

THE DIMENSIONS OF MISSION

by John Corrie

1. Theology and the Theology of Mission

What is theology and what is the theology of mission? This paper aims to lay some foundations for the theology of mission and outlines the key theological and missiological concepts that form the dimensions of mission theology. I would argue that all Christians need to be able to think theologically about mission and think missiologically about theology. This means integrating theology and mission. This is because theology begins as reflection upon God and what he has chosen to reveal of himself. The history of that revelation is the history of his mission, which is the fulfilling of his purposes for the world, a single story beginning with creation, moving through his covenant relationship with the people of Israel, climaxing in his redemptive purposes in Christ and leading to the ultimate goal of the transformation and reconciliation to Himself through Christ in the power of His Spirit of the whole of reality (Eph 1.10; Col. 1.20). This grand story of the Mission of God is opened out in all its comprehensiveness in Chris Wright's recent majestic biblical foundations of mission (Wright, 2006). One of his main points is that God's mission actually precedes Scripture, since God's purposes for his Mission are set in place from the foundation of the world (Eph 1). He therefore prefers to think in terms of the missional basis for the Bible rather than the biblical basis of mission. The whole Bible is a witness to the Mission of God, which therefore becomes the hermeneutical framework for the interpretation of Scripture. God is revealed in Scripture as a missionary God. We cannot think about God separately from His mission. All theology therefore, if it is to mean anything, is mission theology because it speaks about the God who has mission at the heart of his identity.

There are those who attempt to do theology in a detached, academic, independent way, as if it were possible to ignore their own context and the presuppositions which they bring with them, and as if they can shunt the responsibility for its application on to someone else. This could be called doing theology 'from the balcony', as we look down on life from a position of superiority. Many Third World theologians have accused western theology of adopting this attitude. They have rightly pointed out that living theology can only be done on the road below, as we are travelling along and encountering the realities and complexities of everyday life. This does make the exercise of doing theology more provisional and open than the more traditional approach of dogmatics. We do have the 'map' of scripture to guide us, so we have some reference points in God's revelation of Himself; but we will also be raising a lot of questions and not finding easy answers. We need to listen to those who have come up with different answers from our own, and we need to be prepared for our own presuppositions about mission to be radically challenged. But what we are always doing is ultimately 'mission theology'.

Gareth Jones (Jones, 1999:26-42) suggests that good theology has six essential qualities to its methodology: it is 'pluralistic' (in the sense of being contextual and therefore implying that there is more than one way of speaking about God); it is 'limited' (in having certain parameters within which it operates and which establish its validity); it is 'applied' (because it can never be purely theoretical); it is 'critical' (in being discerning, reasonable, thoughtful, consistent); it is 'constructive' (in so far as it provokes us to new ways of thinking); and it is 'imaginative' (if it is ever to begin to communicate something of the mystery of God).

So there is no single way to do mission theology, and we see this variety reflected in Scripture.

Sometimes it will be attempting to set forth propositions of truth about God, humanity and the world, putting them together into some doctrinal coherence. At other times it will be more historical, in the form of a story, which requires more interpretation and provokes the imagination. Sometimes it will be struggling with questions, exploring issues and new ways of thinking in an open-ended way. At other times it will demand action and not be content with mere reflection.

So what is the 'theology of mission'? This is Andrew Kirk's attempt at a definition (Kirk, 1999:21):

"The theology of mission is a disciplined study which deals with questions that arise when people of faith 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"

2. Text, Context, Interpretation and God's Revelation

It is important therefore that our theology does not collapse one side or the other of the balance between text and context. It must not lose touch with the biblical foundations and its respect for them (the text), but it must also engage meaningfully with the issues raised in the practice of mission in the modern world (the context). Mission is intrinsically contextual.

The dynamic between text and context mirrors the divide between fundamentalist and liberal approaches to theology. Fundamentalism affirms the text and largely ignores the context. Truth is an absolute which has merely to be applied, or imposed, upon the context. Liberalism begins with the context, the human and the historical. Faith, and the theological expression of it (including Scripture), is seen as a human response to the mystery of God, so we must allow our context to direct us in the theological journey. This means that the text is not necessarily authoritative, and at best merely inspirational.

