GOD AT WORK IN THE WORLD

Theology and Mission in the Global Church

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In treading the worlds of academia and Christian faith through theological studies, I often find myself not knowing where to step next. At one academic conference, I met an expert in Buddhism teaching in a well-known university who responded to my introduction as a teacher of Christian missions by telling me that he did not like Christian missions. He said something to the effect that Christian missions are imperialistic and missionaries are colonialists. My first inclination was to say that not all Christian missionaries are colonialists and to ask what he thought about Buddhist missions. Instead I proceeded cordially, turning the conversation into a theological exchange. I told him that my understanding of missions has to do with God’s mission out of his love for the world, which I believe was best expressed in Jesus’s self-sacrifice. Therefore, true missions witnesses to such sacrificial love. The Buddhist scholar did not object to such an idea, and we happily discussed the power of sacrificial love. It appears to me that for this person, missions as a Christian practice has nothing

1. In this work, the word “mission” (singular) refers to God’s redemptive work or mission on behalf of his creation. “Missions” (plural) refers to the varied works and activities of the church to reflect and participate in God’s mission. For a good discussion, see Timothy Tennent, Invitation to World Missions: Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 54–59.
to do with God’s act of love. It only denotes an invasion of innocent people groups by Christians who want to convert them to their kind of Christian religion.

On another occasion, my wife and I visited a church that we came to like very much. We especially loved the pastor’s sermons and the congregation’s genuine friendliness. As we became more involved in the church, I heard a story that puzzled me. It was the story of how the church’s missions committee came to support a missions agency working among women in Latin America and Africa. An important factor in the committee’s decision was whether the organization not be interested in conversion. Surprised, I inquired further, and one of the members said that she “would not want to support any kind of conversion.” If I were to have identified a dominant theme in the sermons of the pastor, it would have been “transformation,” which to me is another term for conversion. The pastor often called for change toward Christlikeness, but it was obvious that some in the congregation did not connect this with the concept of conversion.

These two stories illustrate the need for a theological understanding of mission. In both cases, my conversation partners had no problem with the underlying theology of the missionary’s work, but a narrow perception of “missions” led them to resist it. While some objections to missions are simplistic and unfounded, some of the practices of missions are also unjust and even un-Christian, at least from a theological viewpoint. The disconnect between theology and practice can rob the missionary enterprise of its greatest asset—namely, a firm and credible biblical foundation—and the missionary’s disregard of theology has often made Christian missions a questionable undertaking. While it may serve as a corrective to the practice or as a justification of the enterprise, theology of mission is more than these. Because Christianity by nature is missionary—as will be argued in a later chapter—any theological reflections on the Christian faith must have a missional component.

Theology of mission is an essential part of theology itself, and any theology that does not deal with God’s mission cannot be fully regarded as theology proper. Theology of mission is not an appendix to the discipline of theology; instead, its locale is theology in its most basic sense of the term. In the second half of the twentieth century,
the idea of mission was reconceptualized such that God’s redemptive mission was understood as the foundation of the Christian missionary enterprise. Because of this shift in understanding, theologians now recognize the essentiality of the theology of mission for the entire enterprise of theology. The oft-quoted words of Martin Kähler that “mission is ‘the mother of theology’” seem increasingly agreeable to theologians. In locating theology of mission at the core of theology proper, I do not propose a different direction for theology or a revision of its meaning. My wish is to go back to the most fundamental meaning of theology and identify its missionary dimension.

My goal is to make good connections between Christian practice and its underlying beliefs. By articulating why we do what we do, we can both clarify the foundations of our actions and identify practices to purge. The realization that much of what was called “Christian missions” ended up being seen only as colonialism seems to have resulted in three different attitudes: (1) holding aggressively to the practices to preserve a hallowed tradition, (2) abandoning the enterprise or toning it down to an ineffective level, or (3) resolving to do it better. Many progressive “liberal” Christians uncritically conflate Christian missions and colonialism and abandon the enterprise. Some continue to do missions but narrow it to the moral endeavor of Christian service to fellow humankind. On the other hand, many who claim to be preserving Christian traditions from history in the name of “evangelicalism” also fail to evaluate their practices theologically. In some places, oppressive missionary thinking relies on the West’s socioeconomic and political superiority as a missionary tool. Amid such contrasting attitudes, there certainly are Christians who are persuaded of God’s active missionary engagement in the world and who genuinely attempt to be a part of that enterprise. The present work follows this third line of thinking. I do not claim to provide the correct understanding or know how to clean up the mess surrounding Christian missions in history. Rather I attempt to provide a theological lens for the church’s missionary calling. If this helps clean the messy missiological house, that will be an added benefit.

