

Response

by

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Flemming’s essay, “Theology of Mission and Missional Theologizing: A Paradigm from Paul” raises key missiological and homiletical issues. His appeal to Pauline method as helpful in the formulation of our mission and message is both time-honored and productive.¹

“Missional Theologizing” related to contextualization

Every one of my colleague’s major points touches in some way upon contextualization. In other words, how can our proclamation of the Gospel be tailored to fit the listener and his/her cultural background? Flemming underscores the importance of the task: “The gospel encounters people within their cultures and web relationships; it speaks their language.”

Learning the local tongue is vital, yet one must go further by basing concepts taught and preached on local wisdom and life experience. A twenty-minute sermon on the importance of Body Life may prove less effective than quoting a single proverb: “You can’t pick up a grain of rice with just one finger.”

Avoiding theological shipwreck while faithfully contextualizing the *kerygma* will require meticulously steering our “ship” between twin dangers. To the left loom the rocky shoals of syncretism, a lethal mixing of pagan and Christian ideas. To the right lurks the hazardous reef of cultural irrelevance, an imported Gospel so laden with foreign elements that the listener’s heart is never touched, the mind never engaged. Therefore, true conversion never results.

How can we contextualize, or to use Flemming’s terminology, how can we do “missional theologizing”? The challenge facing the theologian is to express the meaning of biblical faith in terms that resonate with the target culture. It will require taking a closer look at viewpoints more likely to effectively communicate the Gospel in a non-Western setting.

Shame, Honour and the Cross

One such perspective neglected by Western theologians is the shame/honour dynamic. Flemming writes: “Consequently, 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.” The validity of Flemming’s observation is confirmed by Musk: “...a major goal in many

¹ See Arthur F. Glasser, “The Apostle Paul and the Missionary Task,” and John R. W. Stott, “The Bible in World Evangelization,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, R. D. Winger & S. C. Hawthorne, eds. (Pasadena, CA [USA]: William Carey Library, 1981.)

Middle Easterners' lives is to accumulate honour and avoid its erosion by shame.”² His observation applies to places outside the Middle East, such as West Africa.

To do “missional theologizing” at the foot of the Cross, how can we supplement the moral influence and penal-satisfaction concepts with an “honour theory of the Atonement”?³

In his essay, Flemming points us toward Paul, who here again proves helpful. Himself a Jew and learned Pharisee, Paul was familiar with Old Testament stories such as that of Tamar and Amnon (2 Samuel 13). When Amnon raped Tamar, her brother Absalom killed him in order to erase Tamar’s shame and restore family honour.

Knowing the Hebrew cultural value of avoiding shame and accumulating honour, we now turn to the New Testament. Indeed, the great Pauline *kenosis* passage (Phil 2:5-11) can be seen through the interpretive “glasses” of shame vs. honour. Jesus was willing to humble himself and bear immense disgrace, but only for the higher purpose of redeeming humankind. “Therefore, God has highly exalted him” (Phil. 2:9a). The Crucifixion was utterly shameful, but God the Father restored honour to the “family” (Trinity) by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:27).

Musk lays out a new paradigm:

Lordship and submission are scriptural concerns (Jn 5:22-26, Phil 2:9-11) and explain why Jesus acted as he did, why the cross was a means of bringing glory to God, not a contradiction of it. To emphasize the vertical relationship between Jesus and his Father is as valid as emphasizing the horizontal relationship between Jesus and mankind...Perhaps it is time to stop expecting the Muslim to see the love of God in the cross of Christ. It might be easier for him to glimpse there something of Christ’s loyalty to his Father, something of the Father’s glory in watching his Son obey him to the end, vindicating family honour.⁴

Conclusion

Flemming reminds us of the importance of approaching missional theologizing from various Pauline perspectives. While this response focuses primarily on the issue of honour vs. shame, his list is more comprehensive and worthy of deeper reflection.

Questions for dialog

1. What other biblical authors could supplement Paul as we develop our own model for “missional theologizing”?

² Bill A. Musk, *Touching the Soul of Islam: Sharing the Gospel in Muslim Cultures* (Crowborough, East Sussex, England: MARC, 1995), 73.

³ For a more extended treatment, see J. Gregory Crofford, “A Matter of Honor: An Alternative View of the Cross,” 2001; unpublished paper.

⁴ *Touching the Soul of Islam*, 87-88.

2. Flemming says that Paul's theologizing is "dynamic and flexible." How can one be sure that "missional theologizing" does not become so flexible that it breaks down, sacrificing truth for the sake of relevance?
3. The Bible gives multiple explanations of the Atonement. Which one resonates best in the area where you minister? What additional models might be worth exploring, in order to enhance homiletical effectiveness?
4. Does globalization — an apparent homogenization of world cultures — make "missional theologizing" of lesser or greater importance? Explain.