

MISSIONAL THEOLOGY: BECOMING A MORE FAITHFUL WITNESS  
BY CREATING MORE INCLUSION AND EQUALITY

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*Missing the Mark*

Researchers working in missional theology, which aims to invite all to "fully participate in God's mission" by being a "faithful and embodied witness in a particular context," claim the movement represents a theology that plays out on the ground, in real life, with real people.<sup>1</sup> It aims to see how the Spirit of God is moving in the here and now. The movement claims to intentionally seek the power of contextualizing the good news of Jesus through all contexts and in all contexts. But herein lies the problem, the voices defining missional theology in the West are much more homogeneous, similar, and exclusive than its surrounding context. There is a discrepancy between professed values and way of being. More plainly, examining writers of missional theology in America reveals a movement defined primarily by white men. And while maleness and whiteness are not problems, America is a nation marked by diversity and multiculturalism. Thus, an honest critique of missional theology in America shows it must create more inclusion and equality at all levels of participation if it wants to faithfully embody the gospel and encourage all to "fully participate in God's mission."<sup>2</sup> Advocates of missional theology need to better reflect their own context here in America and "initiate a diverse and ecumenical conversation with a wider community" to walk in alignment with its professed values.<sup>3</sup>

For the gospel to present itself more fully here and now through missional theology, inviting all to participate in *missio Dei*, "it must be expressed in terms that make sense to [all] those hearing it."<sup>4</sup> This means missional theologians looking to draw forth the sort of "counter imagination" diverse America demands must move past one race, class, or sex having the majority of the say in its theology.<sup>5</sup> The path forward for leaders of missional theology involves embracing a larger framework that allows for sharing influence, power, voice, storytelling, decisions, and purpose beyond the currently limited circle. This is an invitation to trust that "we can widen the horizon of our theological reflection in different directions" and find "an opportunity for the emergence of new expressions of the Church which are more faithful to the demands of the Gospel."<sup>6</sup> Only by genuinely inviting others to engage fully at all levels of its strata will missional theology faithfully do what it claims to desire. As feminist theologian Letty

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 13; Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *Participation In God's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2018), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Maria P. Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodriguez. *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, xxi, 42

<sup>5</sup> Stone, 13; Letty M. Russell, *Church In the Round* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Elsa Tamez, *Through Her Eyes* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 117, 152.

M. Russel says, perhaps when we allow God to really "break down the walls between us, 'the world becomes an open house.'"<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to representation — or a lack of thereof — it is important to register that every missing voice is a missing section of society and culture. This means the sameness, homogeneity, and exclusivity of missional theologians causes the movement to miss out on the "ideological, social, and political constructs" of other cultures here in the West.<sup>8</sup> Those constructs, rooted in our social location, impact how we interpret the world and experiences, and determine our behavior.<sup>9</sup> We are all unavoidably shaped by our cultural narratives.<sup>10</sup> Those narratives build a framework that forms our perspective.<sup>11</sup> As Richard Rohr says, "we do not see things as they are; we see things as we are."<sup>12</sup> In other words, when we remove voices from the conversation, leadership structures, discernment process, and mission, people will not hear the gospel talking to their experience.

While critical engagement remains essential throughout the process, Christ-followers must understand that social location and culture are not problems we remove.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the goal is to avoid "unconscious contextualization."<sup>14</sup> As Lesslie Newbigin writes, "there can never be a culture-free gospel."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, while people may personally encounter God within a given cultural context, advocates of missional theology must be open and committed to trusting that God moves through other cultures too.<sup>16</sup> We must willingly engage in other cultures with the confidence that God is at work and looking to find expression within every culture.<sup>17</sup> Thus, for missional theology to form "an all-inclusive, truly catholic community" — that honors the multifaceted nature of the gospel — it must open itself up to "the richness and diversity of Christian life and witness."<sup>18</sup> A failure to do so is to deny "the church its full catholicity" and remove participation from others within the body of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

### *Developing an Inclusive Approach*

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<sup>7</sup> Russel, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 43-44.

<sup>10</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 43; Justo Gonzalez, *Santa Biblia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now* (Spring Valley: Crossroads, 2014), 18.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 135.

<sup>14</sup> Gonzalez, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, 135

<sup>16</sup> Michael W. Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), 93.

<sup>17</sup> Christena Cleveland, *Disunity In Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP Book, 2013), 21; Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, 135-136.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals* (New York: The Crossroads, 1998), 70; Van Gelder and Zscheile, 40; Van Gelder and Zscheile, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Fiorenza, 88.

In the remainder of this writing, we will examine the problem more deeply and consider a positive, more inclusive way forward by exploring larger structures of sin and oppression, the gift of learning from other theological frameworks, the desire for researchers of missional theology to embody their professed values better, the need to read the Bible alongside others, treating others as equals, facing injustice, and practical steps of application for all types of practitioners of mission theology. The goal is for readers to see and understand a new direction is not being proposed for missional theology or missional theologians here. Missional theology and its proponents are not under attack. Instead, the hope is to strengthen and empower missional theology, more specifically, missional theology practitioners, in their genuine attempts to faithfully embody the gospel and encourage all to "fully participate in God's mission."<sup>20</sup>

