A THEOLOGY OF MISSION OR A MISSIONARY THEOLOGY? A BURNING QUESTION FOR TODAY'S CHURCH

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In 1965 I completed a three-year course in a British Bible college and began pastoral ministry in the university city of Cambridge. I have very many reasons to be thankful for my training, not least because it convinced me of the central importance of expository preaching and gave me an excellent biblical foundation for such a ministry. However, in one area in particular my training seemed sadly deficient: mission was absolutely marginal within the course, confined to occasional visits by people called, rather curiously, 'missionary statesmen'.

Recently I came across some words of Alexander Duff in which, reflecting on his preparation for ministry, he identified similar weaknesses in theological education in nineteenth-century Scotland. Like me, Duff was profoundly grateful for the blessings he experienced at his Alma Mater: it was said that he could never speak of Saint Andrews 'except in terms approaching sheer rhapsody'. However, addressing the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland in 1867 on the occasion of his election to the new chair of evangelistic theology, Duff noted one glaring omission from the theological curriculum during his student days:

> I was struck markedly with this circumstance, that throughout the whole course of the curriculum of four years not one single allusion was ever made to the subject which constitutes the chief end of the Christian Church on earth. I felt intensely that there was something wrong with this omission. According to any just conception of the Church of Christ, the grand function it has to discharge in this world cannot be said to begin and end in the preservation of internal purity of doctrine, discipline and government. All this is merely for burnishing it so as to be a lamp to give light not to itself only but also to the world. There must be an outcome of that light, lest it prove useless, and thereby be lost and extinguished. Why has it got that light, but that it should freely impart it to others?[1]

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1 Quoted by Colin Chapman, 'Mission and Theological Education'. Unpublished paper read at the inaugural conference of the British

The professorship to which Duff was inducted after this speech was intended to remedy the neglect of mission studies in the theological curriculum. It was the first chair of mission in Europe and represented a bold and innovative step in theological education.[2] Yet the experiment scarcely survived Duff's death in 1878 and mission studies has had a difficult time finding a home in the theological faculty ever since.

However, there are reasons to believe that the question of the relationship between theology and mission has now become an urgent and unavoidable one. In the first place, theological study on a traditional Western model faces a crisis of confidence. Among the many voices raised in protest against traditional patterns of theological education, we may note the words of a former Archbishop of Canterbury. Present patterns of training, says Robert Runcie, 'are either too academic or too influenced by university models'. He continues,

> The unsatisfactory aspects of the theological college syllabus are largely due to the fact that they are a boiled down version of an academic, university syllabus which is itself inadequate as Church theology.[3]

At the same time, the traditional Western approach to theological education has been widely rejected elsewhere in the world. By now we are all familiar with the critiques developed in South America, but elsewhere around the globe voices are raised against an approach to theology that is perceived to be too academic, too abstract and too remote from the actual tasks of mission and witness in a religiously plural world. Thus, some years back John Mbiti observed that the curricula used in theological seminaries in Africa showed them to be 'very much out of touch with the realities of African culture and problems'. Mbiti asked,

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and Irish Association for Mission Studies, Edinburgh, July 1990. I am grateful for the stimulus to my thought provided both by this paper and through conversation with the author on this subject.

2 The *first* chair of mission was that occupied by Charles Breckinridge at Princeton Seminary in 1836. See David Bosch, 'Theological Education in Missionary Perspective', *Missiology: An International Review* 10 (1982), p. 14.

3 Quoted by Michael Griffiths, 'Theological Education Need Not Be Irrelevant', *Vox Evangelica* 20 (1990), p. 8.

> Have we not enough musical instruments to raise the thunderous sound of the glory of God even unto the heaven of heavens? Have we not enough mouths to sing the rhythms of the Gospel in our tunes until it settles in our bloodstream? Have we not enough hearts in this continent, to contemplate the marvels of the Christian faith?.... Have we not enough intellectuals in this continent to reflect and theologize on the meaning of the Gospel? Have we not enough feet on this continent, to carry the Gospel to every corner of this globe?[4]

Mbiti's words clearly imply that Christian theology developed in Africa will be inextricably bound up with mission. Indeed, they reflect an awareness that a fundamental shift has occurred by means of which the real centres of spiritual vitality and missionary expansion are now located in the Southern hemisphere. Consciousness of this change is widespread in the Third World, and theologians in Africa, Latin America and Asia increasingly ask whether the churches in the West have yet awoken to the reality of this new era in Christian mission. For example, Choan-Seng Song notes that predictions concerning the growth of the Christian population in Asia, Africa, Oceania and South America, will mean that believers in the West will need to ask themselves some heart-searching questions.