We will look at connections between our core Christian beliefs and our missionary thinking to identify the theology of Christian missions. In so doing, we will not discuss much about various practices of missions; our interest is to locate their theological foundation and identify dogmatic themes and thoughts in order to refine missiological thinking.

**God’s Work in the World and Theology of Mission**

In this work, I propose that theology of mission deals with God’s work in the world. I assume a belief in God and propose that belief in God’s active engagement with the world is the foundation of the theology of mission. Without faith in an active God engaging in the world, I do not believe that we can talk much about the Christian mission. We may differ in our ideas about how and to what extent God is active in the world, but believing that he is at work is essential for mission theology. At two ends of a spectrum are God and the world, and there’s a whole lot in between.

While not all aspects of theology are necessarily missiological, our understanding of the theology of mission is broad and general to the extent that some may find it unhelpful. Others may find it unhelpful to talk about mission in this generalized way. We locate the theological foundation of mission in the Trinity, especially in the economic Trinity as made known through the incarnation. The very concept of God as triune is already missiological; the doctrine of the Trinity came about from what we believe to be God’s way of working. Trinitarian revival in the twentieth century and an emphasis on the economy of the Trinity are certainly major influences on our project. At the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity, I will argue, is God’s mission of salvation through the incarnation. Not only does the doctrine of incarnation lead to the trinitarian formulation, but it is also the foundation of God’s salvific economy. We discuss trinitarian theology

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3. Roger Olson classifies Christian beliefs into three categories according to their importance: dogma, doctrine, and opinions or interpretations. Most of what we consider here may be classified as dogmas. See Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 17–18.
of mission and the incarnation as the way of that mission in chapter 1. The implications of the incarnation for the relationship between gospel and culture will be picked up again in the last chapter (chap. 5).

By dealing with God’s economy of salvation, we investigate the goal and task of mission as found in God’s salvific work in the world. The topic of salvation, framed as God’s missionary engagement, spans the next two chapters (chaps. 2 and 3). Salvation as God’s work and salvation as experienced by human beings have often been confused in missiological discussions. While our emphasis is generally on the former, we realize that one cannot really be discussed without the other. In chapter 2, I will lay out some biblical and theoretical motifs of salvation as seen in the history of missiological discussion. With Christology as a focal point, I will end with traditional Western theories of salvation. In chapter 3, I will explore the theoretical discussion in the context of the global church by looking into the dimensions and scope of salvation. I consider the experiential side of salvation to see how salvation has been variously conceived. My aim is to show the richness of the theology of salvation and how its different facets came about to reveal God’s mission to save the whole creation. If this approach appears to neglect the context of religious plurality, that is because I deal with theologies of religious plurality in connection with the scope of salvation. My approach of drawing from dialectical oppositions and finding a credible position in the tension—however uncomfortable—will be clearly seen here and in chapter 3.

The missionary response to God’s work in the world (or God’s mission) is part of the church’s witness, making the study of Christian missions an ecclesiological matter. Ecclesiology thrived and made great strides in the ecumenical atmosphere of the twentieth-century church. In this same ecumenical spirit, in chapter 4 I trace different paths in which God’s mission featured at the center of ecclesiology. Then I highlight biblical images of the church and their missiological implications.

The last chapter addresses the relationship between gospel and culture. One might think that one of the points I pursue there—namely, the gospel’s universality as the foundation of the theology of mission and cultural plurality—should be made in an earlier chapter. However, in the present arrangement, it fits best in the last chapter.
A careful reading of the Bible does not reveal Christian missionary thinking as obviously as we may like. The very hermeneutic we identify in the Bible, I argue, must serve as the basis for our own thinking. We try to capture this principle of interpretation under the rubric of particularity and universality, or as a movement “from one to many.” How God has acted in one story, the story of Israel, is how God deals with people of different cultures. By electing and working through one, or the few, such as Abraham and Israel, God reaches all.

