

**The Place of Mission in New Testament Theology:  
An Attempt to Determine the Significance of Mission within the Scope of  
the New Testament's Message as a Whole**

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*What is the place of mission in the theology of the New Testament? After clarifying the nature of mission, New Testament theology, and Scripture, the present essay assesses the significance of mission within the scope of the New Testament's message as a whole. The author first surveys the New Testament theologies by Rudolf Bultmann, George Ladd, and N. T. Wright, then the theologies of mission by Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, and David Bosch. This is followed by a discussion of the biblical material focusing on John's Gospel. The article concludes with three important principles in determining the place of mission in New Testament theology.*

What is the place of mission in the theology of the New Testament? Is mission at the center of the New Testament's, indeed the entire Bible's, message, as many missiologists claim? Is mission merely a marginal component of the New Testament writings, as one is led to believe when sampling various New Testament theologies written in this century? In what follows, we will seek to locate the place of mission within the larger framework of New Testament theology. This will be done on the basis of surveys of both New Testament theologies and works on mission in the New Testament. But first a few preliminary remarks are in order.

**Prolegomena**

The task at hand makes it necessary for us to reflect on the nature of mission, New Testament theology, and Scripture.

First, determining the place of mission within the scope of New Testament theology requires at least a preliminary understanding of what constitutes mission according to the writings of the New Testament. In contemporary usage, *missions* generally refers to cross-cultural ministry. In biblical terminology, however, it appears that the cross-cultural aspect of Christian ministry is not a necessary part of mission. To be sure, mission may, and frequently will, involve the crossing of ethnic, cultural, or other boundaries (cf., e.g., Acts 1:8), but this is not an integral part of the New Testament concept of mission itself. Rather, mission in the New Testament usually centers around a person's (or group's) commissioning (e.g., Matthew 28:18–20; Luke 24:46–48; John 20:21–23) to a particular task, in the present case focusing on the proclamation of the gospel, the message of God's gracious salvation and forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus which is to be appropriated by faith. This soteriological focus rules out an understanding of mission that is conceived so broadly that the message of salvation in Christ is submerged under more general notions of "Christian service" or even lost altogether.

At the same time, the question arises whether it is unduly narrow to limit mission, in its New Testament usage, exclusively to direct verbal gospel proclamation. For there is some indication in certain books of the New Testament that other forms of Christian activity were considered to be part of the church's overall mission. In Peter's first epistle, for example, believers are frequently exhorted to respond to suffering in a godly, God-glorifying manner. To be sure, they are told always to be prepared to make a defense to everyone who asks them to give an account for the hope that is in them (1 Peter 3:15). But even where this is not possible, Christians' godly response to suffering, whether accompanied by verbal gospel proclamation or not, to give but one example, may

properly be considered to constitute *mission*, albeit more broadly conceived. Thus it appears inappropriate to dichotomize between verbal gospel proclamation on the one hand and a broader notion of Christian service on the other. The question is rather one of primary focus, in the present case the verbal, intentional, purposeful proclamation of the gospel message. But this should not be pressed to the extent that other legitimate aspects of mission are excluded, especially if it can be shown that the New Testament itself includes these within the scope of its presentation of Christian outreach.

Second, determining the place of mission within the scope of New Testament theology also requires an understanding of the nature of New Testament theology. In the words of the eminent conservative German theologian Adolf Schlatter, it is "not the interpreter's own theology or that of his church and times that is examined but rather the theology expressed by the New Testament itself" (1997:18). Thus New Testament theology, as a subset of biblical theology, is a task that is both historical and primarily descriptive. The *historical* dimension of New Testament theology brings into play our own presuppositions, convictions, and vested interests. As those engaged in mission or biblical studies, we inevitably approach the New Testament documents with our own understanding of the nature of mission and its place within the scope of the New Testament's theology as a whole. But as Schlatter (1997:18) reminds us,

It is the historical objective that should govern our conceptual work exclusively and completely. ...We turn away decisively from ourselves and our time to what was found in the men through whom the church came into being. Our main interest should be the thought as it was conceived *by them* and the truth that was valid *for them*. ...This is the internal disposition upon which the success of the work depends, the commitment which must consistently be renewed as the work proceeds.

