

THEOLOGY OF MISSION AND MISSIONAL THEOLOGIZING: A PARADIGM FROM PAUL

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My focus in this paper is not so much on a “theology of mission” as an end product as on the *process* of missional theologizing. The generative model for these reflections is the Apostle Paul, who embodies the marriage between mission and theology. Paul’s theology is at its heart a mission theology. His theological activity in writing letters is an extension of his apostolic calling and missionary work.

The Pauline Paradigm

I will note four senses in which Paul’s letters could offer us a model for missional theologizing. First, Paul targets his message for the context. Rather than trying to set forth some kind of “pure” theology or a ready made doctrinal system, Paul works out the ramifications of the gospel for a variety of mission churches scattered throughout the Mediterranean world, responding to their particular socio-cultural circumstances, challenges, and pastoral concerns. Paul’s theologizing has an incarnational thrust, enabling the eternal Word of the gospel to become a “word on target” for those it addresses.¹

Consequently, Paul draws upon the motif of righteousness by faith to interpret the gospel for the Galatians or Romans, where Christians’ relationship to the law is at issue. Elsewhere, however, he turns to other themes that are tailored to the audience and their life setting—the cross, wisdom, the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians or the *parousia* in 1 Thessalonians. Paul’s theology cannot be abstracted from the particularity of its mission context.

Second, Paul’s theologizing is dynamic and flexible. For instance, he has no stock way of expressing the significance of the death of Christ. Instead he enlists a kaleidoscope of metaphors and images from his world to communicate its meaning. Some of these are overtly religious (e.g., “sacrifice” Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 5:7), others come out of peoples’ everyday experience, such as personal relationships (“reconciliation” 2 Cor 5:18-20; Rom 5:10-11), and still others participate in both realms. The metaphor of “redemption,” for example, evoked both biblical images of God’s deliverance and those of the contemporary slave market. Joel Green and Mark Baker observe that, unlike the church today, in which one view of the atonement—the “penal substitution” model—tends to popularly dominate the theological landscape, Paul adopted and adapted a rich variety of images, some traditional, some contemporary, which he could deploy according to peoples’ needs.²

Third, while Paul’s theologizing is flexible and audience-oriented, it is not “market-driven.” Rather, it is consistently rooted in “the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:5, 14), the non-negotiable message that Paul proclaims and which defines his life and mission. Whether the issue at hand is food sacrificed in pagan worship or the basis of Gentiles’ acceptance into the people of God or Christians taking one another to court, the coherent gospel, centered on God’s saving action in Jesus Christ, norms all particular theological and ethical expressions.

¹ J. C. Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul’s Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. x.

² Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in the New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), esp. pp. 46-67.

Fourth, Paul's articulation of the gospel is both shaped by, and at the same time challenges, his socio-cultural world. Addressing a predominantly urban Hellenistic environment, he utilizes the cultural materials at hand to construct Christian identity and theology. Language from the spheres of religion, philosophy, and moral teaching, metaphors from athletics, commerce, and warfare, conventions of rhetoric and letter writing, social institutions like the household and patronage, values such as honor and purity, all are drawn into the service of the gospel and mission. The gospel encounters people within their existing cultures and web relationships; it speaks their language.

At the same time, the gospel engages Greco-Roman culture and society in order to transform them from within. Citizens of the Roman colony Philippi are called to a higher allegiance than Rome, a Christ commonwealth whose life in the world takes a cruciform shape (Phil 1:27ff; 3:20). The Corinthians' cultural obsession with worldly wisdom is subverted by Christ crucified as the true "wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). The convention of the "household code" governing behavior among family members and masters and slaves receives a Christological grounding that recasts existing social relations. Paul's theologizing is characterized by both incarnation and transformation, both constructive and corrective engagement.

Missional Theologizing Today

Today's missional church must embrace the same theological task of contextualizing the gospel within the life situations of contemporary people in transforming ways. Surely, our theological reflection must be grounded in Scripture and in our tradition, as Paul's was. Yet, the writings of Paul and the other New Testament materials are more than just sources for theological *content*. They also serve as models for doing the theological task.³ As the New Testament writers engaged their world, we must engage ours. While their ways of expressing the gospel, as Scripture, continue to carry foundational significance, we cannot be content merely with imitating their terminology or simply reading their images directly into our settings.⁴ Sacrificial language, for example, which evoked a deep well of religious associations for ancient Mediterraneans, may need careful "translation" for many contemporary people for whom an act of "sacrifice" could mean giving up desserts in order to lose weight.

At the same time, we must have the courage, guided by the Spirit, to find ways of articulating and embodying the gospel that draw upon our own stories and cultural resources, while remaining faithful to the witness of Scripture. Portraying the cross as God's loving identification with human shame might communicate the atonement to Eastern "shame" cultures more meaningfully than traditional interpretations based on guilt and punishment. In settings where the community's relationship to ancestors is fundamental to peoples' worldviews, Christians might consider enlisting this discourse in order to clarify the role of Christ. Yet traditional beliefs must be challenged and language infused with new content, lest Jesus be reduced to one ancestor among many. Churches in affluent societies might co-opt images from the financial world in order to expose their cultures' worship of Mammon.

Wesleyans, who have historically shown an ability to adapt theologically to changing social and intellectual circumstances, have a particular opportunity to do this kind of theologizing. Indeed, our ways of formulating and communicating holiness must be continually "re-contextualized" if they are to holistically engage the worlds in which we live and serve. It is only by following

³ Joel B. Green, "Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided," in J. B. Green and M. Turner, ed., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 40-41.

⁴ See Green and Baker, *Scandal*, pp. 110-111.

Paul's paradigm of enabling the one gospel of Christ crucified and risen to address and transform people within their life circumstances that we can have a truly missional theology—one that motivates and sustains the church in its service and witness in the world. Is any other theology worth claiming?