### *The Seriousness of The Problem*

With the importance of representation now stated, it is worth considering how many people in the West understand the gospel is for them. If people do not hear their voices, experiences, and narratives in the invitation to participate, will people understand the gospel is for them? Whether unintentional or intentional, a lack of representation can easily be experienced and interpreted as a rejection or an "act of exclusion — 'we' are in and 'they' are out."<sup>21</sup> On this topic, Roberto S. Goizueta says, "theology has lost its form, its beauty, and consequently its ability to reflect the glory of God...We have become irrelevant to the faith communities that we claim to represent, and, therefore, increasingly desperate in attempts to say something that actually matters to the people."<sup>22</sup> Goizueta is not alone in his critique. In *Participation in God's Mission*, Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile address the same holes. Speaking about the church in the Western world, they write, "those who have relied on social and cultural privilege, have struggled with the issue of how to engage...with neighbors who are different."<sup>23</sup> They go on to state, "if the church in mission fails to translate the gospel deeply enough into the particular and local, it will not speak meaningfully to its neighbors."<sup>24</sup>

These problems undoubtedly conflict with the Jesus way. Jesus aimed to draw circles so wide that even those in the margins found their place within the church. Bonhoeffer says that "the church is the church only when it exists for others."<sup>25</sup> There is no group of people God is not perusing; "God's mission relates to the whole of creation."<sup>26</sup> All were invited "to know the living and truth of God and to join the worldwide church."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, if "Jesus rejected the idea of creating a restricted and separate community," questions around what voices we do and do not honor are questions that need to be examined through the framework of Jesus' goal to build an inclusive community that includes all humanity.<sup>28</sup> If the good news message Jesus presented was, in fact, intended to become "good news to everyone, everywhere, in language and within

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<sup>20</sup> Stone, 13; Van Gelder and Zscheile, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, 158.

<sup>22</sup> Russell, 158.

<sup>23</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Fiorenza, 298.

<sup>26</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Tamez, 100.

cultural expressions that are understandable, knowable, and accessible," advocates of missional theology must embrace different voices to ensure it can do the very same.<sup>29</sup>

Even more than creating a community of inclusion, Jesus created a community marked by equality. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the author of *A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation*, writes, "the theological self-understanding of the Christian community is best expressed in the baptismal formula of Galatians 3:27-29."<sup>30</sup> Elsa Tamez echoes these words when she states, "only united are we God's likeness and expression."<sup>31</sup> Without trivializing our differences and creating a "false catholicity...in which the particular is swallowed up by the universal," our "calling eliminates all status distinction of religion, race, class, and caste and leads into a truly universal and catholic community of disciples."<sup>32</sup> The church must keep "rediscovering how to affirm its inherent many-ness in the essential one-ness."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, we must remember the proposal laid out here is for more inclusion and equality at all levels of participation. This means we want Galatians 3:28 to apply throughout the entirety of Christian structures and organizations.<sup>34</sup>

### *Moving Forward with The Problem in Mind*

So how can proponents of missional theology, which aim "to invite all to participate in this new creation as a sign of hope for a future of an eternal community with God," move towards a more inclusive and equal way of doing missional theology here in America?<sup>35</sup> How can missional theologians move towards a more faithful contextualization here and now? How might the Spirit of God be looking to lead and teach us to contextualize more fully within our particular location?<sup>36</sup> How do we build a communal and holistic theology that becomes good news to all? Furthermore, can we acknowledge the ways leading voices in missional theology might be excluding or silencing others by not giving voice to more narratives or by not sharing authority?

These are questions about what it means for the church to be a "faithful and meaningful Christian witness...within the contemporary American context."<sup>37</sup> These are questions we ask knowing that "contextual awareness will translate into missional alertness," in turn, advancing the goal and effectiveness of missional theology.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, missional theologians claim to understand that we are "experiencing a moment of major transition."<sup>39</sup> It is understood that "the Spirit of God is still very much at work, even though we may struggle to discern where and

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<sup>29</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Fiorenza, 96.

<sup>31</sup> Tamez, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Cleveland, 18; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 282; Fiorenza, 96.

<sup>33</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 34.

<sup>34</sup> Fiorenza, 178.

<sup>35</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, xx.

<sup>39</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 5.

how."<sup>40</sup> Thus, by embracing hard and reflective questions, missional theologians demonstrate a posture that understands, "Christian life, church, and theology are caught in the middle of history, and therefore, are in constant need of prophetic critique."<sup>41</sup> We must press in and examine where we find ourselves today with trust and confidence that this will improve the outcome by empowering us to better engage in the mission of God here and now.

*Seeing Structures of Sin Through A Case Study [Women's Theologies]*

To help us engage with the goodness that can come to and from missional theologians if they willingly aim to include and equalize — building a more inclusive table of participation and engagement at all levels — we will be taking a closer look at theology done by women. The hope and goal here is that by looking closer at various theologies done by women, missional theologians will be better positioned to foster engagement with other groups who do not hear their voices within missional theology as well. Whether we are looking at "a larger framework for missiology" that includes the poor, the young, people of color, LGBTQA+, or so forth, the invitation remains the same: may we bring gracious balance to the places where the dominated or the "marginalized...have traditionally had little or no influence on decisions" involving missional theology.<sup>42</sup>

Here may we also remember that "gender, race, and class domination do not exist in isolated compartments, nor are they neatly relegated to uniform categories of repression."<sup>43</sup> Miguel De La Torre captures this wisdom when he writes, "Show me a sexist, and I will show you a racist" to help teach us that oppression of women "serves as a paradigm for the subjugation of all people that fall short of the white male ideal."<sup>44</sup> By looking closer at theology done by women, may we become better equipped to consider the ways we have been collectively socialized to overlook some people or see some people as less than. May we become quicker to note when any segment of society does not have the freedom to name their own experience.<sup>45</sup>

It is also imperative we respect that we are looking at *structures* that overlook people and not just individual behavior. In other words, we must consider that sexism in theology is not only a personal fault but a structural evil that distorts Christian theology and corrupts the academic integrity of religious studies.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, "theological and ecclesial structures [even within missional theology] have to be liberated from all forms of racism, classism, and sexism [and so forth] if they are to serve people and not contribute to their oppression."<sup>47</sup> The hope is that by widening the framework in one way here — including more women's voices in missional theology — we encourage people to consider the remaining interconnected changes that must continue within institutions and structures. And as there is movement forward, may we do so not only "for the sake of 'equal rights' within the church, but because...[we understand] that theology

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<sup>40</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Fiorenza, 102.

