

Developing A Theory of Mission

We lack an adequate theory of mission that can guide in setting priorities, assigning personnel, determining what we should be doing and how to do it, developing inter-relationships with other cultures and organizations, adequately and completely evaluating our ministries. This lack of a comprehensive theory of mission is most notable in difficulty in discerning trends and estimating the long-term consequences of apparently reasonable actions.

It is not a matter of being uncertain of the Message we bring. That is one sure point about which all else revolves. We are confident of that Word, and seek to develop theologies that express the Word in differing cultures and contexts. Adequate theologies can enable understanding of God's self-revelation, expressing in human thought patterns what has been shown of His nature and purposes. But theology cannot be separated from theory. In other words, the message cannot be separated from methods used to give the message. Mission theory includes theology, and in fact develops on theological foundations - or more accurately, theology develops on missiological foundations.

Mission theory seeks to discover the overall structure of mission, and show how each part fits into the whole. Theory does not discard the parts, but shows how each part is needed to fulfil God's purpose.

Certainty about the Message does not mean certainty in how we proclaim the Message, however. For that, a theory of mission is needed that can guide the manner in which we understand and implement the mission of the Church.¹

Needed: A Theory of Mission

Do we need a theory of mission? The Holy Spirit is our teacher, guide, counselor, energizer, it is quickly affirmed. He Who knows all can surely direct our steps beyond our ability to know. So our proper role is not to know and understand mission, but to know and obey Him. In the much narrower context of military action, Tennyson expressed that position clearly, "Ours is not to reason why; ours is to do and die."²

If that is our position, then logically, our discipling and training efforts should be abandoned.

¹ "Theory" is used carefully here, referring to an integrated structure of relationships between established facts, as in the theory of relativity or the theory of gravity. Such a structure not only explains the 'why' of past events, but can predict broadly what will happen when similar circumstances again occur. There is little similarity to the popular use of the word "theory" meaning a guess or unproven idea.

² Tennyson, Alfred Lord.

Instead, we should concentrate exclusively on better discerning His presence and guidance. But does knowing and understanding mission imply that trusting and obeying Him are not important? Certainly not. Trust and obedience are fundamental to mission, but do not in any sense replace knowing and understanding. We offer service as part of our rational worship as well as emotional worship, so that we glorify Him "in spirit and in truth."

Seeking a mission theory simply shows that we recognize the limitations of human perception of God's purpose and will. We do love Christ, we desire to follow and know Him, but our perceptions are clouded by familiar patterns - and unconscious self-interest. Very often the result is that we are guided by the patterns of our own culture, or existing methods and established procedures - tradition in other words - without even recognizing the theories we are utilizing.

What theories of mission might we be utilizing?

Social Science Theories

Some would suggest that mission is a valiant human effort to bring God's Kingdom on earth, aided by God's Spirit of course. Since it depends primarily on concrete human knowledge and abilities, we learn about individuals and societies to understand human dynamics. We accomplish our work by utilizing those dynamics that harness human movements. Theory dominates theology; a sense of God's Presence is a bonus rather than a necessity.

When we slide into the error of depending on human effort to accomplish mission, we become fascinated with sociological, psychological, and anthropological theories that explain and possibly predict human behaviors. Clearly, those disciplines offer many genuinely valuable insights. Even where the objective is biblical, dependence on these theories may, however, cloud the message and power of God's Word Incarnate. God is methodologically pushed to one side so that His Kingdom can be advanced by utilizing the most recent "understanding" of how His Church grows, how culture changes, or how inner hurts can be healed.

The Spiritual Theory

In practice this is an important theory in our approach to mission. It is shown in reluctance to require specific training for mission, even inter-cultural mission. Training is considered fine but optional, perhaps even a luxury. Certainly, for short-term missions it does not matter. How can 3 days be taken for introductory training when vacation time only allows three weeks for the whole experience? But then when some go forward to long-term missions, the argument is that they don't need training because they've already been on short-term assignments! Indeed, God will use whatever we bring, and bless our willingness to give to missions. But this church-sponsored tourism is camouflaged by supra-spiritual language and the deep needs of the host group which these visitors would like to meet.

In the case of career workers, knowledge of the Message is considered sufficient, especially since the Kingdom of God is often considered to be only internal. Therefore it is very difficult to measure its progress. A good bible school or seminary training in theology and Bible literature is required to be sure the right message is given. But knowledge of how mission is implemented

will be learned on the job, hopefully, since we assume that God is guiding and empowering all we do in His Name.