> What will the future of Christianity be in their own lands? How are they going to recapture the power of the gospel, especially in those countries where there is increasing indifference to the church? And how are they going to relate to Christians in the Third World who will surpass them in numerical strength?[5]

This statement by an Asian theologian leads directly to the second factor which compels us to place the subject of mission at the top of the theological agenda today. When Duff spoke in 1867, very few of his contemporaries discerned the forces at work within the Victorian age, which even then were beginning to undermine faith and would result in the radical secularization of British culture. So far as they were concerned, mission was something done on a distant shore, among peoples unfortunate enough to live beyond the sphere of Christendom in lands benighted by the influence of

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4 John Mbiti, 'Christianity and Culture in Africa' in *Facing the New Challenges – the Message of PACLA* (Kisumu, 1978), pp. 275-8.

5 Choan-Seng Song, *The Compassionate God – An Exercise in the Theology of Transposition* (London, 1982), pp. 6-7.

'paganism'. Today the picture has changed completely; Christianity has ceased to be a European phenomenon and has become a world faith. Speaking of this development, Andrew Walls comments that signs of Christianity's decline in Europe became evident 'just as it was expanding everywhere else'.[6] This decline of faith in Europe has led to a situation in which a leading Christian thinker can argue that the most urgent missiological question today is *whether the West can be converted?* In this situation the subject of this paper would appear to be of critical importance; mission studies, so long left homeless, must be admitted to the seminary, not as a condescending act of compassion, but because this excluded and marginalized subject may be capable of revitalizing theology and offering the Western church a way to genuine revival.

Historical Perspectives on Mission Studies

In a series of writings the late David Bosch helpfully surveyed the history of theological reflection on the Christian mission.[7] It is not possible within the limits of this paper to discuss Bosch's survey of the different historical paradigms for mission. He observes that in the earliest period, mission appears to have been the natural expression of the life of the church. Witness to the world through words and deeds which reflect the truth and values of the kingdom of God was not something debated or discussed. Rather, Christians lived as strangers and pilgrims in an alien world and took it for granted that they were called to act as salt and light. In a context of cultural and religious pluralism, mission was neither an option nor a duty, but simply an integral part of what it meant to be Christian. Commenting on the unself-consciousness of the early church, one observer has concluded that ecclesiology is of little interest in periods of revival and missionary advance; in the 'first generation' the

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6 Andrew Walls, 'Christianity' in John Hinnells (ed.), *A Handbook of Living Religions* (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 67.

7 See *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (London, 1980); 'Theological Education in Missionary Perspective', in *Missiology* 10/1 (1982), pp. 13-33; *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Mission Theology* (New York, 1991).

absorbing interest is Christology and life becomes a doxology.[7]

David Bosch regarded the conversion of Constantine as the crucial turning point in the church's perception of its role within the world. Growing institutionalisation removed the sense of being a pilgrim people and mission became equated with church extension. For well over a thousand years mission was to be understood in relation to the *corpus christianum*. Bosch identifies certain key biblical texts which have been influential in each successive era of mission; he suggests that Luke 14:23 ('compel them to come in') sums up the missionary paradigm of the medieval church and that an attitude of superiority to those outside Christendom persisted well into the present century. Indeed, it is impossible to exaggerate the extent to which the ideology of Christendom influenced the churches in Europe. Even today, living amid the ruins of past ecclesiastical power, the mentality of the *corpus christianum* clings to us in all kinds of ways and continues to shape our thinking about mission.

However, within the last one hundred years mission studies (or, as our American friends prefer, missiology) has made its appearance and has sought entry to the divinity faculty. This very fact reflects a deepening awareness that the challenge of the task confronting the church in a pluralist world requires serious biblical and theological reflection on the nature of mission. In Bosch's words,

> the Christian church in general and the Christian mission in particular are today confronted by issues which they have never even dreamt of and which are crying out for responses which are both relevant to the times and in harmony with the essence of the Christian faith.[8]

Relationship between Theology and Mission

If the need for theological reflection on the task of mission in the modern world is increasingly recognised, there is no consensus as to how this laudable objective might be achieved. The problem is, where can this johnny-come-lately be accommodated? Traditionally the theological curriculum has been divided into three or four major subject areas. Biblical studies, dogmatics, and historical studies have formed the indispensable core of divinity courses, with

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8 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 188.

practical (or pastoral) studies added during the nineteenth century. It is not at all clear how these areas relate to each other, nor is it obvious how additional subjects (worship, for instance, or ethics) might find a place in such a system. Moreover, the approach to theological studies has tended to be highly academic. Colin Chapman has likened traditional courses in divinity to the first two years of pre-clinical medicine, with the critical study of the Bible, dogmatics and Western church history being comparable to courses in the basic sciences, anatomy and physiology. Introducing mission studies into this setting would seem to have as little hope of success as asking an order of monks committed to silence to accommodate an extreme charismatic.