The *descriptive* nature of New Testament theology entails that we set aside for the time being our concern for the contemporary application of the biblical message. At the proper time, this will, of course, be very important, and, truth told, this is also what fuels our interest in the present subject in the first place. But unless we are willing to let the New Testament speak to us on its own terms, we only deceive ourselves. We will merely find in the pages of the Bible what we have already determined to find there on other grounds. If we thus domesticate Scripture, we deprive ourselves of an opportunity to be instructed by, and even transformed by, Scripture, and we rob Scripture of its authority and preeminence. Although no one can claim to be able to escape completely his or her own preconceived notions of a given subject (our "pre-understanding"), this must not keep us from trying, and as we make this effort, we can do so with the expectation that our own views (and subsequent practice) will be increasingly, albeit not perfectly, conformed to the counsel of Scripture itself. This is what has in recent hermeneutical debate been called the "hermeneutical circle" or "spiral," a dialectical process between the self and the text by which the interpreter, through repeated study of the biblical message, approaches ever more closely an accurate understanding of the text on its own terms. Without this confidence in our Spirit-aided ability to apprehend the teaching of Scripture, we would sink into utter despair, into a relativism where any knowledge of absolute truth is excluded, and into a kind of epistemological solipsism (the autonomy of self in the process of arriving at knowledge) where human existence is ultimately absurd.

Third, it should be recognized at the outset that one's very conception of mission in the New Testament is closely tied to one's view of the nature of Scripture. Two primary approaches can be identified, a religion-historical one and a salvation-historical one. In its purest form, a history-of-religions model utilizes a comparative religions approach that views Scripture from an essentially evolutionary vantage point.<sup>1</sup> The history of Israel, the life of Jesus, and the development of the early church are viewed in terms of the evolution of human religious consciousness. This approach is anthropocentric; it focuses on the development of *humankind's* understanding of God, leading to particular concepts of God, forms of worship, and moral codes. Mission, likewise, is understood within this framework: it is part of humanity's emerging beliefs concerning God, including the

understanding that these convictions ought to be persuasively shared with others. Such a religion-historical approach finds in Scripture a progression, a dynamic, but one that is entirely rooted in human consciousness rather than in divine revelation. This history-of-religions model has devastating effects on one's view of Scripture (it is conceived entirely as a human witness to the emergence of religious consciousness in history); on the objective nature of divine redemptive acts, ultimately centering in Christ's substitutionary cross-death and resurrection (which are, in customary liberal fashion, viewed in merely mythological or existential terms); and on the deity of Christ (which is denied, with Jesus being viewed as merely a "Galilean peasant" or "Cynic sage" or the like), to name but a few of the most important implications. And where there is diversity in Scripture, no underlying unity may be found or should even be sought. For where there is no inspiring, revealing, redeeming God who intervenes in human history, there is no unity of purpose, but only diversity of human religious views.

For this reason the second approach, the salvation-historical one, is to be preferred. The term "salvation history" (German: *Heilsgeschichte*), of course, has been used in many different ways, not all of which are compatible with the view proposed in the present essay. A full-fledged critique far exceeds the scope of this presentation; we can only provide a brief description of a basic salvation-historical model that will be used in the remainder of this investigation. At the heart of a salvation-historical conception of Scripture is the notion of divine revelation. Salvation history is more than merely the evolution of human religious consciousness. It is rather the history of God's self-revelation in the form of both propositional self-disclosure (e.g., the Law) and redemptive acts (e.g., the Exodus). Scripture, according to this view, is not merely a human witness to the emergence of human religious consciousness, but rather the inspired record of God's revelation and redemptive acts in human history. This, too, involves progression and dynamism, but these are at the heart rooted in the sovereign plan of God rather than merely in human consciousness. There may still be diversity, as well as development, along salvation-historical lines and among different biblical writers, but there will also be an underlying unity and coherence to the counsel of Scripture, derived not from any human source but from the God who revealed himself, redeemed humanity, and inspired Scripture. This God is also the God of mission, the Lord of the harvest, the one who is carrying out his sovereign plan of redemption and mission in history to which the Scriptures testify.

We turn now to our discussion of the place of mission in New Testament theology. We shall first survey a selected portion of the relevant literature. In view of limitations of space, interaction will be focused on three significant contributions to New Testament theology: the New Testament theologies of Rudolf Bultmann, George Ladd, and N. T. Wright, and on two major works in the biblical theology of mission, written by Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller and David Bosch.

### **The Place of Mission in New Testament Theology**

In this section I will interact with the New Testament theologies of several major theologians, followed by a discussion of the theologies of mission found in the work of several major authors.

#### *New Testament Theology of Rudolf Bultmann*

In his famous opening statement to his *New Testament Theology*, Bultmann contends that the message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself (1951:3). For Bultmann, the theology of the New Testament begins with the *kerygma* (preaching) of the early church and not before. Bultmann claims that the dominant concept of Jesus' message, in keeping with Jewish apocalyptic expectations, is the reign of God. This message concerning the kingdom of God, according to Bultmann, is central to Jesus' call to decision. Following Wrede,

however, Bultmann adamantly denies that Jesus considered himself to be the Messiah. Jesus, he argues, was declared such only by the early church. This church, so Bultmann claims, presented itself as an eschatological sect within Judaism, distinguished from other sects by its belief in Jesus as Messiah and its conviction that the followers of Jesus constituted the eschatological messianic community.