Many liberal scholars have tried to drive a wedge between the biblical tradition and its interpretation. They look at both how the Early Church interpreted Jesus in the NT documents and also at how that process of interpretation has continued beyond the apostolic period into the history of the Church. This is a necessary and important exercise of course. But Liberal Protestantism at the end of the nineteenth century, influenced by the Enlightenment, felt that the only way to recover the authentic Jesus was to try to get back to the 'Jesus of History'. It was said that we must distinguish between who Jesus really was and how the Early Church understood and interpreted Him. Only who Jesus really was can be valid for our faith today, because any later 'interpretations' were too conditioned by religious and cultural factors to give us an accurate picture of the real Jesus. This naturally led on to saying that we have to reinterpret Jesus for today, critically to 'demythologise' the gospels and therefore to drop our reliance on its unchanging authority. It was said that the theology of the present cannot depend on the theology of the past.

So it is claimed that our interpretations today are just as valid as those of the Early Church, and certainly more relevant. This can even lead to the possibility of adding to the scriptures insights we gain from our own context today. Canaan Banana asks (Banana, 1995:78):

"My question is this: Has God's revelation finished? Is it not possible that there is more that needs to be added to (as well as subtracted from) the Bible as we know it today to make it relevant to our times and people?"

How we understand 'revelation' is therefore critical. If it is 'given' in the form of propositional statements enshrined in Scripture, then we can be fairly definite – even dogmatic – in expressing who God is and how He works. If revelation is in and through history and human experience it becomes more complicated. Some go to the extreme of denying any revelation from 'out there'. The ultimate consequence of this trend is illustrated by the Sea of Faith school represented by Don Cupitt, who has all but abandoned any reliance on the historical texts as sources of truth (Cupitt, 1990:77):

"Post-modernity is a flux of images and fictions..so that truth is human, socially produced, historically developed, plural and changing"

Evangelicals like to be as definite as possible about what God has revealed of Himself. But revelation also implies concealment – what cannot be known about God. So there is always going to be a tension between revealedness and hiddenness, which is well illustrated in the person of Jesus.

Another less extreme example of 'contextual theology' is the attempt by Liberation Theology to construct a 'new way of doing theology' based not on orthodoxy but on orthopraxis. Gustavo Gutierrez's definition goes as follows (Gutierrez, 1973:6f):

"Theology is critical reflection on historical praxis"

In other words theology is forged out of a commitment to action, and it is that praxis which is the primary reference point for theology; the tradition being only a secondary source of authority. Orthopraxis is separated from, exalted over, and can ultimately replace orthodoxy. Many Third World theologies today have been influenced by Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology can be viewed as a throw-back to Liberal Protestantism in its insistence on a re-interpretation of the Bible in the light of praxis in the context of poverty and injustice.

I would want to insist that the Christ of Faith is the Jesus of History, and that there is continuity of authority and inspiration from Jesus to the NT Canon. That continuity is provided in the apostolic witness in the Church, to whom Jesus entrusted the future of the gospel and in so doing promised them the Holy Spirit as the One who would lead them into all truth (John 16.13). And we must believe that the Holy Spirit enables us today to interpret the Word of God in a way which can be coterminous with Jesus' life and words; that is, in a way which is both faithful to Him and faithful to our own context. We must be able to say that our experience of God is consonant with the Early Church's experience of Him: I can experience God through the Holy Spirit in the same way as St Paul did.

We need therefore to be aware of all attempts to drive a wedge between the tradition and its interpretation. Recent Roman Catholic missiology has emphasised this by outlining how it is possible to hold to certain constants in revelation and tradition whilst also taking context seriously (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004: 394):

Mission today is a "single, complex reality". In its singleness it remains faithful to what has always been constant: the centrality of Jesus Christ, the importance of the church, the urgency of the message in the light of the world's end, the proclamation of salvation, the importance of the human person and human culture. But as a complex reality the one mission needs to be sensitive to the various movements of culture, thought, politics, and spiritual sensitivity that make up the context in which mission is lived out. It needs to be open and determined, sensitive and

courageous”

Of course interpretation is influenced by cultural, historical and personal factors, and it is complicated by human sin which distorts all human reason. So our interpretations today will always be humble and in a sense provisional. We must resist the attempt from the fundamentalist direction to canonise our interpretations with infallibility. We must also be aware of the very human inclination to imagine that our interpretation is clearly the best and even only way of looking at it. Today we have a rich diversity of theologies, notably from very different contexts in the Two-Thirds world, and it is vital that we listen to how others do theology in their own contexts and allow that to challenge our own very narrow horizons. Is it not possible that different contexts will throw up different perspectives on a text, all of which may complement one another? This is how Rene Padilla puts it (Padilla, 1985:89):

"My thesis is that every culture makes possible a certain approach to the gospel that brings light to certain of its aspects that in other cultures may remain less visible or even hidden"

Nevertheless, Padilla would also want to say that while we accept a qualitative difference between the way we do theology today and the theology of the NT, we nevertheless also accept that the NT Canon was recognised by the Early Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to be a final and definitive revelation of God's will for His people.

