Encountering
Theology of
Mission

Biblical Foundations,
Historical Developments, and
Contemporary Issues

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The theology of Christian mission has undergone, in David J. Bosch’s analysis, paradigmatic shifts throughout the history of the church. However, none of them has been as far reaching as those of the twentieth century. Understandings of truth, biblical authority, the nature of non-Christian religions, the role of the local church, the place of social justice, spiritual dynamics, the growth of the majority world church, and many other concerns have evolved and evoked dramatic rethinking of mission in many different directions. There has seldom been a greater need for biblical clarity and global awareness regarding the mission of the church as it moves into the twenty-first century.

Our goal is to provide the reader with an overview of these developments and deliver a fresh, biblical reframing of our understanding of mission. We thematically take up the central questions of mission and examine them from a biblical, historical, and contemporary perspective, taking into account current developments at both the local and the global levels. This book deals with these themes in three parts: (1) Biblical Foundations, (2) Motives and Means for Mission, and (3) Mission in Global and Local Context.

Though not always explicit, we have sought to link theology of mission more directly with ecclesiology and eschatology. Our conviction is that the church as community of the kingdom is both the primary agent as well as the chief fruit of the missio Dei in this age. Furthermore, only a theology of mission that is rightly framed eschatologically will give proper place to the kingdom of God. The church as God’s people lives as instrument, witness, sign, and anticipation of the kingdom that is already present but only to come in fullness upon Christ’s return. The cross remains the fulcrum of history, the gospel the message of hope, and the Spirit the power of mission.
We make no apology that biblical authority is the north star by which we have sought to navigate these turbulent waters. We are evangelical in our orientation but hope that these pages will be of value to all, and we have sought to treat divergent viewpoints with fairness. Our approach to this task is not that of strictly armchair theologians; rather, each author brings many years of practical experience in cross-cultural mission, which has tempered our scholarship. Craig Ott has authored the introduction and chapters 1–9, Steve Strauss chapters 10, 11, and 13, and Timothy Tennent chapter 12. Translations of quotations from non-English original sources are our own. Bible quotations, unless otherwise stated, are from the New International Version. Apart from references to the Divinity, proper names, and use in direct quotations, we have chosen to use lower case for terms such as the church (whether referring to the church local or the church universal), scripture, and the kingdom of God. The term gospel is capitalized only when referring to the four Gospels in the New Testament. Italics within quotations are as set in the original unless noted otherwise.

Most chapters provide teachers and readers with sidebars and case studies intended to stimulate further reflection, the formation of the learner’s own viewpoint, or practical application of the subject at hand. These may be used for group discussion, class interaction, or independent study.

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Our hope and prayer is that this volume will stimulate students, missionaries, academics, and ordinary Christians to a deeper understanding of and more faithful participation in the missio Dei.
Introduction

The Importance of Theology of Mission Today

The living God, maker of heaven and earth, lover of our soul, the eternal Father, sends his people on a mission in this world. Having redeemed us by the blood of his Son, having given us his message in the Bible, and having equipped us with the Holy Spirit, he sends us to become his instruments for fulfilling his purposes in history. The more one contemplates this thought, the more awe inspiring and overwhelming it becomes; the deeper our sense of privilege, unworthiness, and inadequacy, the greater the urgency to make sure that we get it right. Theology of mission can be reduced to the wonderful yet challenging task of unpacking just what that means—to be sent by God on his assignment into the world.

And yet few topics evoke such a wide range of emotions, commitments, and convictions as Christian mission. Some Christians are enthusiastically and sacrificially committed to mission. They see it as the central calling of the church. Others become fearful or even hostile at the thought of mission, seeing it as arrogant or a threat to world peace. “Christian mission” is for some synonymous with a colonialist mentality, destruction of traditional cultures, and religious intolerance.

Even among mission advocates, opinions differ widely when they attempt to define the central task of mission. Is mission primarily a matter of preaching the gospel to those who have never heard? Or does mission include feeding the hungry? Perhaps mission should focus more on social justice and fighting “structural sin”? Or is mission simply a matter of quietly living out a life of integrity and love wherever one is—being a “silent witness”? Numerous other questions and issues swirl about the term mission: Is there still even a need or justification for sending missionaries? Who is a “missionary”? What right do
Christians have to suggest that Christianity is in any way superior to other religions? What about those who have never heard the gospel? Do we need better strategies or more spiritual power? The list goes on.

