

Missional Theology - Chapter 3

Missional Theology

“Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.” The move from church with a mission to missional church has significant implications for the practice of theology.

As with the church, the impulses and assumptions that have shaped the discipline of theology in the West are those of Christendom rather than the mission of God. Most of the teaching and research in universities and schools of theology in the West remains in thrall to traditional academic models that stress detached objectivity in the study of any discipline, including theology.

If theology is to serve the life and witness of the church to the gospel and if we assume that the church can only exist as truly itself only when dedicated to the mission of God, a burning question ensues. How should one reinvent theology and theological education so that they flow naturally for an integral perspective on God’s consistent will and activity in the world?

Like the challenge facing the church in moving from church with mission to missional church, so the discipline of theology, if it is to serve the church and be faithful to its subject, must move from theology with a mission component to a truly missional conception of theology.

Figure 3.1

Definition: Missional theology is an ongoing, second-order, contextual discipline that engages in the task of critical and constructive reflection on the beliefs and practices of the Christian church for the purpose of assisting the community of Christ’s followers in their missional vocation to live as the people of God in the particular social-historical context in which they are situated.

The Nature of Missional Theology

The Task of Missional Theology

The Purpose of Missional Theology

Doing Missional Theology

Missional theology starts in the life and witness of a community that believes in the gospel and is prepared to live by it.

As the community bears witness to the gospel in its particular social location it has encounters and experiences that continually shape and challenge its conception of the gospel and Christian faith and their implications for witness in the world. These lived encounters and experiences provide the starting point for theological reflection.

This reflection begins with the formulation of questions to be wrestled with and responded to: What is going on in the culture? What needs, desires, concerns, and challenges are reflected in these encounters and experiences? How are they addressed by the gospel? What insight into these situations is provided by scripture? What contributions are made by Christian communities past and present to contemporary situations and challenges? How is God at work in the situation? What is the Spirit saying to the churches?

Because this reflection is the result of lived situations, it will result in action as the communities and individuals determine how they will respond to the particular situations and challenges they face. The determination of a course of action will also raise important questions that require further theological reflection: What response constitutes faithfulness to the mission of God? What is the response of love? How might the community need to change? What sacrifices might be called for by individuals and the larger community? What are the implications of particular responses for the unity of the church? How will dissent be addressed?

Figure 3.2

Theology in Christian history constitutes a series of local translations of the gospel and iterations of communal life based on the texts of scripture in relationship to particular social, historical, and cultural conditions. The science of communal convictions.

This multifaceted history is an important element in the method of missional theology. While it is beyond full comprehension, the more we are aware of this history and all of its diversity, the more alert we become to the voice of the Spirit at work in the witness of Christian communities and the infinite translatability of the gospel and theology.