

Introduction

Jason S. Sexton and Paul Weston

An Overdue Conversation

Theologians and missiologists do not often talk to each other. This means that as time passes, they may become increasingly unaware of each other's questions and concerns in their respective quests to do theology in ways that serve the church effectively. Some efforts have been set forth in recent years to address this, but with little real success.

In a desire to contribute to the development of this interdisciplinary conversation, a conference was organized by the Tyndale Fellowship Christian Doctrine study group, a consortium of scholars and practitioners, leading systematic theologians, and seasoned missiologists from different parts of the world. The conference took place at Wolfson College, University of Cambridge, July 3–5, 2014.

The Aim of the Conversation

The aim of the conversation was to bring together key players from the two groups to seek a greater mutual understanding on the question of how to *do* theology in the service of the church's mission. This

book allows you to listen in on some of the discussions we had during the 2014 gathering. It was not an entirely easy conversation. Each participant brought particular perspectives to questions about the nature of theology: how it is most meaningfully constructed, and how its outcomes are applied and carried out. Accordingly, in truly interdisciplinary fashion, this volume covers a host of considerations about the relationship between theology and mission, incorporating perspectives from contextual and systematic theology, missiology and mission studies, World Christianity and historical studies, biblical studies, missional hermeneutics, ethnography, pastoral practice, and social justice. However, at every point, the focus of the authors was the central question of what it means to *do theology* for the sake of mission.

Ordinarily, systematic theology is done in ways that have tended to pay little practical attention to matters “on the ground.” At the same time, the missional conversation (both at local and global levels) can often lack the depth and seriousness that a close-range conversation between systematic theologians and missiologists has the potential to generate. Yet one of the abiding issues in evangelical Christianity today relates to questions about evangelical identity—including matters of ministry practice and mission—and how these relate to the wider Christian traditions out of which they arise. These are vital concerns, and they require a number of voices to make sense of the issues involved (certainly more than those who have already been at the table, as it were). In our increasingly globalized world, with burgeoning local theologies in various forms of development, putting the conversation off any longer is a luxury that Christians of all persuasions can ill-afford. After all, missiologists and theologians are engaged in the same task, working together for the same outcome—helping the church do its theology better for the sake of the gospel.

As will be apparent from the chapters that follow, the contributors disagree on a number of things—sometimes quite strongly. We will leave it to our readers to discern precisely where these tensions are, and who has made the better case about how best to do theology for the sake of mission in our fast-changing world. This serves as a

reminder that the task of doing theology faithfully as part of the calling to make disciples is never an easy one, requiring not just the best participants that can be found, but a variety of perspectives as well.

The subtitle's phrase from this book's title, "Shaping Theology," is, at first sight, a strange way to talk about this. Isn't theology somehow fixed? Does it not involve a number of nonnegotiable and immutable truths, "once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)? For our part, theology is indeed a matter of the first order, for it affirms a number of things that are possible to know and have been made known by God. These are common core commitments shared by this volume's contributors, and they form a vital part of our collective understanding of reality. Humans are a special part of a universe created by God, who is triune; God has acted decisively in Christ as Savior; the church is the community in which God's special presence as Spirit abides today; Jesus will return to heal everything broken.

But what is the nature of these claims set forth as theological commitments? What is theology? Is it doctrine, something to be taught and passed on? Is it dogma, reflecting unwavering beliefs that cannot be revised in light of other considerations? And how is it *shaped* for mission? This is where theology also emerges as a second-order enterprise, an ongoing activity of the church. There remain fundamental features of our theology that are nonnegotiable, and yet the church is called to be active in *shaping* these commitments for the purposes of God for the world. This book therefore sets out to explore what this *shaping* might involve, so that the people of God might be better equipped for the mission to which they are called.

The Shape of the Conversation

The contributions in the book are arranged in three sections. Section 1—entitled "Theology and Mission in Dialogue"—arises out of the conversation between mission theologians and systematic theologians about the nature of theological enterprise, and in particular, about the three sources from which theology has to draw: Scripture, tradition, and culture.

Mike Goheen begins with a restatement of a missional hermeneutic of Scripture, viewing the Bible not just as a missional text in its own right, but one that gives rise to—and energizes—the ongoing work of mission, with attendant implications for the way Scripture should therefore be read today. In spite of broad agreement with the thrust of Goheen’s argument, systematician Justin Stratis offers a corrective, noting that if mission is one of the divine names, as it were, it is only such because it is grounded in God’s free life-giving being. In other words, there is more to God than is told in the Bible, and this is something Stratis finds missing in the desire of missiologists to attempt to draw directly from the divine life—however inadvertently—in making everything about mission.

Brad Green offers an exposition of a Protestant understanding of the role of tradition for doing theology, with a strong affirmation of *sola scriptura* as the propositional core of this tradition. Having much sympathy with Green’s approach, missiologist Paul Weston offers a corrective by insisting that theology is always more than a mere restatement of earlier statements from the tradition. Theological traditions, Weston argues, are both contextual and dynamic in their present articulations. Their formulation bears a consciousness of the pressing issues of the day, and carries an ability to respond to these with both realism and expectant hope.