Organization Theories

Established patterns (traditions) dominate decisions especially in the uncertainty of complex and changing contexts. When change threatens control and apparent progress, regulations and procedures increase. This also happens when there is not a clear understanding of mission, both biblically and experientially. Administrative structures are strengthened and a pragmatic, "profit-oriented" system develops. Training is done "in-house" to thoroughly indoctrinate new staff into the mission system, ensuring smooth functioning of the organization. Mission is driven by familiar business-type models ("managerial missions") rather than a biblically sound theory of mission.

In each of these approaches, theology and theory are separated. Communication of the message is seen as something distinct from the message itself. The nature and glory of God is marginally revealed. Worthy, but far lesser goals such as multiplying congregations, or relieving oppression, poverty, suffering, substitute as the reason for mission. Those goals are important, but not sufficient to be the motivation for mission.

Only a comprehensive, biblically-based understanding of mission can offer a model through which we can compensate for our human biases and limitations. That is the theory of mission we need.

What follows is a preliminary attempt to outline a biblically consistent and comprehensive theory of mission.

Telling that Transforms: Communicating Christ to the Unreached

As a sophomore in college, I tried to imagine what I would actually do when I became a missionary. The year before during a six-man football game with a college rival God unmistakably called me to missions. Now I enjoyed the quiet Sunday afternoons and somewhat aimless conversations while we were equally aimlessly driving to the mountains or the beach listening to a car radio. How would I spend these afternoons when I was in the Amazon, or Africa? Well, I reasoned, I would just give the time to prayer... Not now, but then -

It never worked out that way. Too many things to do, trying to supervise three Sunday Schools and 15 or so teacher trainees. Then later, pondering over which articles to write or have written, which churches to visit, and still later, debating the next steps in developing a Christian university, having elders' meetings and, of course, the essential Sunday afternoon nap.

After more than fifty years in which ministry, and specifically missionary ministry, has been my life, I see that I had it right as a college sophomore. I've done so many things, worked long hours and expended energy as if it would always be limitless. Communication has been "my thing" in

teaching, in journalism and publishing, in preaching, in consultations. But the times when I've been quiet in His Presence, seeking the fulness of communion with Him, of communication with my Lord, those are the times when I best understood and best communicated.

I suggest that the biblical model of mission is communication, not cultural anthropology, or church growth, or education, or compassion ministries. We are given a message to proclaim. We seek to make Christ known, the Living Word. Belief results from hearing the Word, and it is believing response that, incredibly, transforms lives. All we are shown and commanded in Scripture rests on hearing and listening to the Word of God. That is communication.

Mission is Communication

Communication is simply an overall term for the foundations and actions of ministry. We are told to proclaim, witness, preach, teach, make disciples, command, rebuke, correct, train, encourage, give understanding - these are all terms of communication. All rest on foundational communication with God Himself. We do not speak from our own ideas, but from His revealed Word.

Communication is more than the way by which we accomplish mission, though it is that. It is how we reach the lost and make disciples. It is how we reveal the glory and goodness of God to all men. It follows that we must master the skills of communication; become master preachers and teachers, great artists and writers, superb dramatists, accomplished linguists. Being skillful, however, does not ensure that we communicate the knowledge of God. Does technique make our prayer more effective? Does skill increase our obedience to the Word of God? Does mastery of all of the communication arts increase our experiencing of God Himself?

Communicating with Him is the core of our knowing what to communicate. Before we have anything ourselves to communicate, we must experience communication from Him. There is more, much more, to communication than skills and arts.

Communication can only grow out of experience, unless we are merely sophisticated relay towers or satellites. But they can only transmit, not communicate. We communicate from the images entered into our minds. Every moment is filled with sound, a tumbling tumult of rhythm, words, cries, laughter. A kaleidoscope of color and image flickers and floods our brain. . Those images mold our mind. There is no stillness left. No silence in which to quietly revel in His holy place. And so, instead of message in our ministry, we have programs and skills.

Understanding the full dimensions of communication, we can better see why communication expresses the biblical model of mission. A biblical perspective on communication shows three interlocking dimensions:

- 1. functional communication**, which is the essence of the Christian experience;
- 2. framework of communication**, the human systems within which we function; and
- 3. foundational communication**, the use of methods and skills to create understanding

of the Message. Fulfilling ministry requires all three aspects of communication.