These questions only illustrate the confusion that surrounds the topic of Christian mission. Since the 1950s the necessity, definition, and justification of mission in its traditional sense have been seriously questioned. Walter Freytag’s (1958, 138) statement of over fifty years ago still rings true today: mission doesn’t have a problem, mission has become a problem!

There is little clear consensus on many of these issues—neither at the popular level in the local church, nor at the theological level in the seminary, nor at the strategic level in the mission agency. Yet local churches, mission organizations, Christian leaders, and individual Christians regularly make decisions based on their understanding of how these questions should be answered. These decisions have far-reaching consequences; they influence which projects get supported, which tasks are undertaken, how one prays, how people are counseled in Christian service, how one relates to people of other faiths, how Christian leaders are trained, what is emphasized in sermons, how missions is promoted, and so on.

In our rapidly globalizing world these questions have only become more complex. The world has become very small through increased travel, the ease of global communication, a growing variety of media options, the spread of international economic networks, and the international flow of immigrants, students, refugees, tourists, and businesspeople. Christians everywhere increasingly encounter people of other ethnic backgrounds, with other religions and other values. They are often our next-door neighbors or colleagues at work. The short-term mission phenomenon, whereby annually over one and a half million North Americans travel internationally on ministry trips, has not only increased enthusiasm for mission but has also raised concerns about mission. Majority world churches have also become significant missionary-sending bodies, often sending workers to lands traditionally considered Christian. Mission has literally become “from everywhere, to everywhere” (Nazir-Ali 1990). What are the implications of such developments for our understanding of mission?

THE TASK OF THEOLOGY OF MISSION

The task of theology of mission is to address such matters and provide biblical direction for the church’s fulfillment of its missionary mandate. As trends in mission practice come and go; as new mission theories and strategies are aggressively marketed; as contemporary developments confound established understandings; as local congregations bypass traditional mission agencies; as conferences, workshops, and consultations on mission abound; the practical need has perhaps never been greater for biblical and theological reflec-
tion on the nature of mission. If our mission practice and passion are based solely on catchy slogans, trendy strategies, or contemporary social scientific discoveries, and not on sound biblical foundations, mission practice will be reduced to pragmatism, enthusiasm, or even political correctness. Evangelical warnings of the “de-theologizing of missiology” must be taken seriously (e.g., Rommen 1993).

The need is for nothing less than a biblically grounded theological perspective on God’s work in the world and the participation of the church in that work today. If we believe that mission involves the very nature of God, his will for the church, and his plan for the nations—and this we most certainly do believe—then theology of mission must be the starting point for defining the nature of mission and discerning the practice of mission. A theology of mission must accomplish the following tasks.

**Provide Clear Biblical Direction for the Task of Mission**

Mission passion fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit is the locomotive pulling the train of Christian mission. Theology of mission, however, provides the rails upon which the train should ride. The rails give direction and stability, leading the train to its proper destination. Without rails, the most powerful train will not travel far or in the right direction. So, too, without clear biblical theological direction, the greatest mission commitment and vision will not bring the work of mission to its God-given destination. Conversely, without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the most carefully and biblically articulated theology of mission will be as immobile as a train without a locomotive.

**Accompany and Scrutinize the Foundations and Practice of Mission**

Theology of mission not only gives direction but also must accompany the church as it embarks on its engagement with the world. In the words of David J. Bosch, “Missiology’s task, furthermore, is critically to accompany the missionary enterprise, to scrutinize its foundations, its aims, attitude, message, and methods not from the safe distance of an onlooker, but in a spirit of co-responsibility and of service to the church of Christ. Missiological reflection is therefore a vital element in Christian mission—it may help to strengthen and purify it” (1991, 496–97).

**Hold Forth the Missionary Dimension of the Gospel to Church and Academy**

Because mission is rooted in the very nature of God—God is a missionary God—theology of mission has an important role to play in the broader disciplines of theology. Theology of mission not only continually reminds the church of its missionary calling, giving missionary practice biblical direction,
but it is also the “gadfly in the house of theology” (D. J. Bosch 1991, 496). Theology of mission calls the church out of its comfort zone and the academy out of its ivory tower, holding the world ever before their eyes.

It lies in the nature of both church and academy for energy to gravitate toward narrowly defined “in-house” concerns and self-serving pursuits. But theology of mission has the task of stubbornly and biblically keeping the vision of God’s purposes for the world before the eyes of theologians and pastors, academic institutions and congregations, Christian leaders and Christian novices. Thus the forging of a sound theology of mission must be considered central to a biblical understanding of God and his purposes for the church today.