This does not mean that we can simply apply biblical texts uncritically, or that the Scriptures give us 'blueprints' for mission which we can simply transfer lock, stock and barrel to today's world. There is always a dynamic relationship between God and His world: God works in and through history to fulfil His purposes, so we must always consider history, culture and context. Nevertheless, a theological foundation for mission, according to Kramm (Kramm, quoted in Bosch, 1991:9):

"is only possible if we continually refer back to the ground of our faith - God's self-communication in Jesus Christ"

I would want to clarify that by adding..."and its authoritative interpretation in the NT". Many of the problems theology has with mission today arise because it has cut loose from this foundation and no longer regards the revelation of God in Scripture as its final authority. We need to be aware of the on-going debate on the interpretation of the Bible in missiological studies. At every point we will need to know why we can take the biblical witness as our authority. This will be one of the issues we will study in relation to the work of David Bosch. There are many who want to say that God reveals himself in and through history through our on-going experience of him as He works in the world and in the Church. We will need to decide what weight, if any, we give to that dimension of revelation. Also in more recent times another 'layer' of the revelatory activity of God has been added through the charismatic experience, and we need to decide how we are going to evaluate the prophetic word as it is given through individuals today. In what sense is that 'revelation'?

3. What is Mission?

At its simplest level mission can be seen as a process of sending: it involves a sender, one who is sent, a message with which the 'missionary' goes, the people to whom she is sent, and the aim of the mission. The movement of sending begins with God, who sends Jesus who then sends the Holy Spirit so that the Church can be sent into the world, with the ultimate aim of seeing God's Kingdom established.

Using the above model we can define mission by returning to our original assertion that all mission is God's mission, both in terms of its origin and in terms of its goal. This has been called the "Missio Dei" and it's a key concept in modern missiology (see Bosch, 1991:10. See also pp389-393 for a fuller explanation of this theme). It's an overarching theology which can be traced back to Karl Barth. Barth began his systematic theology with the doctrine of God and His revelation of Himself as Trinity (Barth, 1975:306):

"God reveals Himself as the Lord"

God is therefore the initiator of mission in sending his Son, and then through the Son in sending the Spirit, so that the Church is sent into the world as a continuing movement of God's trinitarian life. Barth's theology of revelation arose as a reaction to natural theology (that knowledge of God is possible outside of God's revelation in Jesus Christ). It's very much a theology of grace: God chooses to reveal Himself in the event of His self-revealing. Barth wanted to develop a Christ-centred approach to revelation and to see it as God's self-revelation in the incarnate Lord. This means that all God's dealings with the world are effected in and through Jesus Christ. Jurgen Moltmann picked up this theme of the Trinity in relation to the mission of God (Moltmann, 1977:64):

"It is not the Church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the Church"

Mission therefore originates in the very nature of God: God is a missionary God and we are called to participate in God's mission as a missionary Church. Both the initiative and the power come from Him. This concept of the 'Missio Dei' received a kick-start at the World Missionary Conference in Willingen in 1952, where it was declared: "The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself". From an evangelical viewpoint, John Stott is able to say (Stott, 1986:21,22):

"Mission arises primarily out of the nature of God Himself...the primal mission is God's, for it is He who sends His prophets, His Son and His Spirit. Of these missions, the mission of the Son is central"

Verkuyl underlines this by saying (Verkuyl, 1978:5):

"Missiology is the study of the salvation activities of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit throughout the world, geared towards bringing the Kingdom of God into existence"

'Missio Dei' helps us to answer theologically the question of who sets the agenda for mission. Some have said that it should be the context and its issues which set the direction for our mission. Others have insisted that the Church should retain the initiative. But in fact the initiative lies with God Himself, and sometimes in His grace He surprises both the Church and the World with what He chooses to do to further His Kingdom purposes. So Kirk speaks about "the calling of the Church, at every level and in every place, to be part of God's mission in the world" (Kirk, 1999:24).