Bultmann devotes an extended section of the first volume of his *New Testament Theology* to a discussion of the Gentile mission of the church (1951:65–92). Among the topics he surveys are monotheism, God as Creator and Judge of the world, repentance, the Day of the Lord, Jesus' role as the eschatological judge, the resurrection from the dead and the resurrection of Jesus, the sacrificial death of Jesus, the formation of the Gospels, the proclamation of the gospel (*euangelion, kerygma*), and the requirement of faith. Bultmann's casting of the Christian message against the back-drop of the contemporary religious environment is one of the strongest sections of this work.

Overall, Bultmann's treatment is very incisive, but his failure to root the mission of the early church in Jesus' messianic consciousness<sup>2</sup> renders his evaluation of the Christian mission rootless if not arbitrary. Also, it is unclear how Bultmann can ignore the salvation-historical unfolding of God's plan that pervades the entire Old Testament and is picked up repeatedly in the New Testament as well (viz., Luke–Acts, Galatians). The call and blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 in particular deserves much greater attention in light of further Old and New Testament references. Thus Bultmann's discussion of the early Christian mission becomes a mere exercise in the history of religions without rooting this mission in the history of Israel culminating in Jesus. A case in point is Bultmann's discussion of the Gospel of John, which is entirely dominated by alleged parallels to gnosticism while claiming that a salvation-historical perspective is lacking in John (1955:8–9).<sup>3</sup> In the end, Bultmann's radical dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith prevents him from seeing the continuity between Jesus' message and the missionary preaching of the early church that alone accounts for the rapid growth of Christianity in the decades subsequent to Jesus' ministry.

#### *New Testament Theology of George Eldon Ladd*

In his chapter on "The Messianic Mission," George Ladd describes Jesus' mission as the preparation of men and women for the future kingdom of God (Ladd 1993:181–192). Those who in the present decide for Jesus may partake of the future life of the kingdom already in the present. As the Son of God, Jesus brings the kingdom to humanity; as the servant of the Lord, Jesus is called to suffer vicariously for humankind (Mark 10:45; 14:24). Jesus' mission as the Suffering Servant of the Lord is already given expression by the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism where Jesus, in allusion to Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, is called to the mission of God's servant. To quote Ladd, "This allusion to the servant passage in Isaiah indicates that Jesus realized from the very beginning that his messianic mission was to be carried out in terms of the Suffering Servant of the Lord rather than in terms of the ruling Davidic king" (1993:184). Passages such as Mark 2:20 ("the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day") indicate that Jesus expected to die from the earliest stages of his ministry. The Gospels also make clear that Jesus understood his own death in terms of ransom (Mark 10:45) and the shepherd's substitutionary sacrifice for his sheep (Mark 14:27, citing Zechariah 13:7; John 10:11, 15, 17).

However, while Ladd gives adequate attention to the mission of Jesus and its centrality in God's plan, he does virtually nothing to relate Jesus' mission to the mission of the early church. The reason for this may be Ladd's commitment to biblical theology foremost as the study of individual biblical books in their own contexts. But biblical theology also entails the investigation of larger themes of Scripture (Carson 1995:24–25). In fact, if the study of the Bible stops short of this larger thematic level, it cannot be called "biblical theology" at all (Carson 1995:30–31; Gibson 1997). This major weakness in Ladd's treatment is to a small extent remedied by the appendix on unity and diversity in the New Testament added in the second edition by David Wenham (1993:684–719). Taking his

starting point with James Dunn, who contends that Jesus Christ, as the fulfillment of Scripture and the giver of the Spirit, is the center of the New Testament, Wenham argues for a broader center of New Testament theology, also taking into account God's plan of salvation and reconciliation for his people and the world (1993:712). According to Wenham, New Testament theology is about "the divine mission [of restoration] to the world," which he describes as follows:

1. The one creator God, the God of Israel, in his love and in fulfillment of the Scriptures, intervened through Jesus to complete his saving purposes through his people Israel and thus to bring a broken and hostile world back under his rule and to restore it to the love and perfection that God intended.
2. Jesus was the Spirit-filled Messiah of Israel and the Son of God. Through his life, teaching, and supremely through his death and resurrection, he announced and inaugurated the saving rule of God, inviting others to receive the divine gift.
3. Those who receive Jesus and his salvation by faith are through and with him the true Israel, children of God, having the Holy Spirit of sonship. They are called to live as a restored community in loving fellowship with God and with each other and to proclaim and live the good news of restoration in the world.
4. The mission of restoration will be complete at the Lord's return to judge the world, when evil will finally be overcome, God's people will be raised and perfected, and the whole of creation will be restored to its intended glory. (Wenham 1993: 712–713)

In light of our present concern, the question arises whether even Wenham gives mission its due within the context of New Testament theology as a whole. Does God conceive of salvation history in its entirety as a history of mission? Did he call Israel to participate in that mission, and if so, how? What is Jesus' role in the divine mission, both in relation to Israel and to the Gentiles? And how central ought mission to be in the life of the church in the interim between the exalted Christ's sending of his Spirit at Pentecost and Christ's return? These are questions that merit much more detailed exploration than is devoted to them by Ladd and Wenham.

