TENNENT CHAPTER 2: TRINITARIAN MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

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My notes on the second chapter of Timothy Tennent's excellent book on world mission.
Category: Observations

Businesses all over the world have mission statements; *mission* no longer has a purely Christian connotation.

It was in the C16 that Jesuits first used the word in the sense of people taking the message of Christ out into the world. Until that time, mission was only used for the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Mission was used about God, not about people.

In recent years, with the advent of â€˜mission statementsâ€™ the word has been broadened to mean everything the church does. Mission has moved from being a theocentric to an anthropocentric concept.

MISSION AND MISSIONS

> *â€œMission refers to Godâ€™s redemptive, historical initiative on behalf of is creation.â€*

It is first and foremost about God and his actions..

This use of the term mission can be traced back to the International Missionary Council at Willingen in Germany in 1952, where the term *missio Dei* first came into common used.

> *â€œMission is our participation in the Fatherâ€™s mission of â€˜sending the son.â€™â€ (Vicedom)*

The idea of *missio Dei* will be at the root of the theology of this book. There were problems with the way that the idea was developed in ecumenical circles. Post Willingen the church and mission were decoupled. The world is the scene of Godâ€™s action and the church was sidelined. This sort of view was adopted by the World Council of Churches in 1968 at Uppsala.

The Eastern Orthodox Church resisted this sort of movement and remained committed to a strong connection between mission and the church. In the C19, much Orthodox mission looked similar to Protestant work. However, in the C20, Orthodox churches faced problems that caused them to become more passive and it became difficult to distinguish between mission and liturgy.

If Protestant and Catholics tend to separate mission and the church, the Orthodox went to the other extreme.

The evangelical opposition to the ecumenical movement was led by McGavaran and Glasser who stressed traditional themes of evangelism and church growth. They raised concerns about the tendency to reduce mission to social and political activism. However, they also failed to appreciate the way in which *missio Dei* thinking could help. The missiology they offered was overly driven by pragmatic, sociological principles, rather than a positive theological vision of Godâ€™s work in the

church.

God works both inside and outside of the church, but the church must be central to any biblical vision of mission. The Church is the only community specifically instituted by Jesus to participate in his mission.

Mission is God centred and church focused. In order to capture these realities, we need to distinguish between mission and missions.

Missions refers to all the specific and varied ways in which the church crosses cultural boundaries to reflect the life of the triune God in the world and, through that identity, participates His mission, celebrating through word and deed, the inbreaking of the New Creation.

GOD-CENTRED AND CHURCH-FOCUSSED MISSIONS

Mission should never be conceptualised apart from the *missio Dei.*

We say that mission flows out of Godâ€™s heart and initiative, but stay very busy with our own plans and activities.

Missiology and Social Science

From its inception, missiology has been dominated by social sciences. There is much to be learned from these disciplines, but they are not an adequate base for our actions. The controlling function in mission must be theological, not sociological. This was a key failure in the work of people like McGavaran.

Theology of Mission Versus Missional Nature of All Theology

We have tended to construct elaborate theologies of mission rather than seeing mission running through all theology.

Chris Wright in the The mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand NarrativeÂ has done a great deal to rebalance this.

Individualist Conceptions of Soteriology

The theology of missionaries â€“ especially Protestant ones â€“ has tended to be influenced by an overly individualistic and pietistic understanding of salvation.

> *â€œHowever, let me also clearly state that biblical salvation encompasses much more than individual conversion. Salvation also inherently implies incorporation into a community. We*

> *are not just baptised by faith; we are baptised into a faith that is shared by a community that exists in space around the world and back through time. Indeed, there are aspects of salvation that can be experienced and known only within the church as the redeemed community and cannot be realised in isolation from that community.â€*

The pietistic emphasis on individual salvation arose, to some extent, because of a suspicion of the established church amongst early evangelicals. God is seen as working primarily with individuals, not communities. Soteriology becomes separated from ecclesiology and pneumatology. The role of the church as the reflection of the Trinity; a Spirit filled community is largely lost in this view. We are commissioned to tell a story, but we are not a part of the story.

This sort of individualistic view also separates mission from the life of the church. Mission is the work of an elite group of individuals, not the whole community.

Seeing mission as the work of God helps us to redefine and understand what the church is. The Church is by nature missionary, the first fruits of the New Creation.

The distinction between mission and missions helps to keep the church humble by keeping things God centred.

> *â€œOur missionary activities are only authentic insofar as they reflect participation in the mission of Godâ€ (Bosch)*

However, we also acknowledge our invitation to play a role in what God is doing.

TRINITY AND *MISSIO DEI* IN LESSLIE NEWBIGIN AND KWAME BEDIAKO

Typically, mission text books follow this pattern:

- The biblical basis is examined and used to develop a missionary theology
- The history of mission is explored.
- An anthropological section which looks at the challenges to our understanding and communicating the gospel in different contexts.
- A practical section on what to do next.

All of this is vital, but without a Trinitarian framework, it is difficult to keep the correct balance between mission and missions.

The danger in mission training is that once we get into the practical stuff, we lose sight of the *missio Dei*. The only solution is to be thoroughly Trinitarian from the ground up.

Newbiginâ€™s Trinitarian Framework

Newbigin was one of the first to see the need of developing a missiology of Western civilisation.

For Newbigin John 20:21 is a key missiological text (â€˜As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.â€™ And with that he breathed on them and said â€˜Receive the Holy Spiritâ€™)

The Trinity is the starting point for the churches understanding of missions and how it relates to the mission of God. The problem is that the Trinity is a mystery to many Christians today. As long as we lived in Christendom, this didnâ€™t matter, because the authority for missions was not questioned. However, in a post-modern world, we must be able to give the source of our authority, which must lie outside of the bounds of society.

Newbigin set this all out in his book the Open Secret, but he never really got beyond setting out the Fatherâ€™s role in mission. However, his contribution was really important in setting the framework.

Bediako and the Context of the Trinity

Sanneh has long argued that mission is far more complex and subtle than simply being a history of Western colonialism. Sanneh identified two forces in mission. The horizontal dimension was the transmission of the gospel by missionaries, while the vertical one was the assimilation and enculturation of that message by local communities.

The gospel becomes expressed in local communities in ways that the missionaries never imagined. The missionaries only set in motion a process of religious change; the Africans themselves are the man players.

Bediako took up these ideas and framed them in an explicitly Trinitarian framework.

Act 1: Divine Intiation

The Father designs the plan of redemption. He is the one who takes the initiative to unfold his plan. He works in people groups to prepare them for the arrival of the gospel.

Act 2: Historic Transmission of the Gospel through the Church

The gospel has its root in a historic event, the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. The church is sent out by Christ to proclaim the redemption that Christ has achieved.

Act 3: Indigenous Assimilation of the Gospel in a Particular Context

The focus here is on the Spirit who convicts the world regarding sin and empowers the preaching of

the Gospel.

This post consists of my personal notes taken fromÂ Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century (Invitation to Theological Studies Series)Â by Timothy Tennent. Once you have read all my notes, please buy the book!