However, we need to be on the look-out for the way in which the concept of the 'Missio Dei' has been hijacked by the universalists. They say that 'Missio Dei' implies God's concern for the whole world, and that does not directly involve the Church. So the next logical thing to say is that it need not include the Christian Church at all! This theology is based on a basic unity of God's purposes in creation and salvation which embraces everyone, whether they are aware of it or not. Texts such as 1 Tim 2.4; and

the texts above are used in support. We do have to decide what to make of these verses: for example, in what sense is God going to 'reconcile all things to Himself'? That is a key question which we will come back to. Vatican II opened the door for this way of thinking for radical RC theologians by admitting for the first time the possibility of salvation outside the Church and by adopting a much more world-affirming theology.

But the logical conclusion of this way of thinking is to say that the 'Missio Dei' need not include Christ Himself, since God's purposes are worked out in the world by His Spirit. It is also said that Christ can be seen as the 'cosmic Christ', who bears little or no relation to the Jesus of History! So the grace of God becomes operative in human history independent of the Church and its message about Christ. This can be identified as a theocentric rather than a christocentric approach, and in its extreme form it is exemplified supremely by John Hick, who prefers to speak in terms of an 'ultimate reality' rather than a personal God (see, for example, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Hick, 1988)). God can reveal Himself and articulate himself without the help of the Church or even, it seems, of the person of Jesus! The Church can only serve the 'Missio Dei' and point to God at work in all humanity, and even through other faiths, to fulfil a universal salvation which does not depend on the particularity of Jesus Christ.

This inclusivist approach is increasingly popular, and has given rise the approach of 'dialogue' as the focus of mission. The aim for many is not to 'convert' others, but to engage in a mutual quest in which all religions should be allowed their valid contributions. For example, Bosch charts the way in which the terminology used by the ecumenical movement has changed to accommodate this approach (Bosch, 1988:134):

"The Mexico City meeting of 1963 still employed the 'old' concept of 'witness': "the witness of christians to other faiths". A year later, at an East Asia Christian conference in Bangkok, the world witness was dropped; the theme was "The Christian encounter with men of other faiths." Three years later in Sri Lanka, the word encounter was also dropped. The theme now ran: "Christians in dialogue with men of other faiths." Throughout, however, the major participants are still identified as Christians who dialogue with others. In 1970, in Ajaltoun (Lebanon) this was also dropped; the theme was "Dialogue between men of living faiths." (The women were apparently still outside the dialoguers' field of vision!). In 1977, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the theme was "Dialogue in Community"

It is important, however, not to dismiss dialogue as a mission strategy. It does not necessarily mean that we are speaking on a 'level playing field' in relation to truth. We must be prepared to listen and understand before we speak. And some, like Lesslie Newbigin, urge us to be open to whatever truth may emerge through the dialogue which has not occurred to us before. We need what Bosch calls a 'humble boldness' and a 'bold humility'. Bevans and Schroeder adopt as their central model of mission what they call 'prophetic dialogue' (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004: 348ff).

Some more 'liberal evangelicals' are working today on a theology of religions that retains the uniqueness of Christ, but is more open-ended about questions of ultimate judgment, how God reveals himself by His Spirit, and who may or may not be 'saved'. An example is Amos Yong, who builds on a critical appreciation of the work of the controversial inclusivist evangelical Clark Pinnock. Yong seeks a Pentecostal way of focusing on the role of the Holy Spirit as the dynamic and universal presence of God. By not allowing himself to get stuck on the question of salvation, and by grounding his theology of the Spirit in the Trinity (The Word and the Spirit being the two hands of God the Father), Yong hopes to develop a more appreciative and dialogical approach to religions, so that through the conversation itself

criteria of discernment emerge rather than being predetermined. This may take the debate forward, but it has to be admitted that it leaves lots of loose ends.

One of the key questions therefore which we must consider concerns the interaction between God's universal plan of salvation and the particularity of His coming in Christ. What is the continuity between on the one hand God's mission to rescue history and to redeem the whole of creation and on the other hand the mission of Christ, through whom all things were made and in whom all things will be brought together? How does what we say about this affect our attitude to other faiths and their truth claims?