<sup>42</sup> Cleveland, 37; Tamez, 111.

<sup>43</sup> Miguel De La Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 87.

<sup>44</sup> De La Torre, 88.

<sup>45</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 241.

<sup>46</sup> Fiorenza, 126.

<sup>47</sup> Fiorenza, 126.

and church have to be liberated and humanized if they are to serve people and not oppress them."<sup>48</sup>

### *Theology Done by Women*

Theology done by women often thrives on notable strengths that run parallel or complementary to missional theology. In many ways, missional theologians and Christian women in mission want the same thing.<sup>49</sup> Consider how embodiment is a crucial priority of women's spirituality today.<sup>50</sup> Like the best of missional theology, theology done by women often aims for a faith embodiment that "affects all aspects of our lives, all human reality."<sup>51</sup> The authors of *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* tell us that in the United States, Latina feminists commonly believe that "one's faith is not only to explain and interpret its meaning, but also to assist in the transformation of reality itself."<sup>52</sup> Clear themes found within theologies done by women show us Christian women living on mission want faith to play out here and now, in its given context — just like proponents of missional theology.

There are differences in the various theological disciplines done by women, of course. Nevertheless, it needs to be understood that many of the themes found in women's theology could be applied to missional theology for the benefit of missional theology. For example, Elza Tamez teaches how present and contextual women's theology aims to be when she shares theology "starts from what has been lived, from what is experienced in the present" and that our "living realities are the takeoff point for theological elaboration."<sup>53</sup> In *Women and Christian Mission*, Frances S. Adeney shares that in her research on theology done by women, she repeatedly found "women often do theology feet first."<sup>54</sup> Speaking of Latina feminists specifically, Cherrie Moraga declares the goal is we create "a theology in the flesh."<sup>55</sup> Women generally want a theology rooted in "concrete experience."<sup>56</sup> For women, "the elements of everyday life are very intertwined with their speaking about God."<sup>57</sup> Even biblical passages and questions are examined "on the basis of their experience...and existential reality."<sup>58</sup> And, likely due to their history, Tamez notes that "women are bolder in questioning concepts, and they have a creative curiosity that opens new paths and allows new understandings."<sup>59</sup> All of these are traits that could empower missional theologians in any context to be more awake to people, the present, and the Spirit of God.

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<sup>48</sup> Fiorenza, 63.

<sup>49</sup> Frances S. Adeney, *Women and Christian Mission* (Eugene: Pickwick Publication, 2015), loc. 65 of 7334.

<sup>50</sup> Adeney, 27.

<sup>51</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 120.

<sup>52</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 119.

<sup>53</sup> Tamez, 45.

<sup>54</sup> Adeney, 253.

<sup>55</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, xv.

<sup>56</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 115.

<sup>57</sup> Tamez, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Tamez, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Tamez, 45.

A closer look at theology done by women also shows the various gifts women could bring to missional theology. For example, it is observed that "many women are especially gifted with a deep intuition about human life and are able to counsel, to intuit problems, to express them, to give support, to propose solutions, and to confirm the faith of many people."<sup>60</sup> Additional gifts — and embodied values — commonly found in women doing theology include "attitudes of humility and willingness to receive from others as an incarnational witness" and a prioritization of unity that shows love for and respectful treatment of all humanity.<sup>61</sup> Theologies done by women also thrive on focusing on shared mission instead of getting held back by differences of doctrine.<sup>62</sup> Throughout various forms of women's theology, we see a listening posture, allowing others to speak freely, and an ability to disregard differences to work together to alleviate human need.<sup>63</sup> Again, these are all traits, gifts, and values that would only strengthen missional theologians proposed desire to help all engage in God's mission in their context.

On the topic of creating deeper inclusion and equality in missional theology, it is worth noting that another common strength found in the various disciplines of women's theology is the commitment to share power and authority less hierarchically. On the topic of leadership postures found in feminist theologies, Letty Russel notes that she observed power is seen as "something to be multiplied and shared rather than accumulated at the top. A feminist leader is one who inspired others to be leaders, especially those on the margin of church and society who do not think they are 'somebody.'"<sup>64</sup> Partnership and being "multivocal" are core strengths of the various theologies.<sup>65</sup> In other words, there is deep accessibility in women's theology. And once again, these are traits that would only support missional theologians in their attempt to invite more people to participate in the mission of God in a given context. Theology done by women thrives at contextualization, inclusion, and equality because of its various traits, values, and gifts. Its existence has been built on fostering a "non-competitive" posture.<sup>66</sup> These are key resources — or ways of being — proponents of missional theology claim to value and ought to improve on.

Moreover, one cannot ignore the key role women play in ecclesial communities throughout various contexts — even though too many institutional churches have often left women feeling undervalued.<sup>67</sup> In other words, the issue at hand does not include the need to add women into church space. The repeated point found throughout various women's theology is the belief that women no longer should settle for "admission and marginal integration into the traditionally male-dominated hierarchical institutions of the churches and theology."<sup>68</sup> Instead, women's theology is asking for "radical change of these institutions and structures....because they are convinced that theology and church have to be liberated and humanized if they are to serve people and not oppress them."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Tamez, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Adeney, 81-82.