**MISSION, MISSIONS, AND MISSIONARIES**

Surprisingly the words *mission* and *missionary* do not occur in most English Bible translations. One searches concordances in vain to find these terms and consider their biblical usages. This simple fact explains some of the confusion surrounding the terms. The word *mission* derives from the Latin word *mittō*, “to send,” and *missio*, “sending.” The word *mission* was first used in 1544 by the Jesuits Ignatius Loyola and Jacob Loyner to describe the spread of the Christian faith. In 1588 Loyola wrote, “By mission I mean journeys and undertakings carried on from town to town for the sake of the word of God” (cited in K. Müller 1987, 30). The term *mission* entered common usage in the seventeenth century. Previously one spoke more of the *apostolate*, or apostolic office (Ohm 1962, 38–39).

Though the terms may not occur in the English Bible, the concept of mission—sending—certainly does. The Greek New Testament uses two terms to describe sending: *pempo* and *apostello*. These terms are used more or less synonymously to describe God sending angels and prophets, the Father sending the Son, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the sending of the disciples (Köstenberger 1998a, 97–111).
Until the 1950s the terms *mission* and *missions* were generally used synonymously to describe the spread of the Christian faith, usually by missionaries—persons sent by the church—with the explicit calling and mandate to preach the gospel to those who had never heard and gather converts into churches (sidebar I.1 offers additional definitions for consideration). This normally included crossing geographical or cultural barriers. Often attendant to this task, but usually considered secondary or supportive of it, was the establishment of schools, hospitals, and orphanages and various other works of compassion or economic development. This understanding has since undergone radical transformation in many circles.

Since the 1960s the term *mission* (singular) has come to be used more broadly to describe all of God’s sending activity: God’s mission in the world. Mission has come to describe not merely the tasks of missionaries, but the very sending mandate of the church as a whole. Stephen Neill claimed in 1966, “The age of missions is at an end; the age of mission has begun” (cited in D. J. Bosch 1991, 391).

The term *missions* (plural) has come to be more narrowly used to describe the various specific efforts of the church to carry out the task of mission in the world, usually related to the spread of the gospel and the expansion of the kingdom of God. This distinction, though not unproblematic, will generally be maintained throughout this book. We will use the term *mission* to describe the sending activity of God with the purpose of reconciling to himself and

**Sidebar I.1**

**Defining Mission**

Consider the following definitions of Christian mission:

- The word “mission” . . . is properly a comprehensive word, embracing everything which God sends his people into the world to do. (Stott 1975, 33)

- Mission is the people of God giving witness to the reality of God through the church as the sign, foretaste, and presence of the kingdom. (Roxburgh 2000, 179)

- Mission is the self-sending creative and redemptive action of the triune God for the [sic] mankind and the world. Its ultimate goal is the completion of the Kingdom of God and salvation of the people of God. (Yoshimoto 2005)

- “Mission” is the divine activity of sending intermediaries whether supernatural or human to speak or do God’s will so that God’s purposes for judgment or redemption are furthered. (Larkin 1996, 534)

**Reflection and Discussion**

1. Which definition do you think most accurately reflects a biblical understanding of mission and why? What passages of scripture support your choice?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each definition?

3. What difficulties might arise from adopting an inadequate or inaccurate definition of Christian mission?
Introduction

Many terms, such as mission, contextualization, and religious pluralism, will be defined in detail later in this volume. We offer here a brief glossary of terms used in this text that may be unfamiliar to the reader.

**Conciliar.** A reference to churches, denominations, and mission organizations associated with the World Council of Churches (WCC, est. 1948) and other ecumenical councils preceding it dating back to Edinburgh 1910. Various conferences and commissions of the WCC, such as the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, have shaped conciliar theology of mission (see www.oikoumene.org).

**Doxology.** A term derived from Greek meaning "glorification" in the sense of glorifying God. Used in this text with broad reference to the worship, praise, and honor of God, not narrowly as an element of the Christian liturgy.

**Enlightenment.** An intellectual and social movement generally associated with the eighteenth century, but influencing Western culture subsequently. It advocates individual rights, natural law, and the sufficiency of human reason alone (apart from religious authority) to understand reality and solve human problems. Scientific inquiry should dispel superstition, and religion is relegated to the private, personal sphere of life.

**Eschatology.** Theology pertaining to the course of history with emphasis on the coming of the kingdom of God, the return of Christ, and the end of history.