Integrated Christian Communication

I suggest the term Integrated Christian Communication to describe communication as a theory of mission, including the three vital dimensions: foundation, framework, and function.

Foundational Communication

God does not simply use communication, it is his very nature to communicate. There is perfect communication within the Trinity, and Jesus prayed that man would enter into that perfect communication, *"That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent Me."* Communication within the Trinity, and communication from the Trinity is the foundation for all communication among men.

Communication is of the very nature of God. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* The Logos communicates personality and power. He is not simply a life-force but One with purpose that was articulated in creation and redemption. When communication is reduced to a function, it reduces our perception of the nature of God. He is so much more than the words written or spoken!

God is a communicating God; not aloof and unknowable; not a mystery, but One who reveals Himself. *"And God said"* (Genesis 1:3 ff.) All that we see, touch and feel is a communication from Him. He made it, and each thing is a thought of God.

To listen to Him, to understand Him, to know Him is His desire for us. Paul reflected that hunger in Philippians 3:10, *"I want to know Him..."* Experiencing constant communication with Yahweh is the incredible privilege given His redeemed, and the essential foundation for all other communication. God desires to bring man into that harmony with Himself that is complete communion, perfect communication - essential, foundational communication.

Since communication is part of the very nature of God, communication with God and with man is the essence of ministry. When God reveals Himself, He is communicating. When man responds to God's love, he communicates with God. Without communication, we could not perceive God. Without communication, the life of the church would not exist. Interaction between text and traditions, between those within the church and those without the church, are all communication.

Years ago I was challenged by the simple, true story of a godly Scotsman. Every morning before he left his home to work in a grimy factory of Glasgow, he gave time - half an hour, one hour - to be quiet before God, communion with Him. A neighbor spoke of him with awe, "Every morning he comes out of that little house glowing. What he is, I want to become." The Scotsman knew that real living began with communion, foundational communication.

He demonstrated that to participate in communication with God is to become more aware of God Himself. Prayer grows out of stillness before God, a deepening communion - communication - with Him. But even prayer can be just an instrument to get something we want, empty talking without any intention of entering into the mind and heart of God. When we regard prayer communication as communion, we bring our Father into every part of our life. We are stimulated and guided to pray "in His Name."

It is our great loss that we are so pragmatic, so result-oriented, that we miss the foundation of communication, making communication simply a way to implement our plans and achieve our desires.

Framework of communication

Seeing communication also as community opens our mind and heart to those around us, those who are our neighbors. We slowly realize that words and actions are not insignificant sounds and gestures to fill silence, but the creation of community. Thus we are cautioned to watch every idle word, to speak in a way that encourages and builds others (Matthew 12:36-37, Ephesians 4:29 - among other references). In beginning to grasp the inclusiveness of communication, we come closer to obeying Christ's inviting command, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Matthew 22:37-39).

Loving our neighbor must mean that we seek to create understanding in him by communicating within his life and experience. God reveals Himself through the human framework of communication - families, clans, tribes, and nations as well as within the psychological structure of the individual person. Finite man is contained within a flexible framework of ideas, values and beliefs expressed through social structures and relationships. He is unable to apprehend what is outside that framework. Any communication must occur within that framework, or it is just transmission - a message spinning in space with no receiver to understand.

For ten of our thirty African years, we lived among the Matabele of Zimbabwe to show them Christ. Always we were treated with courtesy and hospitality, but for some years we could see little effect among the people. Of course we taught the Word, we were privileged guests at church conferences, and musicians learned from and enjoyed my wife's ministry through music. We had friends and enjoyed their company. But really our presence made little substantial difference to anybody.

The Lord was patiently leading and teaching us, however. We began to learn much more of their families, clan relationships, their values, fears and needs. Very slowly we began to see the inner world through which they interpreted everything. We learned that their thoughts and lives centered around mediatorship. Marriage arrangements were not made by the boy and the girl, not even by the parents, but by mediators acting on behalf of the families. Quarrels were settled by mediators. All kinds of negotiations went through mediators. Then we discovered that the "ancestor worship," that we of course had condemned, was primarily seen as using the ancestors as mediators. Since they had died, they had better contact with the spirits and so could act on

behalf of the living - if the living remained on good terms with the ancestors who had gone before.