<sup>62</sup> Adeney, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Adeney, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Russell, 57.

<sup>65</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, xv.

<sup>66</sup> Stone 13.

<sup>67</sup> Tamez, 48; Aquino, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Fiorenza, 63.

<sup>69</sup> Fiorenza, 63.

*Not A New Direction*

The goal of women who do theology is not to "exclude men from participation" (Russell, 39). The goal is to "build a new synthesis in which the dialectic present in the human existence can take place, without destroying any of its vital elements."<sup>70</sup> In *Better Together: How Women and Men Can Heal the Divide the Work Together to Transform the Future*, Danielle Strickland encourages readers to adopt a vision that says, "We are building a new world. A world where we can embrace our differences, end oppression, and learn how to live and work together in harmony, prosperity, and peace."<sup>71</sup> Much like the concept of reciprocity found within missional theology, women's theology wants to create an inclusive distribution of power that unites all humanity with a deep understanding that "God brings men and women together without suppressing the richness of their differences."<sup>72</sup> The hope is a more significant partnership.

As noted earlier, it must be understood that missional theologians are not under attack here. The targets laid out are in support of more intentional inclusion and equality within missional theology. What we aim to do here is model how various theologies and voices can respectfully work together — within the very framework of missional theology — for the greater good. Different perspectives may never find a perfect consensus between all sides, but "they nevertheless can collaborate...because they share a common theological commitment, ethos, and passion."<sup>73</sup>

One might emphasize using the words witness or embodiment here because this is a call for proponents of missional theology to practice and engage their professed values more. Missional theologians are not merely looking to be about right thinking. More specifically, missional theology practitioners cannot settle for belief statements that declare they are open to other voices. Instead, being open to other voices must become a way of life for practitioners of missional theology. Theology must "de-academize theory" and lean into what it claims to believe.<sup>74</sup> On the topic of embodied truth, Timothy Gombis says, "truth is not merely a set of facts... [truth is something] the church is to study, talk about, learn, and ultimately, to perform. In doing so, the church will grow up into Christ, embodying the life and love of God on earth."<sup>75</sup> Advocates of missional theology — at all levels — must live their truth.

Moreover, as those actively engaged in missional theology move towards widening their circle and contextualizing more in the here and now, advocates in missional theology can rest in trusting this posture will help missional theology live its mission well. For example, by welcoming participation from everyone, there will be protection from "false interpretations of what it means for us to be the Church... and at the same time...opportunity for the emergence of new expressions of the Church."<sup>76</sup> Gelder and Zscheile write that "when the gospel, scripture, and the church's life are translated into local vernaculars, the local culture changes even as the

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<sup>70</sup> Tamez, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Danielle Strickland, *Better Together* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020), xviii.

<sup>72</sup> Tamez, 57.

<sup>73</sup> Fiorenza, 288.

<sup>74</sup> Aguino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 149.

<sup>75</sup> Timothy G. Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>76</sup> Gombis 17; Tamez, 117.



missionaries are challenged by new insights into the meaning of the gospel."<sup>77</sup> By allowing more voices to speak into missional theology, we allow God to "shape our imagination and our life trajectories, our vision of the world..." in ways we cannot imagine without true collaboration.<sup>78</sup>

Again, missional theology's goal is not broken. The attempt here is to highlight a hole and contradiction that a theology rooted in being on the ground in America cannot be dominated by one specific group of society. Missional theologians need to look at themselves in the mirror and see how they can better live their professed ideals. This is a chance to re-examine who is shaping missional theology and to contextualize theology in better ways here and now.

*Reading the Bible Alongside Others: Showing Our Commitment to Learn*

This writing's argument extends to how missional theologians read, engage, and interpret scripture. Leading voices in missional theology must build space for other perspectives, even when it comes to how it interacts with the Bible. As Maria P. Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodriguez write in *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*, "since all human beings have a story, a context, a perspective, theology cannot be articulated in a vacuum."<sup>79</sup> The task of theological reflection is done best when it "builds on the reflections and learnings of other[s]..."<sup>80</sup>

On the topic of reading the Bible without respect for contextualization specifically, John R. Franke goes so far as to caution that "without this commitment, such reading will generally devolve into the practices of coercive perfusion and assimilation that are part of colonization."<sup>81</sup> De La Torre has the same warning: "The danger of reading the Bible through the eyes of the academy is that we end with interpretations captive to the socio-economic location of scholars doing the interpreting."<sup>82</sup> In other words, learning to engage the Bible alongside other perspectives is not merely a good idea to consider but an important part of forming a theology.

Missional theologians cannot forget that context impacts how we read the Bible and that "no one reads Scriptures objectively. We all read the Scriptures subjectively. All of us bring our biases and presuppositions to the text, reading into it our theology and worldview."<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, to impose our perspective onto scripture as the only possible truth is a misuse of power and scripture. We cannot make our subjective reading of the Bible "normative for all."<sup>84</sup> Therefore, in the same spirit in which Jesus draws a wide circle and includes all in a spirit of equality, missional theologians must create spaces that enable biblical reflections based on various perspectives "of ordinary believers."<sup>85</sup> This includes explicitly reading the Bible from the

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<sup>77</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 39.

<sup>78</sup> Gombis, 17.

<sup>79</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 204.

<sup>80</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, xiv.

<sup>81</sup> Goheen, 102.