With the conversation well underway, Kirsteen Kim strengthens Weston’s argument for the cultural-locatedness of all theology (as well as theological traditions) with a thoroughgoing and rigorous treatment of how culture has been understood from evangelical, ecumenical, and Catholic perspectives. To this largely historical treatment, Dan Strange considers the implications of Kim’s work for ministerial training and contextualized mission. As a systematician, Strange offers an alternative proposal, highlighting the gospel as the subversive fulfillment of culture, enabling a renewed calling for Christians to function as transformative agents in light of the future re-creation of all things.

The second section of the book (titled “Assessing the Shape of

Theology and Mission in Dialogue”) builds on the first, but develops a different kind of conversation. Taking stock of the various proposals already set forth, it explores the ways in which the enterprises of theology and mission operate in the church and in the world. To begin, Mark Elliott gives a critical biblical-theological assessment of current trends in missional hermeneutics, urging the church toward better forms of discipleship. Next, leading historian of world Christianity Brian Stanley offers his reading of the discussion thus far, topped off with a challenging plea for evangelical theological reflection on a number of key issues emerging from the current state of global Christianity.

Pete Ward follows this with a similar plea to pay attention to the life of the church and its lived experience. In true ethnographic fashion, his is a challenge to theologians, historians, and missiologists alike to draw interpretive theology from the reality of actual ecclesial practices. The final chapter in this section is Jason Sexton’s exposition of a dynamic evangelical public theology, which sketches the various ways in which theology operates in public spaces in so-called secular Western cultures, and lays out a reflexive agenda by which the church might better live out its theology as a witnessing community.

The final section is titled “The Practice of Shaping Theology for Mission” and moves the conversation out of the primarily critical, abstract, and methodological realm in order to present glimpses of differing ways in which theology and mission have worked together from an international and regional perspective. First, David Kirkpatrick offers a critical study of Ecuadorian theologian René Padilla’s theology of *misión integral* (integral mission). The chapter accounts for Padilla’s fascinating role within both Western (and non-Western) Evangelicalism, and explores how Western evangelicals have continued to lack significant engagement with partner evangelicals in the majority world. Next, Andrew Marin explores the issue of reconciliation in the context of alienated relationships among members of the LGBT and evangelical communities. Drawing from his work in Chicago and beyond, he offers a proposal that seeks to take

sufficient account of psychological realities among victims, and makes healing and forgiveness possible through embodiment.

Continuing with the practical mission proposals, Jonny Baker employs his practitioner's lens to develop a pioneer theology for people living beyond where Christ is usually proclaimed. He explores the kind of education needed to facilitate this gift to the church, emphasizing the need to cultivate greater attention to mission and how it works. Krish Kandiah's contribution develops a vision of mission that cares for vulnerable children—especially pertinent in an era of refugee crisis. This chapter reflects on Kandiah's work with the UK-based organization Home for Good, which focuses on a theology of adoption and care, but calls for the church to develop a more robust theology for this kind of mission work.

Finally, Christopher J. H. Wright offers a valuable afterword, which serves to locate the context of this book in current discussions about mission. In doing so, he draws attention to what, in our estimation, is his own considerable contribution to the enterprise—without which the present book would surely be much poorer.

Where the Conversation May Be Headed

We believe that the kind of critical conversation taking place in this book offers something of major importance to the future of Christian witness, especially in the context of the pressing questions raised by colonialization, globalization, forms of diaspora, the refugee crisis, and the mass migrations occurring on an unprecedented scale. In our fast-changing and challenging world, we may often wonder where and how God is working. We will also very naturally ask what we are doing as those called in mission, as well as those claiming to do academic theology in the service of the church. What is it all for? What is its end? And how might we best shape theology to serve God's purposes for the world? In spite of strong and various impulses calling us to fear others, we are called, instead, to labor with the desire to see others flourish alongside members of our own ecclesial communities, to pursue a vision of radical hospitality and vulnerability. And so, the

questions addressed in this book matter massively for the ongoing dynamic life of the church and its calling.

In an ever-changing world—sometimes called “post-Christian”—in which significant challenges remain about the nature of theological education and its future, these kinds of conversations must be developed and deepened. While they may often be challenging, requiring us to learn new things and to be transformed (even sanctified!), it is our conviction that what must remain central is the significance of the church’s mission as the aim of theological education. The practicality of theology is certainly something that the churches need more and more. Yet, at the same time, churches and those involved in the frontlines of missionary work in its variety of forms need the depth of tradition and theological reflection to strengthen and direct their work. We trust that this book will provide a model for the kind of rigorous engagement needed if the church is to do theology for mission, both in the academy as it continues to change, and in the churches that the academy serves.

Jason S. Sexton and Paul Weston
Epiphany 2016
Fullerton, California and Cambridge, England