This concept was the unexpressed center of their world view, yet our biblical teaching had at best only superficially related to that idea. The Spirit of God brought to mind the scriptural truth of Christ as mediator, especially I Timothy 2:5, "*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus...*" I began to see the richer meaning of familiar scripture: Galatians 3:19-20, Heb 8:6, Heb 9:15, and Heb 12:22-24. When this was shared, I was astounded at the expressions of amazement and wonder, "You mean that Christ is not simply the White Man's ancestor? That He is the mediator between God and man?" Within their framework of thought, comprehension came - of Christ's superiority to everything they had known.

Because I had partially learned of the human framework of communication, understanding began to form and deepening commitment to Him resulted.

God works within human systems, the framework of communication. He called out one man to build a family and national structure through which He would reveal Himself to all men. He led a group of slave-escapees through a wilderness, shaping them into a disciplined nation. God prescribed a system of ritual and place that would illustrate His greatness and His redemptive purposes. He showed Himself through individuals and groups, speaking within the limits of their psychological and cultural perceptions. It is obviously basic to effective ministry to have some understanding of those human systems. That does not determine our message, but should shape the form our message assumes.

However, the study of culture is not "the missionary discipline," though it is an essential aid to proclamation. Communication is the essential perspective, not culture. We have been told to proclaim the Message, and learning the social and psychological framework within which it was proclaimed, and where it is being proclaimed today, is essential.

God continues to show Himself within human frameworks, but now a new framework is being formed, by creating community - community with God and with man in the Church. True community rests on communication and results in communion. Notice how the words (in English) that express our oneness in Him have the same root:

communication
communion
community
commune
commun = having in common

It is in the richness of communication that we build communion with God and man. Through involvement with God and one another, we show that we are a new creation, living a new life that is counter to the domination of this world's cultures. We establish a relationship so that

there can be a true sharing, communication of the very life of Christ. Anything else is mere superficiality, a utilitarian telling of propositions that rests on the surface of culture and of life.

Are we forming a true community in our ministries? Perhaps by so much attention to the words, we are missing the very core of communication. It is reduced to questions of strategy and style, a set of tools rather than the sharing of His life. "Communication is not something the church does, but something it is." (Pickard, "Evangelism and the Character of Christian Theology")

Communication is not something we do to people, we do it with people. There is no other way to reach the heart - the core. That heart must be reached, and it is virtually impregnable!

God is pure communication; how can He be understood by limited and impure man? To reveal Himself to man, He makes Himself known within human systems of communication to all who will look and listen. And so we learn to see - and help others to see - His imprint on the world, its beauty, its history, its design, even its current events.

Functional Communication

Functional communication is frequently all we include when we talk about communication. That is indeed a wide field. It includes all the communication arts - writing, speaking, art, drama, music - with all their variations and combinations. The person who has mastered at least one of these skills is applauded, "What a great communicator!" Accolades shower on the good communicator, "challenging," "intensely moving," "I wasn't even aware of the time!"

Unfortunately, this usual understanding of communication is only functional - it is an instrument by which we achieve our goals, rather than the message. This utilitarian view of communication is nothing more than the way we accomplish tasks. It misses the essential foundation and framework for communication. The result is that we have polished preachers who cannot communicate the richness and joy of life in Christ. They do not experience foundational communication in their own lives. Philosophical and theological propositions or curricula are substituted for personal experiencing.

Even as God is communicating within human structures and systems, we miss His word unless it is expressed in signals that we can perceive and understand. How does the infinite God break through our dim perceptions and show Himself to us? By speaking within the languages that we use and understand. This is functional communication.

Interpersonal communication uses twelve signal systems in every culture³, ten ways of communicating beyond the obvious verbal and written signals, the language of words. Of course God is not limited to words or other signal systems, but He uses them so that people can understand. Throughout Scripture, we see how he communicated with objects, pictures, time,

³These essential materials of functional communication are discussed more fully in Smith, Donald K, Creating Understanding. Zondervan, 1992, pp. 144-165.

in fact He used all twelve signal systems to reveal Himself to humans.

Consider just a small part of that revelation, the design of the tabernacle. God used the *verbal* system in giving instructions for building the tabernacle, recorded in Exodus 25 to 31. In these instructions, all but two of the signal systems are used.

The *written* is dramatically used,, “When the Lord had finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets ... of stone inscribed by the finger of God.”

The number of things conveys meaning, the *numeric*, (“four gold rings,” “Six branches...of the lampstand,” “four cups shaped like almond flowers,” seven lamps...”)