<sup>82</sup> De La Torre, xv.

<sup>83</sup> De La Torre, 9.

<sup>84</sup> De La Torre, 9.

<sup>85</sup> De La Torre, xv.

margins trusting we will find "new insights for the entire faith community."<sup>86</sup> Our ability to listen to others impacts our ability to see different possibilities and outcomes.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, done well, simply the sheer practice of reading the Bible alongside others can be formative. Michael Goheen writes, we must "learn to read with others in such a way that we are able not only to listen to their words but also hear what they are saying. In this way, the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of God will be made known on earth. This is the task of missional theology."<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, learning to read the Bible alongside others will also lead us to demonstrate our commitment to learning. Lesslie Newbigin casts vision on the topic of being a humble learner when he says, "the Church, it seems to me, needs to be very humble in acknowledging that it is itself only a learner, needing to pay heed to all the variety of human experience in order to learn in practice what it means that Jesus is King and Head of the human race."<sup>89</sup> Tod Bolsinger uses the term "a church without expert" to capture what ought to be the church's and missional theologians ongoing learning posture.<sup>90</sup>

Naturally, reading closely and respectfully with people from other cultures, social locations, and perspectives will challenge and stretch us. Sincere flexibility will be necessary if practitioners of missional theology intend to diversify, equalize, and build a more inclusive table at all levels of participation and engagement.<sup>91</sup> In fact, Steve Addison, who has studied movements throughout church history, states that "balancing flexibility and control enabled [John] Wesley to build a movement . . ."<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, being that advocates of missional theology claim to believe that a fluid but fixed nature helps bring forth God's mission in various times and places, this is just one more area practitioners of missional theology can work on embodying their professed values for the sake of living into its mission more fully.<sup>93</sup>

### *Seeing Others as Equals*

For missional theology to make a change in the right direction, it is imperative to clarify that those in the dominant group with power — those currently defining the parameters of missiology — must come to respect inclusion and equality. For example, it is not enough to include some token women in male-dominated theological and ecclesial structures. What is necessary is the humanization of these structures themselves. Wider circles must be drawn, and power must be distributed amongst the group. Danielle Strickland reminds readers that "equal rights without equal opportunity is not really equality at all."<sup>94</sup> Jesus formed a "discipleship of equals," and advocates of missional theology has the same call.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Russell, 27.

<sup>87</sup> Russel, 40.

<sup>88</sup> Goheen, 102-103.

<sup>89</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Missionary Theologian* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publish, 2006), 217.

<sup>90</sup> Ted Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 31.

<sup>91</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 112.

<sup>92</sup> Steve Addison, *The Rise and Fall of Movements* (Laramie: 100Movements Publish, 2019), 79.

<sup>93</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile 57.

<sup>94</sup> Strickland, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Russell, 59.

The caution here is that proponents of missional theology must not fall into the trap of advocating for a shallow "visible unity."<sup>96</sup> Instead, leaders in missional theology must work towards being a more ecumenical movement that reflects unity without uniformity. God draws us close, all are welcome, but all must not be the same. Letty Russell writes that it is "unity without uniformity that makes hospitality and diversity possible."<sup>97</sup> These are essential parameters for the church today. There is an invitation here to stop seeing those unlike us as the problem. Instead, we must look for how the church has struggled to bear witness to this mandate.<sup>98</sup>

This, of course, mirrors the structure of life we see within the Trinity. The Christian faith stands on a theology that says, "God is a community of love between persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) where the differences and pluralities are not suppressed but integrated...In this divine community, the human community finds its likeness."<sup>99</sup> In the Trinity, we see what it means to share authority and to "exist within a non-hierarchical model."<sup>100</sup> Here there is "cohesion that involves a spiritual, covenantal, and relational corporateness."<sup>101</sup> And while authority is a big issue in theology, the Trinity shows us how to move past "power over" structures of domination and submission — learning to "resist strategies of manipulation, exploitation, coercion...of others" — and truly become equals.<sup>102</sup> The Trinity teaches us that love calls us to treat one another as equals.<sup>103</sup>

Again, the church becomes the gospel by participating in it.<sup>104</sup> We must form a more "humanized theology" and "whole theology" that honors differences and our shared place before God as children of God.<sup>105</sup> This is part of the public witness we reflect to the world. Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz speaks to this topic when she says, "it is only at the level of the table 'as equals' and not under the table 'as inferiors' that a constructive dialogue and a fair reconstitution of the world can be achieved."<sup>106</sup> To describe an ecumenical partnership and shared mission to the world, Bryan McLaren uses the language of "inclusive partnerships."<sup>107</sup> We must move past seeing some people with "second-class status" and see one another as co-contributors with "co-responsibility."<sup>108</sup> We are to embody a unity rooted in "mutual love and responsibility."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Charles Van Engen, *Missional Theology In the Light of Post Modern Critique*, Academia, (n.d.). [https://www.academia.edu/3220357/Mission\\_Theology\\_in\\_the\\_Light\\_of\\_Postmodern\\_Critique](https://www.academia.edu/3220357/Mission_Theology_in_the_Light_of_Postmodern_Critique), 441.

<sup>97</sup> Russel, 174.

<sup>98</sup> Russell, 11.

<sup>99</sup> Tamez, 61.

<sup>100</sup> De La Torre, 60.

<sup>101</sup> Van Engen, 441.

<sup>102</sup> Fiorenza, 247; Gombis, 128.

<sup>103</sup> Fiorenza, 247.

<sup>104</sup> Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 109.

<sup>105</sup> Fiorenza, 66.

<sup>106</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 94.