This dilemma is reflected in the question which forms the title of my paper: 'A theology of mission or a missionary theology?' Of course one must be thankful that increasing attention is being given today to the theology of mission. In North America 'Schools of World Mission' have been founded in many leading seminaries and missiology is a high-profile subject. American missiologists such as Eugene Nida, Charles Kraft, Harvie Conn, and David Hesselgrave have produced work of very high quality and have offered considerable assistance to men and women called to communicate the message of the gospel across cultural boundaries.[9] However, the great disadvantage of this approach is that it leaves the study of mission isolated from the rest of the theological curriculum, perpetuating the impression that this is, after all, an optional concern likely to be pursued by enthusiasts. Worse still, this approach inoculates theological studies as such against the challenge and disturbance that will inevitably occur when missiological questions begin to be raised at the heart of the divinity school. Doubtless missiologists, who are inclined to employ insights from the social sciences in order to suggest more effective methodologies in cross-cultural communication, do need to

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9 See Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith* (Pasadena, CA, ²1990); Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (New York, 1980); David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, 1978); Harvie Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (Grand Rapids, 1984).

listen to the questions raised by theologians; but equally, given the condition of the world at the close of the twentieth century, theology simply cannot be done today without reference to the new era of world mission in which we find ourselves.

As long ago as 1948, H.P. van Dusen delivered a notable lecture in which he demanded that mission studies be given centre stage in theological education. His words appear to me to have a prophetic ring to them and they are worth quoting at some length.

> Christian mission which now holds an incidental and precarious position in so many seminary curricula, an addendum to the main subject matter, should move to a place of unchallenged centrality. It should be presented as the key to Church History, the seedplot of Christian Ecumenics, and the growing edge of Christianity's most vigorous and vital impact on the world of today and tomorrow, making far more urgent demand upon our attention and our devotion than homiletics, pastoral theology, religious education, or any of the other traditional instruments of perpetuating our familiar parish activities.[10]

Van Dusen's passionate plea leads us to consider what a genuinely missionary theology might look like today. At the risk of appearing presumptuous, let me suggest some of the likely consequences were missiological objectives to be allowed to shape the subject areas of divinity courses mentioned earlier.

The Challenge to Biblical Studies

It scarcely needs to be said that biblical studies would be released from captivity to an arid, purely technical approach to the text of Scripture. Such an approach, says Walter Wink, is bankrupt simply because it is incapable of making the Bible come alive so as 'to illumine our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation'.[11] By contrast, a missiological reading of the biblical text would reveal how the witnessing activity of the church is founded upon the *missio Dei* and it would shed new light on the manner in which *all* Scripture is useful in equipping the man or woman of God 'for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:16). For

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10 Quoted by Chapman, 'Mission and Theological Education', p. 14.

11 Quoted by Griffiths, 'Theological Education Need Not Be Irrelevant', p. 7.

example, I simply do not know how to avoid the missionary implications of the Song of Songs in a culture which has forgotten the meaning of pure love; nor can the apologetic value of Ecclesiastes be overlooked in an age of nihilism; while the message of Job leaps from the page with extraordinary relevance in a century that has witnessed the sufferings of Auschwitz and Belsen. When one moves to more familiar territory, say, the book of Psalms, or the prophets, not to mention the parables of Jesus, we have our hands full of material which is spiritual dynamite in post-modern culture.

Of course, a missiological reading of the Bible requires an openness to interpretations of the text from brothers and sisters who read Scripture from socio-cultural contexts different from ours. Let me cite just one example. Jeremiah's assault on what scholars have come to call the 'royal-temple ideology' was illumined for me recently when I read Kosuke Koyama's book *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai.*[12] Here is an Asian Christian attempting to understand what happened to his country and his people and discovering exact parallels between the temple liturgy denounced by the biblical prophet and the cult of the emperor in pre-war Japan. I now ask students to read Koyama as a modern interpreter of Jeremiah's temple sermon and then to reflect on the continuing danger posed by religious ideologies of various kinds in the modern world.