So even already I hope you are beginning to see the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Once we begin to think of God independently of Jesus Christ, anything is possible. We must therefore hold on to the uniqueness of the 'salvation history' of God's purposes through Jesus Christ. For me, the Bible sanctions no other salvation history than that. Mission begins with God sending His Son, and this sending becomes both the model and the motivation for our being sent (John 20.21). Mission therefore must always be Christocentric, and we must not allow John Hick, or anyone else, to beguile us into a theocentrism which does not respect the Trinity. The God we are speaking of as Christians is the God who revealed Himself in Christ, and that is the only way we can speak 'christianly' about 'God'. Wright also makes much of the monotheism of the OT in affirming that Yahweh wanted himself to be known as the one true and living God, incomparable and unique, and it is this God who *the* God revealed in Jesus Christ (Wright, 2006: 105ff)

John Stott once again gets the balance by saying that mission is not a word for everything the Church does, nor is it a word for everything that God does. He describes mission in terms of (Stott, 1986:30):

"everything the Church is sent into the world to do"

That definition keeps mission both ecclesiocentric as well as christological.

4. Mission and its Goals

Mission can be defined in terms of its goals, which Christians have traditionally interpreted differently:

(a) The goal of 'saving souls':

In this case evangelism is directed exclusively to individual salvation. This is a classical evangelical view of mission. At the other end of the theological spectrum there are those like Tillich and Rahner who say that we cannot 'save' souls if all people have received something of the grace of God by virtue of having been created by Him. In this case the goal becomes the discovery of what is already there in each individual. But it still works on an individual level.

(b) The goal of 'church growth':

Church growth can be thought of in three different ways: growth as the Body of Christ, the Community of God's People (qualitative); growth in numbers (quantitative); or growth as the planting of churches, either as new or as offshoots of an existing congregation (expansive). This view of mission is represented by Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner etc. with their 'church growth' movement. Church planting has become the goal of mission for many mission strategists today, especially in the Two Thirds World. Some see mission solely in terms of reaching 'unreached peoples'. But the view of mission that focuses on the 'Church' is also a RC view with its high doctrine of the Church and its identity as a sacrament of the presence of God in the world.

This view builds on the goal of saving souls with a strong doctrine of the Church. The goal of saving souls can often ignore the Church as an issue to be considered.

(c) The goal of church unity:

This also has a high doctrine of the church, although it does not consider church growth to be necessarily important and it can be disparaging of the goal of saving souls. This view is well represented by the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches. Amongst the more liberal ways of interpreting unity, we can envisage the possibility of a world-wide community which also embraces other religions and cultures. This view has gained strength in WCC circles in recent years.

(d) The goal of the Kingdom of God:

This view interprets the Kingdom as a transformation of this world in terms of justice, righteousness and peace. It is also a view strongly evident in the WCC and is typical of liberation theologies. Some talk of setting up 'signs of the Kingdom' or signs of shalom. Key words are justice, humanisation, structures, transformation. Some liberation theologies have a utopian vision of a christianised society, not all that dissimilar from evangelical post-millennialism. This view raises the question of the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church

Increasingly, models of 'wholistic' or 'integral' mission are being adopted which see mission as a multidimensional exercise embracing all of these goals, and more. Bosch is a leading exponent of this view. The issue then becomes whether to assign priority to one or other of the different dimensions of mission. The wholistic definition of mission then becomes (Kritzinger, in Kritzinger and Saayman, 1990:144):

"the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world"

Bosch defines mission therefore as (Kritzinger, op cit:147):

"the total task which God has set the Church for the salvation of the world"

Mission becomes the expression of God's concern for the entire world in all of its dimensions. The dimensions of that concern are expressed by the Kingdom of God, which is seen as God's caring control over the whole of life. This view is the logical outcome of Wright's approach to the mission of God.

So if we are using a wholistic model, we must say that to announce what God has done in Christ is not merely verbal (proclamation), it is word and deed; presence, explanation and example. There is a similar totality in the idea of proclamation in the WCC documents. To 'proclaim' Christ is to proclaim his identity with poverty (WCC, 1982:34):

"There is no evangelism without solidarity...a proclamation that does not hold forth the promises of the justice of the Kingdom to the poor of the earth is a caricature of the gospel"

Some, like John Stott, want to see evangelism as verbal proclamation of the gospel having a priority in mission even though social action and justice are still seen as partners with evangelism. Stott has affirmed integral mission, arguing that mission should be 'evangelism plus'.