<sup>107</sup> Fiorenza, 273; Brian McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 203.

<sup>108</sup> Tamez, 119.

<sup>109</sup> Newbiggin, 72.

*Creating Inclusion and Equality Means Working for Justice*

It is important to openly acknowledge this redistribution of power may feel like a loss for those with more privilege and authority now. Those losing hierarchical control will need to understand the loss is less about something being taken from them and more about them now returning something that was not theirs to begin with. Furthermore, it would be wise for the church today to consider how it has contributed to the problems of exclusion and inequality around us. For example, the church must own the "theological justification of women's innate difference from men. Christian ethics has intensified the internalization...of passive attitudes, such as meekness, humility, submission, self-sacrifice, self-denying love, which impeded the development of self-assertion and autonomy by women."<sup>110</sup>

Moreover, along the lines of working for change, even though it will be hard, it is worth noting that research does confirm it is easier to be with people who agree with our attitudes, opinions, values, preferences, and so forth. Being with similar others is more comfortable because "they affirm our worldviews, behaviors and experiences."<sup>111</sup> Thus, creating inclusion and equality will take work and might be difficult on some level. Nevertheless, everyone must take responsibility in helping things move forward — whether the problem lies in structural sin as addressed earlier or in personal sin. It takes work to confront, change, and transform broken systems and ways of being.

Once again, we cannot settle for beliefs that say we want inclusion and equality. Practitioners of missional theology must do the work to move forward. We cannot merely "pay lip service" for inclusion and equality.<sup>112</sup> This must be a way of living. Christena Cleveland, a social psychologist, public theologian, author, and activist, reminds her audience that "everyone wants diversity, but no one wants to actually be diverse."<sup>113</sup>

By creating a "convening table" for all, many missional theologians show themselves committed to the process of working towards inclusion and diversity.<sup>114</sup> There must be a shift in habits, heart, attitude, values, expectations, systems, and structures to meet this challenge. We need to see the complex, interconnected web of oppression that fuels exclusion and inequality on a societal and personal level. And of course, this is another chance for us to embody the gospel and help bring healing to a hurting world. As Latina feminist theologian Maria Pilar Aquino says, through our example, we can "affirm new models of social relationships that are capable of sustaining human dignity and integrity of creation."<sup>115</sup>

Doing this work well will also better position advocates of missional theology to better critique systems and structures that oppress, divide, and exclude.<sup>116</sup> By engaging in the pursuit of inclusion and equality, missional theologians will display how our salvation moves us to care about justice, liberation, and human dignity.<sup>117</sup> Part of the good news message is understanding

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<sup>110</sup> Fiorenza, 58.

<sup>111</sup> Cleveland, 328.

<sup>112</sup> Fiorenza, 59.

<sup>113</sup> Cleveland, 184.

<sup>114</sup> McLaren, 228.

<sup>115</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, xiv.

<sup>116</sup> Fiorenza, 56.

<sup>117</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 154.

that all broken things do not need to stay broken. Bryan McLaren writes, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses social, political, and economic issues of the day...including the issues of tribalism, systemic economic injustice, religious pluralism, ethical business, equality for women, mental illness, health care, education, climate change, and environmental stewardship."<sup>118</sup> Christ-followers are to be people who work to create "restitution and humanization."<sup>119</sup> Practitioners of missional theology must actively do their part to bring good, and pursuing inclusion and diversity are important steps forward.

Missional theologians can help turn missional theology into "a community of faith and struggle working to anticipate God's New Creation by becoming partners with those who are at the margins of church and society."<sup>120</sup> This sort of compassion means being willing to "work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world, and to honor the sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect."<sup>121</sup> Moreover, by engaging in the work of justice for all, missional theologians better demonstrate that the gospel is intended to be good news for all.

*Embracing Equal Status with Others Here and Now:  
Four Practical Steps of Application*

While much could be said on how to move forward, there are practical steps those engaged in missional theology can take here and now. More specifically, these are steps white males engaged in missional theology— those who are positioned as the dominant voice in the group — can proactively work on in light of their commitment to contextualizing well in America. These are steps we can take to ensure the good news finds expression and voice in more cultures.

While this list is not exhaustive or complete, these steps are not steps that can be skipped or minimized. Those within missional theology must do the work of creating a more inclusive and equal environment. Cleveland speaks rather directly to this topic when she writes, "to put it bluntly, if you're not willing to do the uncomfortable work of addressing and eradicating power and privilege differences in the church and beyond, you shouldn't bother with unity and reconciliation. You can't have the latter without the former."<sup>122</sup> May those committed to helping bring the good news message to all say yes to doing the work laid out before us.

*Application One: Encourage Full Participation*

Throughout missional theology teaching, we hear, "the church becomes the gospel by participating in it."<sup>123</sup> Even the Apostle Paul "offered himself...as a 'model for participation in the missio Dei.'"<sup>124</sup> We are to be a community marked by our participation.<sup>125</sup> With that being said,

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<sup>118</sup> McLaren, 146.

<sup>119</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 96.

<sup>120</sup> Russell, 12.

<sup>121</sup> McLaren, 208.

<sup>122</sup> Cleveland, 170.

<sup>123</sup> Gorman, 109.

<sup>124</sup> Gorman, 85.

<sup>125</sup> Gorman, 12.

those engaged in missional theology can be proactive in ensuring they allow all sorts of people to participate *fully*.