The Challenge to Dogmatics

In a similar way, opening up dogmatic theology to missiological perspectives and questions offers exciting possibilities for the revitalization of the subject. Bosch asks the question, 'How can so much of systematic theology remain blind and deaf to the fact that the total situation of the Christian church in the West and elsewhere is today a missionary one?' He quotes Martin Kahler as saying that theology is a 'companion of the Christian mission... not a luxury of the world-dominating church'.[13] The recent work of Lesslie Newbigin has been refreshing and stimulating,

12 Kosuke Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai* (London, 1984).

13 David Bosch, 'Theological Education in Missionary Perspective', *Missiology* 10/1 (1982), p. 27.

precisely because, I suggest, it has offered a missiological response to modern culture. In *Foolishness to the Greeks* Newbigin commented on the inadequacy of the North American approach to mission in these words,

> The weakness... of this... missiological writing is that while it has sought to explore the problems of contextualization in all the cultures of humankind from China to Peru, it has largely ignored the culture that is the most widespread, powerful and persuasive among all contemporary cultures – namely, what I have called modern Western culture.... It would seem, therefore, that there is no higher priority for the research work of missiologists than to ask the question of what would be involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and this modern Western culture.[14]

I would want to change only one word in this statement, replacing the American term 'missiologists' with the word 'theologians'. The encounter between the gospel and post-modern culture for which Newbigin so eloquently pleads, is surely a task so absolutely vital, yet so demanding and difficult, that it should be at the top of the agenda of every theological faculty and seminary.

However, it is important to add that this focus on the missionary challenge of the West, important though it undoubtedly is, should not blind us to the truly ecumenical dimensions of a genuinely missionary theology. We have a greater opportunity now than at any previous point in Christian history to discover the width, length, height and depth of the love of Christ 'together with all the saints' (Eph. 3:17). Indeed, theology will be better equipped to meet the challenge of mission in the West if it draws upon the insights into the meaning of the gospel provided by the churches of the Southern hemisphere.

The Challenge to Church History

Finally, what about the third main subject area of traditional theological studies, Church History? What would be involved in looking at the history of Christian expansion over the centuries from the perspective of mission? Andrew Walls, who has thought deeply on this matter over many years, suggests that 'the whole history of the church belongs to the whole church'. He writes, 'The global transformation of

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14 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks – The Gospel and Western Culture* (Geneva, 1986), p. 27.

Christianity requires nothing less than the complete rethinking of the church history syllabus.'[15] Here once again, the history of the expansion of Christianity across cultures during the past several hundred years is of enormous relevance to the missiological task now facing the church in the modern West. Moreover, the study of the history of the first evangelization of Europe is pregnant with lessons of vital importance to a church which now faces the challenge of the re-evangelization of the continent. Every morning as I walk to work at Northumbria Bible College, I catch a glimpse of the island of Lindisfarne along the coast. I am more and more struck by the fact that the missionary movement once centred on that island is not just of antiquarian interest, but offers us examples and principles that are of great practical value in relation to our task today.

Conclusion

The suggestion in my title that the place given to mission in modern theology is a burning issue is a none-too-subtle allusion to Emil Brunner's frequently cited statement that the church lives by mission as a flame lives by burning. If we take Brunner's words seriously and recognise that mission belongs to the very essence and nature of the church, then we are surely bound to conclude that we need not merely a theology *of* mission, but a *missionary theology*. We simply cannot afford the luxury of regarding mission as an addendum, something added to the existing curriculum in order to guarantee respectability. In a post-Christendom, pluralist world, we must recover the apostolic understanding of the church and its calling and recognise mission as inseparable from a life of obedience to Jesus as Lord. As Newbigin puts it, 'The word "You shall be my witnesses" is not a command to be obeyed but a promise to be trusted.' Only then will the church in the modern West rediscover its true nature and identity, recognising that it 'can never in any respect be an end in itself' but that 'it exists only as it exercises the ministry of a herald'. As Karl Barth puts it, 'Its mission is not additional to its being. It *is*, as it is sent and

15 Andrew Walls, 'Structural Problems in Mission Studies', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 15/4 (1991), p. 146.

active in its mission. It builds itself up for the sake of its mission and in relation to it.'[16] In such a church theology and mission become almost indistinguishable.

16 Quoted by Bosch, 'Theological Education in Missionary Perspective', p. 22.