Rowan Williams has wittingly defined theological methodology using three characteristics of theology. He says theology is celebratory, communicative, and critical. Using these three Cs, he outlines what a theological methodology should look like. Theology in Christian history begins first as a celebration, evoking visions of glory and celebrating God’s sovereignty—rather than arguing about various interpretations. Theology also seeks to communicate in different cultural environments using different tools. Theology deals with faith in God as—in Anselm’s famous definition—“faith seeking understanding.” The other end of the attempt to understand faith is the goal to explain or communicate that faith. One of the most conspicuous aspects of theology in modern times is its critical nature. This often takes the form of “negative theology,” which Williams says, “remains one of the most basic forms of critical theology.” Critical theology may move in one of two directions: either toward “agnosticsm, even nihilism,” or “toward a rediscovery of the celebratory by hinting at the gratuitous mysteriousness of what theology deals with.” Thus, I would surmise that any comprehensive theological reflection should involve all three Cs (it should be celebratory, communicative, and critical). However, I would add two more Cs to the list as they apply to the present work: “confessional” and “contextual.” Williams may already include “confessional” in his mind under “celebratory,” and “contextual” under “communicative,” but even so, these two deserve to be spelled out because of their significance in the discussion here.

5. Williams, On Christian Theology, xv.
On Easter Monday in mid-April 2020, in his daily briefing on the coronavirus outbreak in New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo explained how they had flattened the rising curve of COVID-19 cases in the state. He said, “The number is down because we brought the number down. God did not do that. Fate did not do that. Destiny did not do that.” Around the same time, I was browsing the fortieth-anniversary edition of Jürgen Moltmann’s book *The Crucified God*, and I could not help contrasting what I heard from Governor Cuomo with what I was reading. What a difference in how we perceive God in relation to the world and God’s work in the world. It took me a while to digest the two together and to even make sense of the difference, especially in a pandemic-stricken, politically polarized society where the tendency is to choose one side and thrash the other. I understand Governor Cuomo’s words as his way of stressing how important it is for all citizens to do their part in the fight against COVID-19. Even then, the gap between Moltmann’s and Cuomo’s understandings of God was too wide for me to fill. I understand Moltmann’s work to be an invitation to see God in a different way.

I am convinced that this invitation is as urgent today as it was when Moltmann’s book was first published almost fifty years ago. His radical work of linking the theology of the cross with the doctrine of the Trinity shows the depth of God’s solidarity with humanity in crisis. The resulting theology of passion and God’s unfathomable passion became an invitation to see God from a different perspective. Perhaps that is what the present volume can also contribute to the theology of mission, joining the chorus of theological works on Christian missions during the last three decades. In his preface to the paperback edition, Moltmann tells the story of how he conceived *The Crucified God*:

I saw that when God reveals himself to us godless men and women, who turn ourselves into proud and unhappy gods, he does not do so through power and glory. He reveals himself through suffering and cross, so he repudiates in us the arrogant man or woman and accepts the sinner in us. But then I turned the question around, instead

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of asking just *what God means for us* human beings in the cross of Christ, I asked too *what this human cross of Christ means for God.* I found the answer in the idea of God’s passion, which reveals itself in the passion of Christ.8

**Clarification of Key Concepts**

*Theology and Its Mission*

Theology as a concept and as a discipline has been understood and used at different levels. The more basic its level of use, the broader the concept. The more highly specialized the use, the more specific the reference. When used in the broad sense of the term, it often refers to the universally common practice of talking about God. When used in a more specific sense, however, no theology can be seen to be universal. The history of the development of the discipline seems to follow an increasingly specific understanding of theology.