**Evangelical.** Protestant Christians, churches, and organizations that hold to the full authority and reliability of the Bible, teach the necessity of personal conversion through faith in Christ, and emphasize personal piety and activism. Used in this text broadly to include Pentecostals and charismatics, and those in various other churches with evangelical convictions (see www.worldevangelicals.org).

**Globalization.** The phenomenon whereby the world is becoming economically, culturally, intellectually, and technologically interconnected through travel, communication, immigration, commerce, and education. Local life is increasingly influenced by and interdependent with events, people, and powers around the globe.

**Indigenous Church.** A church comprised primarily of people native to a region and historically defined as being self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting. More recently, characteristics such as self-theologizing and contextualized have been added to the definition, with the church giving local expression to the gospel.

**Lausanne Movement.** An organization to promote broad evangelical cooperation in mission growing out of the International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. The Lausanne Covenant (1974) is the theological and missiological basis of the movement. Ongoing working groups, consultations, conferences, and reports have significantly shaped evangelical mission thinking and practice (see www.lausanne.org).

**Majority World.** Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Replaces outdated terms such as third world or developing...
world, emphasizing that these regions now comprise not only the majority population of the world but also the majority of Christians in the world.

**Millennium.** The thousand-year period of the binding of Satan and the reign of Christ described in Revelation 20:1–8.

**Pentecostal/charismatic.** Christians, churches, and organizations that emphasize the ecstatic personal experience of the Holy Spirit, often evidenced by speaking in tongues, and who believe in the ongoing presence and importance of supernatural spiritual gifts such as miracles and healing.

**Premillennialism.** Belief that Christ will return bodily to earth, initiating a literal thousand-year reign of peace. Prior to Christ’s return, Satan and the forces of evil on earth will not be ultimately defeated and the kingdom of God cannot be fully realized.

**Postmillennialism.** Belief that Christ will bodily return to earth at the end of the millennium, which is understood as a period of gradual expansion and realization of the kingdom of God on earth, defeating Satan, leading up to Christ’s return.

**Syncretism.** The phenomenon whereby one religion becomes mixed with another so that its essential character is fundamentally changed or compromised.

**Unreached people.** An ethnic or linguistic group that has little or no access to the gospel. Also sometimes defined as a people group without an indigenous church able to communicate the gospel in a culturally relevant and understandable way.

**Vatican II.** The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, 1962–65, which passed major reforms in Roman Catholic teaching and practice. Two important documents were drafted relating to the mission of the church: *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*.

**Western.** Western is used in this text primarily to describe cultural, intellectual, and social influences of European origin. Today Western culture is often (though not exclusively) associated with individualism, modernization, industrialization, free-market capitalism, and Enlightenment philosophy. The Western church is generally understood as the churches of Europe and people of European descent, particularly in North America.

*bringing into his kingdom fallen men and women from every people, nation, and tongue.* The church is God’s primary agent for mission in this age. One of the most important tasks of this text will be to more carefully define the purpose and task of mission.

The term *missionary* was first associated with the office of an apostle. The Greek term *apostolos* means simply “sent one” or “emissary.” Early missionaries were considered to be continuing in the tradition of the original twelve apostles, who were called and sent by Jesus to preach the gospel in all the world and make disciples of all nations. Though there is also confusion regarding the meaning of the term *missionary*, we will generally use the term to describe people who have been commissioned by the church or a Christian mission agency dedicated explicitly and intentionally to the work of missions (see chapter 10; we provide very basic definitions for additional terms used in the book in sidebar I.2).
In recent years the term *missional* has become popular in missiological and ecclesiological writing. As Christopher J. H. Wright defines it, “*Missional* is simply an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes or dynamics of mission” (2006, 24). Simply put, *missional* focuses on the *doing* of mission. The term has become associated with the concept of the “missional church,” which emphasizes that the church does not merely send missionaries, but the church *itself* is sent by God with a missionary mandate. The church is on mission wherever it finds itself.

### Missional Theology, Theology of Mission, Missiology

A useful distinction can be made between the terms *missional theology*, *theology of mission*, *missiology*, and *biblical theology of mission*.

#### Missional Theology

Missional theology, sometimes called mission theology, refers to the missional dimension of various theological disciplines. In a sense all theology is mission theology in that nearly all biblically oriented theology will, or should, in one way or another relate to God’s missional purposes in the world and the missionary character of God.