#### *New Testament Theology of N. T. Wright*

In the inaugural volume of his yet to be completed five-volume theology of the New Testament, N. T. Wright sketches out the contours of what remains to be developed more fully in volumes two through five (Wright 1992). Wright contends that any work on New Testament theology must do justice to the historical, theological, and literary dimensions of the biblical text. Consequently, with regard to history, Wright's first volume focuses on setting Jesus' ministry in the context of Second-Temple Judaism and early Christianity. With regard to theology, Wright discusses the salvation-historical interconnection between Israel, Jesus, and the church. With regard to literature, he notes how later versions of the biblical story line, such as the Gospel accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry, pick up and further develop earlier aspects of Scripture.

In his critique of Bultmann, Wright points out that Bultmann sought to arrive at timeless theological truths by way of historical criticism and history-of-religions. Indeed, such a "timeless theology" is the real object of the historical quest. "Theology" thus becomes the "real thing" in terms of some aspects being "timelessly true" and others being "culturally conditioned." But, as Wright puts it, the problem is that "the skin does not peel away so clearly," so that "quite a lot of fruit has been thrown away, still sticking to the discarded skin" (1992:20). As Wright contends, "All of the New Testament is 'culturally conditioned': if that were to disqualify an idea or a theme from attaining 'relevance' to other periods or cultures, the New Testament as a whole is disqualified" (1992:20).<sup>4</sup> Wright's assessment of the new literary criticism is equally devastating. According to Wright, it is nothing but "an attempt to accomplish, within postmodernity, what Bultmann's package failed to accomplish within modernity" (1992:25).

Wright's own alternative is a "creative synthesis" combining "the pre-modern emphasis on the text as in some sense authoritative, the modern emphasis on the text (and

Christianity itself) as irreducibly integrated into history, and irreducibly involved with theology, and the post-modern emphasis on the reading of the text" (1992:26–27). The solution is not found by absolutizing anyone of the elements of history, theology, and literature, but in a balanced approach in which each one of these aspects is given its proper due.

The most important section in Wright's work for the present study is found in his survey of what he terms "the first Christian century."<sup>5</sup> Wright starts his discussion with the following observation: "The single most striking thing about early Christianity is its speed of growth" (1992:359). He quotes a statement by Martin Hengel who comments that "[t]he irresistible expansion of Christian faith in the Mediterranean world during the first 150 years is the scarlet thread running through any history of primitive Christianity" (1992:360, citing Hengel 1983:48). Wright continues, "This missionary activity was not an addendum to a faith that was basically 'about' something else (e.g., a new existential self-awareness). 'Christianity was never more *itself* than in the launching of the world mission' (Meyer 1986:18)" (1992:360). Wright concludes with this remarkable assertion: "World mission is thus the first and most obvious feature of early Christian praxis" (1992:361).<sup>6</sup>

In his survey of early Christian literature, Wright notes that the synoptic Gospels tell the story of Jesus as part of a much larger story, that is, the story of Israel, a story that is to function as a foundational story for the early Christian communities (1992:369). This requires that the evangelists intended to write history, the history of Jesus, for the Jewish people expected fulfillment of God's promises to the nation *in history* rather than in some symbolic or mythical sense (1992:402). What is more, the Gospels are the story of Jesus told as the history of Israel in miniature. Thus Matthew, for example, "gives us, in his first five chapters, a Genesis (1.1), an Exodus (2.15), and a Deuteronomy (5–7); he then gives us a royal and prophetic ministry, and finally an exile (the cross) and restoration (the resurrection)" (1992:402). The same phenomenon is also at work in John's Prologue, which includes references to Creation, the giving of the Law through Moses, the Exodus, and the Tabernacle (1:1–5, 14, 17–18) (1992:411–413).<sup>7</sup> The early Christians, according to Wright, on their part "told, and lived, a form of Israel's story which reached its climax in Jesus and which then issued in their spirit-given new life and task," including mission (1992:456).