In its most basic and broad sense, “theology” refers to any discourse about God.9 In recent theological literature, the term “God-talk”10 has become popular for this meaning of theology. In other contexts, theological references can be so specific that the fundamental sense of theology as a discourse on God is disguised or obscured. Over time, theology has become a disciplinary study of different Christian doctrines in the academic context. From there, the term “theology” has been used to refer to different aspects of Christian faith and beliefs. Theology is a process through which life situations are reflected, deriving specific theological meanings from such situations and contexts. In the modern religious context, “theology” can even mean “an analysis of religious beliefs—even if these beliefs make no reference to god at all.”11 Such a variety of usage has clouded the fundamental meaning of the word.


Locating theology of mission in the range of theological disciplines can also be difficult because the concept of mission itself is multidimensional. A helpful approach is to see God and his mission (*missio Dei*) as a starting point for understanding theology. And so we understand theology basically as a discourse about God and his works. The word “theology” was used in this sense, says Alister McGrath, “as systematic analysis of the nature, purpose, and activity of God.”\(^{12}\) By returning to this basic understanding of theology as a study of God’s nature and activity, we reflect on the identity and meaning of theology of mission.

This approach to look first into the nature of God and his work objectively as the heart of theology operates with certain assumptions. First, before one can ever talk about God as the object of one’s faith, one must recognize that faith is inherently subjective. Before treating God and God’s work as the object of our faith, we need to acknowledge that we are dealing with our belief, a very subjective matter. The very process of possessing a particular faith in God is itself a theological process. Yet because our goal here is to clarify an area of theology—namely, mission theology—we can do no more than acknowledge this subjectivity so that we may focus attention on the object of that faith. While it is right to state that Christian theology begins with the Christian faith, it is also true that the source of this faith is God himself. Our belief that God is triune and our faith in the Second Person (Christology) and Third Person (pneumatology) of the Trinity serve as the source as well as the objects of our faith. A second assumption of our approach is that it does not and cannot negate the complexity of theology, which has been systematized into subdisciplines. Each area of inquiry, including soteriology (theology of salvation) and ecclesiology (theology of the church), is complex and depends on faith in God and God’s work, as will be dealt with in later chapters.

**God in a Global Religious Context**

The fact that we translate what we commonly call “God” from one language to another shows the existence of some commonality

in the concept. This, of course, is not to say that the meanings we attribute to God are necessarily the same. Even when the same terms are used, their meanings and usage can be very different.\(^\text{13}\) Even within Christianity, a compilation of theologians’ work shows quite diverse approaches to and emphases on the idea of God.\(^\text{14}\) Recent discourses on God at various levels have brought out rich and diverse aspects of an understanding of God. The growing proximity among people of different nations, regions, cultures, and religions has impacted our conceptions in many ways. While this globalizing development has a homogenizing tendency, it also increasingly honors particular ways of conceiving of God or Gods. Through daily conversations in our world, people of different religions are not only learning from one another but also influencing how other people think of God. Between those who call themselves “theocentric” in their studies of other religions and those who strictly reflect on the Christian monotheistic concept of God, discourses on a God-concept along spatial, cultural, and religious lines have enriched the Christian God-concept in various ways. Because of the stress we place on God in the theology of Christian mission in this book, it will be helpful to locate the Christian conception of it in the global religious context.

Different religious persuasions conceive of God, as well as God’s locale and level of activities, differently. Such variances also exist among members of the same religious group. While it is quite possible to argue that religious views influence one’s concept of God, it is also possible that one’s God-concept (or its equivalent, such as Supreme Being, the Absolute, the absolute Path or Paths, or Supreme Power) serves and directs religious conceptions. Theology revolves around the conception of God and is best understood if we start there, or with equivalent conceptions such as the absolute truths and paths in Buddhism.

\(^\text{13}\) Timothy Tennent, for instance, deals with the use of the Arabic “Allah” in Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions as a reference to the one God. He concludes that Muslims changed the use of the term from a general reference in the pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian faith to a personalized name for God. Previously, “Allah” was equivalent to ‘el or theos, but in its Muslim meaning, it became equivalent to the Jewish “Yahweh.” See Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 25–49.