Questions to consider might include: What type of people do you invite to your home? Who is welcomed to your church and small group? Whom do you invite to your church planning meetings? What books do you read and study? Whom are those books written by? Who do you allow to speak into your sermon content or research? Who truly has the freedom to give you feedback without fear of backlash? Who do you allow to teach? Does the leadership structure you oversee reflect inclusion and equality? Who are you willing to learn from? Do you lean in with curiosity when someone different from you shares a perspective that is unlike your own? Do you assume you know the right, best, smartest answers? Do you make space for others to sense God in another way?<sup>126</sup> Do you see people who are different from you as equal and deserving of their theological authority? Do you believe everyone is called to fully participate in the mission of the church at all levels? Does your behavior and attitude reflect one of inclusion and equality?

Building on this perspective, pastors and practitioners of missional theology need to understand the goal "is not to be a voice for the voiceless but to ensure that those silenced have access, especially in this advanced technological age...to find and exercise their own voice."<sup>127</sup> There is a time and place to be a voice for another, but it is better to ensure the voice of others are not "muffled and their sense of belonging challenged."<sup>128</sup> Those who have been pushed aside need space to "rewrite the Christian tradition and theology" in such a way that it becomes their own as well.<sup>129</sup> Those who have been silenced are co-contributions that share "co-responsibility,"<sup>130</sup> and missional theology must give others their rightful chance to participate fully.

On the topic of participation, Ana Maria Bidegain shared that in liberation theology, "men and women joined hands to make their commitment to the cause of liberation... both sexes were able to share all responsibilities involved...[and people saw] that women have a right to a place in society and the church not as minors...but on equal footing with men."<sup>131</sup> Again, this is about giving back power and authority to others and demonstrating a commitment that says the gospel is not a call to believe but a call to engage and to include everyone else in. Through becoming the gospel, we advance the gospel and become a "community that walks worthy of the calling to which it has been called."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Tamez, 140.

<sup>127</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 196.

<sup>128</sup> Cleveland, 53.

<sup>129</sup> Fiorenza, 62

<sup>130</sup> Newbigin, 156

<sup>131</sup> Tamez, 27

<sup>132</sup> Gorman 297; Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 130.

*Application Two: Encourage True Dialogue*

Done well, "communication is that mysterious bridge where intimacy and otherness meet."<sup>133</sup> Justo Gonzales writes that dialogue "is the basis of our entire social life."<sup>134</sup> While we live in a culture that has normalized "taking polarized positions without listening to another is now pervasive, this is not the Jesus way."<sup>135</sup> Newbigin goes so far as to teach us that, "The Gospel...is not to assert dominance but to invite dialogue."<sup>136</sup> This means those committed to missional theology must learn to engage in dialogue well for the sake of its mission.

On the topic of inclusion and equality, a fundamental way we all can create more balance in relationships is by listening well. This requires trying to see the whole person and leaning in with curiosity and care. In *A Many Colored Kingdom*, readers are told to "listen for content, feeling, and context" in order to stand with others.<sup>137</sup> Newbigin writes that our ability to listen is part of what sets us apart: "eagerness to listen, to learn, to receive even what is new and strange will be the mark of one who knows the word of Jesus."<sup>138</sup> By its very nature, authentic dialogue shows "respect and appreciation for the other person, and some sense of shared vision and purpose."<sup>139</sup>

Teaching about the Methodist movement's success specifically, David Hempton observed that while there were "resistant factors, such as male chauvinism and naked racism...the overall tendency was to promote the voices of ordinary people in ever-expanding circles."<sup>140</sup> Hempton goes on to write, "the movement provided a process through which ordinary people found their own voice. They spoke. Others listened, and then they too spoke. Others joined them."<sup>141</sup>

Moreover, we must remember that genuine dialogue comes from a place of deep humility — not merely a favor or act of kindness to another. This is humility so deep it embraces the possibility of coming to see another or better way. Newbigin notes, "the Christian dialogue must recognize that the results of the dialogue may be a profound change in himself"<sup>142</sup> and that there is no way to remove all the risk from true dialogue.

Along these same lines, Valarie Kaur, civil rights activist and lawyer, describes listening as an act of surrender that positions us at risk of being changed.<sup>143</sup> We must accept the hard work of the process.

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<sup>133</sup> Gonzalez, 14.

<sup>134</sup> Gonzalez, 13.

<sup>135</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 14.

<sup>136</sup> Newbigin, 247

<sup>137</sup> Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, 185.

<sup>138</sup> Newbigin, 169.

<sup>139</sup> Christopher Heuertz, *Friendship At The Margin* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 78.

<sup>140</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism* (Orwigsburg: Yale University, 2005), 206.

<sup>141</sup> Hempton, 206.

<sup>142</sup> Newbigin, 170; Newbigin, 157.

<sup>143</sup> Valarie Kaur, *See No Stranger* (New York: Penguin House, 2020), 143.

*Application Three: Work for A Diverse Community Marked by Solidarity*

The Missional theology movement will never become a more inclusive and equal space if we do not do the work of building a community. We must learn to come together. Christians belong to God, and when we locate our lives inside God's communal life, we find that we truly belong to one another in ways that transgress and transcend the world's way of belonging.<sup>144</sup> In fact, Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that it is the way we form a loving and caring community that ends up being our "primary hermeneutic of the gospel."<sup>145</sup> Jon Sobrino uses the term "'ecclesial solidarity' [to describe] the spirit of bearing one another's burdens, of giving and receiving, of mutual teaching and learning, among the various churches and the diverse strata of church structure."<sup>146</sup> It is through living together — in love and solidarity — we best live on mission.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, advocates of missional theology, including us, cannot skip this part of the process either.