Wright makes no attempt in his first volume to locate mission within New Testament theology as a whole. His focus is primarily historical. What he seeks to show is how Jesus' history is rooted in that of Israel and how the early church's history, in turn, is rooted in the history of Jesus. It may be fair to say, however, that of the three attempts surveyed here, Wright's treatment is the most satisfying. Where Ladd fails to integrate the various strands of theology provided by the various biblical writers, Wright provides a grand synthesis: the conviction on the part of the early Christians that the history/story of Israel culminated in the history/story of Jesus. This conviction alone, together with the early church's missionary activity, accounts adequately for the historical phenomenon of the explosive growth of Christianity in the remaining decades of the first century A.D. Bultmann's history-of-religions treatment, on the other hand, in its isolation from salvation history, fails to supply a credible rationale for the early Christian mission. If Jesus' first followers, all Jews, recognized in Jesus Israel's Messiah, a Messiah the Jews expected to come in history, and if this is the Messiah they in fact proclaimed subsequent to Jesus' crucifixion, a mythological explanation is historically implausible.

#### *Theology of Mission of Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller*

As is hinted at in the title of Senior and Stuhlmueller's work, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (1983), the writers are convinced that "the entire Bible . . . lays the foundations for mission" (1983:315). Already the Old Testament "reveals a dialectic between centripetal and centrifugal forces" (1983:316). Indeed, Old Testament theology, particularly Isaiah, has room for Israel as God's chosen people and outreach to the nations (1983:317–318). Thus, Senior and Stuhlmueller find in the Old Testament an evolving

dialectic between identity and outreach (1983:318). Nevertheless, they conclude that "these elements did not coalesce into an active missionary stance" (1983:318). They elaborate, "Intuitions of a collegial role for the nations remained on the periphery, especially in the postexilic period. Although some proselytizing activity took place during the intertestamental period, this was always in an ethnocentric perspective: Gentiles could become Jews and thus share in Israel's privileged status. Israel was not called to go to the nations; the nations were permitted to come to Israel" (1983:318).

It was Jesus who showed compassion to those outside of Israel, challenging the narrow particularism of his contemporaries (1983:319). The Gospels use the "pattern of Jesus' ministry – a ministry that flowed from his concept of God – as the norm for the universal mission of the church" (1983:331). The authors find mission prominent especially in Paul's writings (such as in Colossians and Ephesians), the Gospel of Matthew, Luke–Acts, and even the Gospel of John, concerning which they comment that "the mission question remains central" (1983:320). Senior and Stuhlmüller conclude their survey of the Bible with the following statement:

Thus throughout the Old and New Testaments the question of "mission" is far from peripheral. In the Old Testament this motif must be sought in the complex and evolving dialectic between Israel and its sovereign God and between Israel and its secular environment. With the figure of Jesus the centrifugal forces surging within the Scriptures break out into the non-Jewish world. The New Testament writings represent the multiple ways in which the members of the Christian community reflected on their mission experience and its relationship to the person of Jesus and the history of Israel. (1983:320–321)

According to Senior and Stuhlmüller, four key themes provided the impetus for mission: (1) a theology of God's sovereignty, (2) a theology of history, and (3) a theology of creation, all of which were (4) formed in the crucible of the religious experience of God's people. First, "[t]he conviction that the God of Israel was sovereign over all peoples and that he was a saving God is absolutely fundamental to the Scripture" (1983:320). Second, the writers of Scripture detect God's hand even in what might be considered "secular" events of world history. Third, all of creation was considered to be the arena in which God's redemptive purposes are played out. And fourth, encounters with God, such as Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, led to an expanded vision of humanity and of history. Senior and Stuhlmüller's model might be represented as follows. [note: Figure 1 is not reproduced here]

**Figure 1. Senior and Stuhlmüller's Model on the Missionary Impulse**

For my taste, however, this model is entirely too anthropocentric. Arguing for religious experience as the key to mission, the authors refer to Peter's words quoted in Acts 11: 17, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" and conclude, "This seems to imply that religious experience is an equalizer" (1983:332). This is a puzzling statement indeed. It rather seems that the key impetus for mission came from God through divine revelation, with human beings frequently being extremely reluctant to respond, as is clear in the case of both Peter and Paul in the Book of Acts. A theocentric model of mission is therefore to be preferred. [note: Figure 2 is reproduced only in part]

Abrahamic Blessing	The Seed	The Kingdom of God
Israel/remnant/eschatology	Crucified Messiah	Church/Gentile mission

**Figure 2. Israel, Jesus, and the Church: The Work of God along Salvation-historical Lines**

Contrary to Senior and Stuhlmüller, the centrifugal forces in Old Testament theology are primarily confined to the faithful remnant and are generally set in the framework of eschatology. Even Jesus operated within the parameters of Israel, ministering to Gentiles

only when the initiative came from them. As the representative Israelite, Jesus took upon himself the curses pronounced for disobedience to the Deuteronomic covenant and suffered an exile of his own at the cross. As the true vine, he attracted new branches, the new messianic community replacing the old, with faith in Jesus as Messiah serving as its constitutive principle. The Gentile mission, in turn, belongs to the post-Pentecost age of the church, when believers, in fulfillment of the Great Commission, go and disciple the nations in a way neither Israel nor Jesus had done.

