Now, is not the lesson pretty much the same when we turn to the apostles, the first missionaries of the church. Was it love for a despised and rejected race that sent Philip to the Ethiopian? Not according to the record. "The angel of the Lord spoke unto Philip, 'Arise and go.'" And he obeyed and he went. Was it love that sent Peter to the proud and the unclean? To Gentiles like us? Not according to the record. "The Spirit said unto him, 'Arise and go'" and he went. Was it a passion for millions of lost Gentile souls, dying without hope, that first made Paul a missionary. Separate me Barnabas and Paul, says the Spirit, and obedience sent him almost reluctantly from his beloved Jews to the Gentiles. "The Lord commanded me saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles."

In the strange new world of the Bible, apostles and missionaries are made not just by looking at the world with compassion and love, but by listening to God in obedience. Now, do not misunderstand me. If you obey without love, you are not much of a Christian missionary. The missionary goes in love, but goes because he or she obeys. And here is where we begin to ask how do we know clearly enough to obey so simply?

Well, the first theological lesson in obedience is to make very sure that you are obeying God and not man. That you can say, "the Lord is sending me, the Spirit has spoken to me." And that is not a lesson I can teach you from theology. That is a lesson you will have to learn in your own deepening Christian experience. And that is the only basis you will have for mission as a missionary of God in Christ. We are simply not sent into the world to save souls — the Spirit saves souls. We are simply

not sent into the world to revolutionize society — the Kingdom of God comes not by men, but by the return of Jesus Christ.

There is one problem that you will have. How is it that when you go, people will not see you as obeying God or even responding in love? Most people will see you (if you respond to this call in obedience and in love) with skepticism, with antagonism. You will go out in obedience, you will go out to proclaim your love, and people will not necessarily believe you or follow you. Why should they? I am wondering if there is not another final lesson in obedience that we particularly here in the West must learn. I heard a young pastor years ago speak of the story of doubting Thomas. Why did the disciple insist on seeing the print of the nails? Why did he thrust his hand into the wound in the side? It was more than simply to identify the risen Lord, the pastor suggested. He said Thomas wanted to be sure that the Lord who was asking him to follow was indeed the same Lord who had suffered for him. Only then did he follow. And perhaps our trouble is that most of the world no longer identifies us with the cross of Jesus Christ. To most of the world, the symbol of the Western missionary — face this! — is not even the savior of souls or builder of the Kingdom. It is unjust, but to most of the world, the symbol of the Christian missionary is a soft, white, rich American. And why should the people follow that?

Do not misunderstand me. We are not asked to suffer. It is our Lord's suffering that we exemplify. But how can we ask the world to follow us to Jesus Christ until we are ready ourselves to follow Him? And He still says, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." And what have I really denied myself to be a missionary? I have had my problems. My father had more than I. But what real cross do I bear? It is an amazing war of theological assurance that the missionary engages in. We have confidence; we believe. But that rings true only in the obedience that we show the world to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is the mission of God; obedience to God; the following of Jesus Christ; and the listening and the empowering — our listening and His empowering — the Holy Spirit, that is ultimately the foundation of any missionary theology.