The goal of community is not coexisting or tolerance, but rather becoming interdependent with the fuller body of Christ. While building a diverse community can present challenges, "opening ourselves up to communion is a great calling, our highest aspiration."<sup>148</sup> Biblical community asks proponents to willingly engage with their "near and distant neighbor."<sup>149</sup> Christine Cleveland says it best when she writes: "not only is Jesus serious about crossing boundaries to pursue us, but he's also equally serious about our crossing boundaries to pursue others. He has shown us how to do it."<sup>150</sup>

Beyond the church's call to build a diverse community, research shows that space between diverse groups can perpetuate problems. Speaking to racial differences specifically, Brian Leong shares, "when people remain socially, geographically, and personally segregated from racial differences the chams of racial misunderstanding and conflict widen."<sup>151</sup> Moreover, Christine Cleveland teaches that *contact theory* reveals how direct contact with people we have inaccurately perceived negatively can reverse our inaccurate perceptions, negative emotions, and discrimination.<sup>152</sup>

In addition, to walk in solidarity with another — walking faithfully and offering compassion and proper care — we must be close enough to know the hurts and the actual desired needs. We can never serve the world properly if we are removed. It is in our togetherness we are positioned to build a better future together. Christopher Heuertz, author of *Friendship in The Margins*, and Jon Huckins, author of *Thin Places: Six Postures for Creating and Practicing Missional Community*, both write that community is the ideal starting place for missional living and where we discover what is our work to do.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> David P. Leong, *Race and Place* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 37.

<sup>145</sup> Newbigin, 233.

<sup>146</sup> Russell, 21.

<sup>147</sup> Heuertz, 33.

<sup>148</sup> Tamez, 145.

<sup>149</sup> Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (Ann Arbor: Yale University, 2010), 236.

<sup>150</sup> Cleveland, 191.

<sup>151</sup> Leong, 181.

<sup>152</sup> Cleveland, 153.

<sup>153</sup> Heuertz, 25; Jon Huckins, *Thin Places* (Kansas City: The House Studio, 2012), 31.



*Application Four: Repent*

Whether the Missional Theology movement intended to become dominated by white males or not, proponents have fallen short. And as Jesus people, we must be willing to demonstrate reconciliation. On the topic of racial reconciliation, Jamar Tisby, author of *The Color of Compromise*, teaches, "History and Scripture teach us that there can be no reconciliation without repentance. There can be no repentance without confession. And there can be no confession without truth."<sup>154</sup> If missional theologians want to move forward, they must commit to the full process of reconciliation.

Now is the time for advocates for missional theology to own how the tradition falls short and commit to moving forward in new ways. Here the movement can demonstrate what cruciformity looks like — what it looks like for those privileged by the dominant culture to put their pride aside and move towards reconciliation.<sup>155</sup>

*To the Voices Missing from Missional Theology*

To those who sense being overlooked within missional theology, this is "not a time to fight or surrender, but to keep moving forward knowing we have great work to do."<sup>156</sup> May those who feel removed from the conversation continue to show up trusting God is not done working on the church. Again, the goal is movement forward — despite the work, risk, and cost.

McLaren points out that often the way forward "seems impassable" but that it is in this "impossible agonizing place...a new depth of naked, essential faith in God mysteriously becomes possible."<sup>157</sup> It is in this "tumultuous sea" our hearts are broken open "with divine love that can heal the world."<sup>158</sup> In this place, we change into "a better way to be Christian and a better way to be human."<sup>159</sup>

Moreover, speaking to women of color specifically, M.P. Aquino notes that "doing theology 'is not a luxury, but a necessity and a right to be claimed.'"<sup>160</sup> May those who feel removed from missional theology accept "God's invitation to share in the building of the new society" and trust that "it is the Holy Spirit who arouses us and moves."<sup>161</sup> Those feelings under-represented deserve and are being called to tell their stories in their own words.<sup>162</sup> Even if responsibility is not being shared, the "mutual responsibility" is with all to participate and share in the mission of the church.<sup>163</sup> May those in the margins remember, the church is "not something to which we belong, but [the church is] who we are."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Jemar Tisby, *The Color Of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 15.

<sup>155</sup> De La Torre, 76; Gombis, 129.

<sup>156</sup> McLaren, 203.

<sup>157</sup> McLaren, 203.

<sup>158</sup> McLaren, 203-204.

<sup>159</sup> McLaren, 204.

<sup>160</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, xiv.

<sup>161</sup> Tamez, 34, 151.

<sup>162</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, xix.

<sup>163</sup> Newbigin, 156.

<sup>164</sup> Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, 149.

*Conclusion: Moving Forward with Hope*

By doing the work to include and equalize more voices, missional theologians help bring about an "all-inclusive, truly catholic community" and to a more "humanized theology."<sup>165</sup> By opening space for more cultures, perspectives, and voices, missional theologians demonstrate their commitment to being a "faithful and embodied witness in a particular context."<sup>166</sup> America is diverse and missional theology in America needs to reflect that at all levels of participation. To remain homogeneous, similar, and exclusive in a nation marked by diversity and multiculturalism is to suppress God's movement by narrowing who has access to participate fully in the church's mission here and now. May advocates and practitioners of missional theology move past being a "belief-based religion to a practice-based religion" while trusting God is asking all to partner and engage fully in his mission.<sup>167</sup> Missional theology cannot be dominated by just one pocket of society — it is time to reclaim the "silenced majority" and ensure all are being welcomed to participate fully in the gospel here and now.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Fiorenza, 66, 70.

<sup>166</sup> Stone, 13.

<sup>167</sup> Rohr, 108.

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