This entails an element of mystery, an unexpected turn of events: while the nations in Old Testament expectation were to be drawn to Israel and join Israel in its worship of God, the New Testament church actively goes and seeks out converts to the Christian faith (Beale 1997). In my view, it is therefore mistaken to level, in the interest of continuity between the Testaments, the missionary modalities in the Old and New Testaments by accentuating alleged centrifugal forces in the mission of Israel and by having Jesus embark already on a Gentile mission of his own. The discontinuity must rather be allowed to stand, giving, as it were, a striking testimony to the way in which the sovereign God consistently confounds human expectations and accomplishes God's plan of salvation in ways controlled by and known only to him until the time comes.

Still, I concur with Senior and Stuhlmüller that mission is a central motif in both Old and New Testament theology. Also laudable is their attention to different emphases in the various writings of the New Testament. As they correctly point out, direct proclamation is but one, albeit the most significant, means of evangelization in the early church (1983:333). Other, complementary modes of mission include exemplary suffering or "good citizenship" (1983:336–337).

#### *Theology of Mission of David J. Bosch*

"Christianity is missionary by its own nature, or it denies its *raison d'être*," David Bosch states at the very outset of his magisterial volume *Transforming Mission* (Bosch 1991:9). In his first chapter, entitled "Reflections on the New Testament as a Missionary Document," he maintains, alluding to the title of Senior and Stuhlmüller's work, that he is not interested in investigating "the 'Biblical Foundations for Mission' (1991:15). Rather, he contends that the "New Testament witnesses to a fundamental shift when compared with the Old Testament" (1991:15). According to Bosch, the advent of Jesus led to the first and cardinal paradigm shift in the history of missions. Consequently, the writer views the New Testament as a "missionary document" (1991:15, reiterated 54), contending that mission was at the "heart of the early church's theologizing. First-century theologians, such as the apostle Paul, were no ivory-tower theologians. Rather, Paul was compelled to theologize in the context of his missionary encounter with the world. As Martin Kähler remarks, mission is "the mother of theology" (Kähler 1971:190, cited in Bosch 1991:16).

Thus, Bosch devotes only five pages of his almost six-hundred-page work to the Old Testament. For "[t]here is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh" (1991:17). Even Jonah he denies the status of foreign missionary, and the second part of Isaiah is not considered to be a book about mission (1991:17; contra Hahn 1965: 19). Still, Bosch acknowledges that the Old Testament is fundamental to the understanding of mission in the New. Bosch devotes considerably more space to Jesus, whose conduct he considers to be "the real starting point of the primitive Christian mission" (1991:31). Similar to Ladd, he focuses on Jesus' teaching on the reign of God (1991:31–35). In his discussion of the mission of the early church, Bosch stresses that mission did not gradually replace the *Naherwartung* (expectation of the imminent end of the world) of Christ's return. "Rather, mission was, in itself, an eschatological event" (1991:41). Bosch's in-depth discussion of individual New Testament writings focuses on Matthew, Luke–Acts, and Paul. It should be noted that only 180 pages, or roughly one-third of the book, are devoted to biblical material (Part 1). The remainder of Bosch's work traces historical paradigms of mission (Part 2) and seeks

to advance "toward a relevant missiology" (Part 3).

By way of evaluation, we find it problematic that Bosch uses a modern-day definition, that of the sending out of *missionaries*, in his evaluation of the biblical material. This leads him to exclude the Old Testament while embracing the New Testament alone as a missionary document. But arguably Bosch's methodology is seriously flawed. Any understanding of a *biblical* theology of mission must derive its contours from the biblical material itself rather than being submerged by extrabiblical definitions. As it is, Bosch vastly exaggerates the discontinuity between the Testaments. While I believe he is right in maintaining that Israel was not called to go and evangelize the nations in Old Testament times, this does not take away from the fact that the Old Testament, as a document, provides in the Abrahamic blessing the foundational paradigm of mission that is realized in the history of salvation through Abraham's "seed," Jesus Christ, and the mission of the church, with the result that all nations of the earth are blessed. Bosch's radical disjunction between the Testaments obscures the underlying theological unity provided by this foundational statement.