\(^\text{14}\) See Kärkkäinen, *Doctrine of God*. 
Friedrich Heiler has been credited with pioneering a popular classification of the world’s religions into two major types: prophetic (Semitic) and mystic (Indian). Keith Ward nuances Heiler’s work by first identifying four groups of religions according to their “central focal concepts,” representing “four different images of the Supreme Power and Value of Being.” He calls them “the Semitic Judge of the World, the Greek Logos, the Indian desireless Self, and the Chinese cosmic harmony.” This characterization of different religious conceptions of God or Gods helps our purpose to locate Christian faith in God within world religions. The Christian conception of God has two sources in this list—namely, the Semitic Judge of the world and the Greek Logos. Ward further consolidates these four into Heiler’s two groups of Semitic “prophetic” religions and Indo-Asian “mystics” because “the Greek and Chinese images have been absorbed into the Semitic and Indian, though in the process they have changed the characters of their host traditions.” Indian theologian M. M. Thomas renames Heiler’s prophetic religions and mystics as “Messianic” and “Unitive” and offers the following explanation: “The broad division is between the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions which take history as the fundamental sphere of the self-revelation and saving action of God, and the other religions of African, Indian, and Chinese origins which see salvation in the enduring vision of an undifferentiated spiritual unity or harmony of nature, man, spirits, and gods.”

One can see that these attempts to simplify world religions by classifying them into two groups need substantial qualification. Many feel that placing primal religions in general and African traditional religions in particular together with Indian and Chinese religions is at best inappropriate and at worst marginalizing. Including the highly complex philosophical religions of Confucianism and Taoism with Indian mystical religion seems unfair and unfounded. However, even these broad generalizations reveal some common characteristics between the two groups. For the present work, this generalized

classification is helpful for locating the complex conception of the Christian triune God.

Between the prophetic and the unitive types of religions, we see some significantly different ways of understanding God/Gods or the divine. Today, the prophetic religions are largely clustered under the Abrahamic faith traditions, and the unitive group consists of Indian and East Asian religions. Keith Ward makes some crucial observations on the differences between the prophetic (or Semitic) and unitive (as found in Vedic) traditions: “In the Semitic tradition, a succession of prophets was possessed by the Word of God, who was experienced as absolute moral demand, judge of all human conduct. Their visions were of a personal God who demanded justice and mercy. The Divine power was experienced in historical acts of deliverance from oppression. Thus arose the concept of the suprasensory as ultimately unified in a dynamic power which relates to the imperfect present as judge and deliverer. The idea of God became that of one personal, active, and transcendent being with a moral goal for the universe.”

The final sentence of this quotation summarizing God as a “personal, active, and transcendent being with a moral goal for the universe” is a crucial description of the tradition. Ward contrasts this vision with the traditions surrounding Vedic religious visions that came out of India. About these traditions, in comparison to the Semitic tradition, he says, “There were no prophets who felt challenged by a morally judging God and who issued condemnation on oppressive social systems. There was no development of belief in a historical purpose or goal. And there was little sense of one creator who stood apart from creation, as a being quite different in kind, except in later, largely heterodox, traditions like Sikhism.”

The contrast helps to show the distinctiveness of the God-concept in the Abrahamic faith tradition within which the Christian trinitarian God is further distinguished. Ward further comments on how the different conditions of the people impacted their conception of God. Whereas the Israelites were nomads in search of a home and were delivered from slavery to freedom, Indians of Vedic tradition were not

slaves seeking a home but were “conquerors seeking to dominate a continent of immense and fertile space.” Thus, “their gods or devas (spirit-powers) took over and took up residence in a vast continent where the cycles of nature seemed to be rich and endless.” The Gods are not figures of moral commands nor liberating ones. Instead, they affirm the status quo and build their religious teachings from there. Although social conditions and existence do not necessarily create God in the human image, they do seem to affect how we conceive of God’s attributes and character.

On Being Global in Context

In speaking of the global church or perspective, I do not mean globalization as used in connection with the capitalist-driven market economy. Rather, I intend to be as inclusively global as possible in the theological conversation that follows. As I have shown elsewhere, I consider world Christianity to be in a transitional stage. While most people groups of the majority world (or non-Western world) have diverse characteristics, their commonality has primarily been their being “non-West.” We cannot deny the fact that we continue to classify nations of the world as West or non-West. This means the West continues to define how things work in the world. Without endorsing this classification, we recognize it as the present condition of global existence. It is what it is.