In the words of Martin Kähler, “The earliest mission became the mother of theology because it attacked the contemporary culture” ([1908] 1971, 190). Historically viewed, much theology (particularly in the New Testament) developed in the context of the spread of the Christian faith. The encounter with other religions, idolatry, false teaching, syncretism, and ethical challenges faced by new believers served as the anvil on which theology was forged. Thus Martin Hengel can claim that the history and theology of the early church are all “mission history” and “mission theology” (1983, 53). At a deeper level all Christian theology proceeds from God’s self-revelation and saving acts climaxing in Jesus Christ; therefore, all biblical theology has a missional dimension. Wright has argued persuasively for a missional hermeneutic of the Bible, whereby mission becomes the focus of hermeneutical coherence: “Mission is what the Bible is all about; we could as meaningfully talk of the missional basis of the Bible as of the biblical basis of mission” (C. J. H. Wright 2006, 29).

Missional theology seeks to delineate more clearly the missional aspects of theology as a whole, placing God’s mission as a central integrating factor. In the words of Bosch, “We are in need of a missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission” (D. J. Bosch 1991, 494). Missional theology is thus concerned with providing an interpretive frame of reference by which we understand the message of scripture and the mission of the church in its entirety.
At the same time, missional theology is dependent on the other theological disciplines, learning from them and building upon them, and then bringing them into relation with God’s mission in the world. Missiology apart from a sound theology is a dangerous and speculative undertaking. Not only does theology help us to correctly interpret the scriptures, but it also provides the larger framework of biblical understanding with which a theology of mission must be in harmony.1

Theology of Mission

Theology of mission, as a subset of missional theology, examines the theological foundations, guidelines, and dimensions of mission in particular. It is a theological reflection on the nature and task of mission. In this regard theology of mission begins with the explicit biblical teaching on mission but moves on to apply that teaching to the various issues that confront the church in fulfilling its missionary calling. Theology of mission thus becomes a dialogue between biblical text and missionary context: “The theology of mission is a disciplined study which deals with questions that arise when people of faith seek to understand and fulfill God’s purposes in the world, as these are demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus Christ. It is a critical reflection on attitudes and actions adopted by Christians in pursuit of the missionary mandate. Its task is to validate, correct and establish on better foundations the entire practice of mission” (Kirk 2000, 21). This means that theology of mission, as we define it, addresses a broad range of topics relating to God’s mission in the world and the challenges of mission practice, reflecting on these topics biblically. It includes the freedom to theologically explore contemporary issues and challenges in mission that may not be explicitly addressed in the Bible or in traditional theological inquiry.

Kevin Vanhoozer defines theology in general as “biblical interpretation that aims at knowledge of God” (2000, 81). He expands on the practical implications of theology: “Theology yields instructions for deliberating well about the gospel—for deliberating well about what God has done in Christ, for deliberating well about what the church is to say about God and do in the name of God in particular situations, for deliberating well about how we can live well, as individuals and as communities, in light of the gospel” (2000, 82–83). He argues that theology must move beyond *theoria* (good conceptual logic) to wisdom, what he calls *phronesis* (practical reason resulting in right action). If we follow Vanhoozer’s definition of theology, then a theology of mission will yield instructions for deliberating well about the nature of God as a missionary God in Christ, about the nature of the church as a missionary community, and about how we as individuals and communities wisely fulfill our mission mandate in light of the gospel.

1. For a discussion of how mission should profit from theology, see Kähler ([1908] 1971, 184–221).
Missiology

Related to these terms is the comprehensive term *missiology*, which includes theology of mission as well as history of mission, anthropology and intercultural studies, mission strategy, world religions, church growth, religious demographics, and related fields of study. “Missiology’s task in every age is to investigate scientifically and critically the presuppositions, motives, structures, methods, patterns of cooperation and leadership which the churches bring to their mandate” (Verkuyl 1978, 5). If this is the task of missiology, then the task of theology of mission is to provide the theological foundations and guidelines for missiology. Theology of mission is the intersection of missiology and mission theology (see fig. I.1).

