

Missional Theology - Chapter 4

Missional Multiplicity

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

On the day of Pentecost, a strong wind came upon them and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages (Acts 2:1-4). The text goes on to say that a large and diverse gathering who were present for this phenomenon were bewildered because they each heard their own language being spoken. Those who experienced this linguistic phenomenon were reportedly amazed and perplexed and asked one another what it meant (Acts 2:5-12).

The meaning of this Pentecostal plurality is significant for understanding the mission of the church to bear witness to the ends of the earth. The action of the Spirit here effectively decenters any particular language or culture with respect to the proclamation of the gospel and the mission of the church. The implication is that no single language or culture is to be viewed as the prime or inseparable conduit of the gospel message.

Plurality, Christian Faith, and the Word of God

Some may see this affirmation of plurality as a capitulation to the mood of contemporary cultural. However, it actually emerges from some of the most central claims of scripture and beliefs that have been commonly held by Christians over the centuries.

For example: the belief that the Bible is the inspired word of God and that the teachings and promises it contains are trustworthy (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The belief that God will provide guidance for the church as it goes on its way through the world and give wisdom generously to all who ask (James 1:5). The belief that the Holy Spirit will guide the followers of Jesus into the truth (John 16:13-14). How do we account for Christian plurality in light of these beliefs?

Thesis: Christian witness that is faithful to the mission of God will be characterized by irreducible plurality and missional multiplicity. If diverse Christian communities are missionally faithful to the places and contexts in which they are situated, their beliefs and practices will constitute a manifold witness to the gospel.

A Theology of Christian Pluralism

The Life of God (Trinity)

Difference and otherness are part of the divine life. While Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are one God, their unity is not an outgrowth of sameness. Rather, they are one in the very midst of their difference.

Figure 4.1: The Word of God in Three Forms

The Word Revealed: Revelation (God Speaks)

The creator/creature distinction and the accommodated, experiential, and indirect character of revelation.

The Word Written: Witness to Revelation (Scripture)

As the Word of God and inspired *normative* witness to revelation, scripture is truth written and its pages bear manifold witness to the plurality of truth. As the Word of God and *paradigmatic* human witness to revelation, scripture also invites greater plurality than that contained in its pages in order that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the witness of the church to the gospel may be continually expanded to all the nations in keeping with the mission of God.

The Word Proclaimed: Witness to Revelation (Church)

The global witness of the Christian community to the revelation of God results in numerous expressions of Christian (missional multiplicity). This constitutes the expansion and proliferation of the Word of God in the world and is a faithful expression of the mission of God.

Multiplicity and Truth: Figure 4.2

The Shape of Missional Theology

Dialogical

Open and Committed to the Other

Beyond Foundations

Against Totality