Also, Bosch's – in part merely pragmatic – decision to focus his discussion exclusively on the Matthean–Lucan–Pauline axis of mission drowns out significant voices such as John's Gospel or Peter's First Epistle, not to mention the Book of Revelation. Bosch's claim that the writings chosen by him are "representative" sounds like special pleading and fails to convince (1991:54–55). His selective use of material leaves Bosch ill-equipped to assess the respective place of mission in the various writings of the New Testament, so that his claim that the New Testament is a missionary document ends up being, at least in part, asserted rather than actually demonstrated.

### **Survey of Biblical Material**

In evaluating the works surveyed above, and in seeking to determine the place of mission within the scope of the New Testament's message as a whole, it is neither possible nor necessary to survey the New Testament writings themselves. Two volumes to which I have contributed have endeavored to do this already: the just-released *Mission in the New Testament: An Evangelical Approach* (1998), edited by William Larkin and Joel Williams, and the forthcoming *Salvation unto the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, which I co-authored with Peter O'Brien in the New Studies in Biblical Theology Series.<sup>8</sup> In the place of a summary of mission in the entire New Testament, I will limit myself to a brief discussion of the place of mission in Johannine theology, in further development of my recently published *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel* (Köstenberger 1998).

#### *Mission in John's Gospel*

Currently, few books on Johannine theology include mission among the important themes in John's Gospel, even though an excellent case can be made for mission being one of the most important motifs in the entire book. The most natural reading of John's purpose statement already suggests that John was written with an evangelistic purpose in mind: "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31, NIV). To interpret "believing" here as first-time faith in Christ is supported by the fact that this purpose statement follows shortly after the Johannine commissioning passage in 20:21, where the disciples are enjoined to forgive others their sins, again most likely referring to the pronouncement of forgiveness upon first-time faith in Jesus as Christ.

If one word is able to describe the nature of John's Gospel, it arguably is the word *universal*. No verse bears this out more clearly than the famous statement in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The term "believe" occurs almost a hundred times in this Gospel, and John states emphatically that faith in Jesus as Christ has become

the sole criterion for membership among God's people. Also, John substitutes the universal phrase "eternal life" for the synoptic concept of "the kingdom of God," which still conjures up particularistic Jewish expectations in fulfillment of God's promises to David. And many other Johannine terms are as universal as can be imagined: the Word, truth, or light.

This, however, does not mean that John loses sight of the Jews, the old covenant community. To the contrary, the entire first half of his Gospel is devoted to Jesus' ministry to the Jews. But in his Gospel, "the Jews" have become part of the world (cf. 1:11) and must exercise faith in Jesus as Messiah to join his new covenant community, on equal terms with Gentiles. Is it historically implausible for John to try to convert Jews toward the end of the first century? Many interpreters today argue that the alleged addition of curses on Christians to the Jewish synagogue service in around A.D. 70, the so-called *Birkath-ha-Minim*, precludes such an attempt. But it is doubtful whether the break was as radical as these scholars claim (Alexander 1992:6–11; Bauckham 1997:23, n.26). Moreover, how could John, himself a Jew, and convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, give up trying to convince his countrymen of this vital, all-important truth?

I submit that, rather than the curses on the Christians, another event taking place in A.D. 70 provided the occasion for John's evangelistic effort: the destruction of the Jewish temple and of the city of Jerusalem, (Balfour 1995). In the aftermath of this— for Jews—shocking development, John detected a window of unprecedented opportunity for the proclamation of the Christian gospel to his fellow Jews, many of whom doubtless had fled to the Diaspora where John resided and wrote (Goodman 1992:27–38). For with the destruction of the temple, Jews had lost the center of their national and religious identity, and the question arose what would take its place. Of course, it was a rabbinic form of Judaism centered on Pharisaic scholasticism that emerged as the eventual substitute (Alexander 1992:1–25). But as John is trying to argue, it is Jesus, not a renewed devotion to the Hebrew Scriptures or to oral traditions surrounding them, who alone is able to fill the theological and existential vacuum brought about by the destruction of the temple: hence the Johannine "replacement theme," which shows systematically how Jesus fulfilled the symbolism inherent in the most significant institutions of Jewish life, such as the temple as well as in the major Jewish feasts, such as the Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles (Carson 1988:253–256).

John thus proves to be a theologian who is also an apologete, an evangelist, and an expert in contextualizing the Christian message in the world of his day. And if the above reconstruction is correct, mission is not merely at the fringes of John's Gospel but rather the impetus for John's writing of his Gospel, providing the organizing principle for his presentation of Jesus' person and work. This is but one example of the crucial significance of the theme of mission in the writings of the New Testament, a fact that has yet to impact New Testament scholarship in away that New Testament theologies and works on the theology of individual New Testament books reflect this reality.