5. The Trinity as the Foundation for Mission

Using the Trinity as a model for mission we can say that it derives its identity from the sending of the Son by the Father in the power of the Spirit (Braaton, 1990:415):

" To know the history of God's trinitarian activity in the messianic ministry of Jesus and the apostolic ministry of the Spirit is to know the starting point and the purpose of the Church"

The Trinity helps us to appreciate the unity between God's creation and redemption purposes. What God is doing in the world by His Spirit cannot therefore be separated from what He did in Christ. God's creation purposes find their focus and meaning in Christ, and not in some vague universalism. This means that the God we speak of is the God who revealed Himself in Christ. There is therefore no false distinction between theocentrism, christocentrism and ecclesiocentrism. Furthermore, in relation to other religions, we have to ask when we talk of "God", what, or who, do we mean? Biblical christianity cannot accept some vague concept of 'the Other', 'Ultimate Reality' or whatever without being unfaithful to the revelation of God in Christ.

We need to be aware that interpretations of the Trinity vary from 'immanent' to 'economic' models. The 'immanent Trinity' refers to God as He is in Himself, and as He draws us into communion with Himself; it leads to a view of mission in essentially spiritual, mystical terms as bringing people into relationship with the eternal God. The 'economic Trinity' refers to God as He reveals Himself in and through history. It is a more dynamic model of God working out His identity in history, and it leads to a view of mission as historical engagement. I would want to say that we must think of God both as He is in eternity and how He acts in history, and not drive another wedge between those two as if they were mutually exclusive. Karl Rahner puts it like this (Rahner, 1966:87f):

"The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity"

An important area of clarification for mission theology is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Christ. In the West, Creeds have included the 'filioque' (that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son). This has tended to unite the work of the Spirit to the work of the risen Christ, so that the Spirit never does anything independently of Christ. In the East there is no such close association between the Spirit and the Son. Therefore in eastern theology God is free to manifest Himself by His Spirit in the world, even if we say that the ultimate meaning of that is to be found in Christ. We are still left with the following questions: In what sense is the Spirit everywhere and filling everything? How important is an Old Testament understanding of the work of the Spirit for what we believe about the Spirit's work today?

An important development in the doctrine of the Church has been in seeing it in terms of 'community', and this find strong support from the doctrine of the Trinity (Two modern exponents of this view are Leonardo Boff and Jurgen Moltmann: see Boff (1988) and Moltmann (1981). The Trinity expresses the relations between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as a community in fellowship with one another. God's salvation offers us a share in that divine 'koinonia', so that we are drawn into the life of the triune God. This brings us into fellowship with one another, so that we experience in community the "unity in diversity" of the Trinitarian relationships. So the community of faith has its life in the community of love which is God - and in God authority, love and power function in perfect harmony. So the goal of mission becomes the creation of such a community, in which there is freedom for one another and fellowship with one another in commitment to one another. Boff takes this further than solely in relation to the Church by saying that all human society should reflect the perfect community of the Trinity. That gives mission an irresistible social dimension.

Theologically to base our mission thinking on the Trinity is to give us an irresistibly integrated approach to mission. If we are truly trinitarian we cannot set evangelism, social justice and Church unity over against one another. God puts the whole of Himself into everything He does, so that His creative, redemptive and eschatological energy is channelled into a mission whose goal is the total transformation of the whole of reality. The goal of our mission should therefore be nothing less than that.

6. Conclusion

In this paper my aim has been to introduce you to some of the issues in mission today and to set out the theological categories which are needed for missiology. You will need to be aware of the questions raised by mission theology because they crop up time and again - the problem of context, the uniqueness of Christ, the authority of Scripture, the role of the Holy Spirit in the world, how God reveals Himself, God's purposes for the world, the role of the Church.... To clarify the issues, however, is not necessarily to have all the 'answers'.

It is not sufficient therefore to work out what mission is from scripture, and then simply apply it wherever we go. Nor indeed should we get too focussed on what it means in our present context. Mission should always have an eschatological dimension – looking forward to the fulfilling of the vision of the Kingdom of God for the reconciliation of the whole of reality. So, for example, when we are planting a church, that is not a goal, it is only a beginning. We need to ask about the future of the church, and how that governs its identity. This makes its life and witness a constant process of renewal and change, and makes mission an open-ended activity, open to where God is leading, and flexible enough to respond to the challenges which meet us in different contexts. That is the adventure of mission, into which God invites us. We all need the humility to recognise that our approach to mission has to be to some extent provisional, and that is not inconsistent with holding on to the 'givenness' of God's revelation in Christ as witnessed to in the Scriptures. Maybe Bosch is right to say that there is more than one way to do mission while still remaining biblical!

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