In a startling exposure of man’s secret depravity, God used the *pictorial* system, “Go in and see ... So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel.”⁴

Yahweh commanded His people to use *audio* signals to praise Him, “This is what the Lord says, ‘Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard...’ (Jeremiah 31:7).

Materials and objects have significance, the *artifactual*, as the use of “a chest of acacia wood...overlay it with pure gold,” “plates and dishes of pure gold ... pitchers and bowls for the pouring out of offerings,” “...the bread of the Presence...”

Motions of the body have distinct meaning, the *kinesic*, as in the wave offering);

The use of light and color is the *optical* signal system - purple and gold, blue and scarlet yarns and the light from the gold lampstand.

Tactile is loaded with information, using the sense of touch, of “feel.” Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the sacrificial ram; also used when blood was put on the right ear lobe, thumb and big toe.

Spatial is the use of space as in the sizes and location of things within the tabernacle, “two and a half cubits long, a cubit wide, and a cubit and a half high.” “The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover... The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover.” “All the curtains are to be the same size - twenty-eight cubits long and four cubits wide.” “Place the ark of the Testimony behind the curtain.”

The God of all time speaks through time, the *temporal* system - daily, every morning, for

⁴Ezekiel 8:9-10

seven days, once a year, for generations to come).

The burnt offering, a pleasing aroma..." and the altar of incense, both show use of *olfactory* signals.

Not only to Moses, to Joshua, to Samuel, to Elijah, to David, but over and over, God speaks, He communicates His power, His desire for man, His intent to guide and fellowship with man - within ways that man can perceive. And there is the experiencing of His "still, small voice" (how can a voice be still and yet be heard?) by which we know outside of the signal systems, in the core of our being, that He has spoken. *Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."*⁵

With great clarity He has communicated in Christ, John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

His truth came by revelation within man's comprehension, not by the intellectual brilliance of a few. Ephesians 3:2-3 *Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.*

His Word provides a sure record of his revelation. 2 Tim 3:16-17 *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

God indeed communicates at the functional level, and within the framework of human systems. But all of it emanates from foundational communication within the Trinity, and man's communion with Him. John Taylor sums it up well, "How secondary, indeed how futile, are all the means of communication unless they are actually born out of the very truth they are meant to convey."⁶

Communication: The Essential Perspective

So, why insist on the centrality of communication in ministry? Simply, it is central - both **S**in our experiencing of God and in the experience of ministry. Using anything else as the grid by which we shape or evaluate what we are doing, sidesteps careful consideration of the nature of our relationship with God and man.

Indeed there must be holiness of life, but not as a bribe so that God will bless our plans and efforts. It is essential for the basic communication with Him out of which all ministry flows.

⁵ Isaiah 30:21

⁶ Taylor, John V. The Go Between God. London, Oxford University Press. 1972. Pp. 68-9.

Certainly we should know where the unreached live and create strategies by which all can be brought into His light. But if these efforts are not rooted in rich communion with Him, they degenerate into ideological triumphalism rather than extending to all the joy and liberty of new life in Christ.

Yes, churches ought to grow, but measuring ministry by growth tends to a pragmatism that favors attractive programs over the challenge of disciple-making.

Considering communication as a set of methods and techniques shifts the focus to the preacher, the singer, the worship team. The performance is evaluated rather than the relationship established with God. There is no merit, however, in singing or preaching poorly! That is probably bad communication at any level. Worship does not exist without communication, but the communication must begin at the foundational level, the essence of what is happening, rather than only at the functional level, a form of words and music. *"They that worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."*

Many disciplines contribute to communicating the Gospel - cultural anthropology, sociology, social psychology, education, various communication arts, history, comparative religion, biblical and theological studies. Professional skills build bridges, for example medicine, community development, and English as a Second Language. However, all of these disciplines and skills need communication - foundational, framework, and functional - to fulfil the evangelical task. Our instructions are to proclaim the Good News, to make disciples, to teach, in other words to make known the message that has been given by God. All of those are communication.

But the essential missionary task is not to learn culture, analyze societies, identify needs, or to set up training programs, but to create understanding of God's Self-revelation. It is on the ground of that understanding that people can respond to Him and know Him as Savior and Lord. For this, communication is both the means and the goal.

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September, 2005

⁷ Taylor, John V. The Go Between God. London, Oxford University Press. 1972. Pp. 68-9.