## **Conclusion**

As we determine the place of mission in New Testament theology, the following observations should be kept in mind.

1. *A tracing of mission in the entire Bible requires flexibility concerning the definition of mission.* We must allow the scriptural record itself to spell out dynamics and developments pertaining to mission over the course of salvation history rather than impose a particular abstract or modern definition of mission on the Bible. Otherwise, legitimate aspects of Scripture will inevitably be excluded and the remaining material streamlined according to the interpreter's respective definition of mission. What makes things even more difficult is that *mission* is an abstract term that as such is not even found in Scripture itself. This has led many to advocate a semantic field approach to the study of mission in the Bible, but even there limitations remain. On the other hand, while

caution in one's understanding of mission is crucial, care must be taken not to define mission so broadly as to include everything under the heading "mission"; this would render any further investigation meaningless.

2. *A salvation-historical approach to Scripture is imperative for an accurate understanding of the Bible's own teaching on mission.* The writers of the Old Testament looked forward to God's future acts on behalf of his people, including the sending of a Messiah and the eschatological kingdom. The writers of the New Testament interpreted God's recent or present intervention in terms of Old Testament paradigms, such as the Abrahamic blessing, the Exodus, the giving of the Law, the exile, or the restoration of a faithful remnant. A history-of-religions approach or an approach that focuses merely on the various theologies of mission contributed by individual biblical writers without understanding the underlying thematic unity along salvation-historical lines is therefore inadequate.

3. *Care must be taken not to compromise the Bible's own story line by imposing on Scripture an artificial uniformity concerning mission.*<sup>9</sup> Those who believe that mission is the central motif of Scripture could easily tend to find mission even where it is not. Moreover, they may represent Scripture's teaching on mission in a way that stresses a certain kind of uniformity in which the continuity of mission over salvation history is stressed, even where this may not be borne out by the biblical record. Two examples may be given: first, the question of whether Israel was called to an active outreach among the surrounding nations in the same way the disciples were enjoined in the great commission; and second, the issue of whether Jesus limited his earthly ministry to Israel or whether he embarked on a Gentile mission as well. This is not the place to answer either question. We may simply warn against a misguided zeal that, in an effort to demonstrate the crucial importance of mission in the entire Bible, reads one's presuppositions regarding continuity into the text even where discontinuity may be found.

This fear is, I submit, in any case unwarranted. In other words, even if Israel was *not* called to go and reach out to its neighbors (but rather was to showcase by godly living what life under God is like), and even if Jesus did *not* embark on a Gentile mission (but left this to the post-Pentecost church), mission would still be a major scriptural motif. For what would have changed in that case would not be God's heart for the world, but merely God's progressive mode of operation, his way of realizing his plan of salvation in successive stages. This, of course, relates to the question of theological systems. Dispensationalists may feel more comfortable with the possible system I have just outlined; covenant theologians may tend to see a greater degree of continuity between Israel and the church, and between the missions of Jesus and his disciples.

Thus we have come full circle: as I urged in my opening comments, if we do not want our exegesis merely to become a validation of our already predetermined views, we must be open for our larger theological system to be challenged by our study of a biblical theme such as mission. This is easier said than done, but I believe it is possible. May God give us the grace to apprehend ever more closely God's plan of the ages, for us personally, and for those who still need us to tell them that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

## Notes

1. In the following discussion, we do not suggest that it is unhelpful to locate Judaism or Christianity within the larger religious landscape of their day. Our critique rather refers to a history-of-religions approach denying the revelatory nature of Scripture with the salvation-historical dimension that entails.

2. See also Bultmann's interaction with the work of Adolf Schlatter (1955:II:248–251) in which Bultmann faults Schlatter for failing to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith and for interpreting Jesus against the backdrop of Old Testament Jewish tradition rather than Hellenistic syncretism.

3. This contention has been decisively countered in recent years by Pryor (1992).
4. Wright also has serious problems with the biblical theology school of the 1950s and 1960s (cf., esp. G. E. Wright [1962]). In this model, the New Testament is given authority not because it witnesses to timeless truth, but because it testifies to the mighty acts of God in history, especially in the life of Jesus. The text is revelatory, and thus authoritative, to the extent that it bears witness to the "real thing," that is, particular salvation-historical events.
5. See especially "2. Praxis" in N. T. Wright (1992:359–365).
6. Besides mission, Wright also names sacrament and worship (1992:362).
7. Whether John's Prologue was indeed written with conscious reference to a passage in the Jewish intertestamental work of Sirach 24:1–28, as Wright contends, is another question.
8. See also my forthcoming entry on "Mission" in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.
9. On the importance of the Bible's own story line in the current post-modern climate, see especially Carson (1996).

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