In this global context, the enterprise of theological construction is caught between Western and non-Western. Unfortunately, many theologies in the non-Western world are still constructed in response to Western theology. In this transitional period, Christians of different traditions in the majority (non-Western) world are making substantial efforts to construct relevant theologies for and from their contexts. The changing nature of theology is still largely visible in these new emerging theological works. The most dominant voices behind these new theological writings have various responses or reactions to Western theologies. While an increasing number have good

theological substance, many have little or no contextual theological substance. Such works that dominated among non-Western theological voices until the recent past may be categorized under three types. Let me call them the “naysayers,” the “need-sayers,” and the “nonsayers,” according to their responses to Western Christianity and theologies.

The “naysayers” are radical reactionary voices so occupied with saying “no” to Western Christianity and theologies that they end up saying little or nothing of substance on their own theology. In many cases, the attempt is so anti-Western that criticism becomes the overriding theme. The “need-sayers” are those who primarily use their work to describe the need for a new theology from non-Western contexts. So far, this is the category with the greatest number of works. The “nonsayers” are those who neither refute Western theology nor see the need to construct contextual theologies. They accept Western theology uncritically as the authority. While this position may still be common among lay Christians without theological training, it is decreasing considerably among those who are theologically educated. Needless to say, we are in a transitional period in theology.

It may be wishful to think that we can move away from constructing theology between the West and the non-West into a truly world-inclusive global theological construction. However, that is what we need. Such a global theological construction can arise out of a spirit that recognizes we all are a part of the world, a world larger than each of us, each region, and our sociocultural categories. The concept of contextual theology came out of the majority world as thinkers in those regions moved from Western-dominated theology into theologizing in their contexts. Western theology that once saw itself as the universal theology is increasingly recognizing the voices of the non-Western majority world. A truly inclusive world for theology requires us to recognize that we are each part of the whole and that each theology is a contextual theology. I think—and indeed hope—this is what we are beginning to see in contextual theological works. Changing its self-perception from being the dominant figure to being

a part of the larger whole is a humbling experience for the West. With this recognition, we should also not shy away from claiming the world as our own larger context.

Context is always multilayered. At each layer, we share common traits with others. We can imagine these layers with our immediate context at the bottom and our commonality as human beings in one world at the top. We do not need to peel off upper layers to reach lower layers. We own them together and use them according to our needs. Our theological constructs may follow a similar pattern. Theology can be done in a very particular context as well as in a more general context. The particular ones are not authenticated by eliminating the more general ones. We all share a global context, and we all have our own local contexts.

Contextual theology can be and should be done at different levels of contexts. Limiting it to one level may make theology inauthentic. The different contexts we share with others make us who we are. If we let our different contexts compete and conflict, we will only destroy ourselves. Instead of disclaiming some in order to claim others, we must own them all. Each has a part in and of us. The West has become a part of my context, although it may never be the same context that it is for my American colleagues. A context is not an isolated, autonomous entity; it is always dynamic and related to other contexts. As the world becomes increasingly global, we each change our frame of reference, even our self-perceptions. We all seem to have written ourselves into the larger contexts in our world.

This book does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of the different aspects of the theology of mission, nor is it a comprehensive guide for the topic. Rather, it is more like a pathway. I understand my work to be like clearing a pathway in the thick jungle of theological thoughts. The work by necessity is interdisciplinary within the field of theological studies. I do not pretend to know the authorities in different areas of study nor do I intend to compile a selection of helpful resources. I try to pave the way as I see it, having a theology of mission as both my approach and my goal. By “theology of mission,” I simply mean the missionary dimension in understanding God, as such an understanding has been passed down through the tradition of theological discussions.
By saying that I am the one paving the way, I do not mean that I construct the way, and thus all new ideas come from me. Everything I do is because of the rich body of knowledge that informs me. I pick and choose my theological interlocutors, partners in dialogue, and sources, which help me take the needed twists and turns for a probable and reasonable way. I try to be honest in referring to the sources that have influenced my thinking, but I cannot name them all. There are far too many voices and thoughts that have led me to think as I do. If I confess my biases, they are my bent toward historical-theological study and my inclination toward biblical textual studies. These will become apparent in what follows.