**Figure I.1: Theology of Mission Visualized**

**Theology of Mission**
Theology pertaining to the task of mission, where missiology and mission theology intersect.

**Missiology**
Theology, history, social sciences, strategy, etc. pertaining to the task of mission.

**Missional Theology**
The missional dimension of all theology.

**Biblical Theology of Mission**

Biblical theology of mission can be considered a subcategory of biblical theology and a subcategory of theology of mission. Biblical theology (in general) is not merely theology based on the immediate teaching of the Bible, but theology that gives particular attention to the historical development of theological themes within the biblical canon and examines the setting and contributions of the individual biblical books or authors in the context of the whole Bible. Biblical theology of mission is thus an examination of the historical development of the theme of mission within the biblical canon, noting the particular contributions of various biblical books or authors.
Biblical theologies of mission have been written by both missiologists (e.g., Peters 1972, Glasser et al. 2003) and by biblical scholars (e.g., Senior and Stuhlmueller 1983, Larkin and Williams 1998, C. J. H. Wright 2006). Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien’s *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (2001) is a good example of a work by biblical scholars. As New Testament theologians, they discuss the scriptural teaching on mission by examining the history, literature, and theology of the various biblical books and authors. Their method is primarily inductive and exegetical. Their discussion is, in keeping with the biblical theological approach, limited almost exclusively to the immediate teaching of the biblical texts in their original contexts, though they recognize a unifying, salvation-historical theme. Eckhard Schnabel’s monumental two-volume *Early Christian Mission* (2004) examines encyclopedically the historical, social, geographical, and theological aspects of mission in the New Testament.

Missiologists writing biblical theology of mission usually give less attention to technical concerns of Old and New Testament scholarship and devote more attention to themes relating to mission practice. Because these authors and others have already provided detailed biblical theologies of mission, this volume will only briefly summarize the fruit of such studies in chapters 1 and 2, and then in later chapters discuss more systematically specific issues of a theology of mission.

**Sources for Doing Theology of Mission**

There are many avenues that one might take to forge a theology of mission. We have chosen four avenues of inquiry in our attempt to bring clarity to these questions.

*The Bible*

First and foremost, the Bible, God’s inspired Word, serves as our primary source in discovering the purposes and revealed will of God. We need not speculate nor are we left to our own imagination on questions of such magnitude. God has spoken. Admittedly our interpretation of scripture is imperfect, and we are not entirely free from our own blind spots and preconceptions. We also recognize much room for difference of opinion among Christ-honoring students of the Bible. Yet we are of the conviction that the Bible does offer *adequate* clarity and direction on the subject. Scripture will serve as our ultimate authority, and our desire is to allow the Bible to speak to these issues (see C. J. H. Wright 2006, 51–58). All other sources are secondary and subordinate to biblical teaching.

Biblical theology of mission provides the North Star by which the ship of mission must navigate. Though storms may rage and currents may pull, the ship of mission can stay its intended course as long as it reorients itself...
on the fixed point. Trends and fads, political correctness, popular opinion (inside and outside the church), ethnocentrism and myopia, and a host of other forces would blow this ship off course. The scriptures as the revealed Word of God must remain the fixed point by which we navigate the ship of mission.

**History**

A second line of inquiry and source of insight is history. We seek to learn from both the history of the expansion of Christianity throughout the world and, more particularly, from the history of Christian thought on the subject of mission. Many of the issues and questions that seem unique to our day are in fact surprisingly similar to issues faced by Christians in previous eras. Others have gone before us in both the practice of mission and the theological reflection on the issues of mission. Many of the debates have been hammered out on the anvil of earlier crises; many of the theories have been tested and refined in the fires of previous missionary practice. While God has spoken in scripture, he is at work in history, and we are foolish if we fail to learn from it. Knowing from whence we have come also helps us understand where we are presently headed and why and may also help us realize if our course needs correction. We desire to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, not to uncritically accept their conclusions, but in humility to gain a broader and longer perspective as we develop a fresh vision for our generation.

**Social Sciences**

Third, we look to the social sciences to aid us in understanding the complexity of culture and the human experience. While strictly speaking we do not view social science as a source for mission theology, it does provide an important backdrop and conversation partner for it. Mission concerns God’s work in human lives, families, communities, and societies; thus, we must understand the nature of those lives and communities. The social sciences can provide us with disciplined methods of inquiry to grow in such understanding. But social theories cannot be allowed to undermine biblical teaching; they cannot become a social-scientific tail wagging the theological dog, as unfortunately often happens. Instead, within the framework of a biblical worldview, such inquiry can help us better discern the complexities of communication, life change, social transformation, and an array of other human factors that influence the understanding and fulfillment of biblical mission.

**Voices of the Global Church**

A fourth route of inquiry is to listen carefully to the voices of the global church (see Ott and Netland 2006). The literature and discussions on theology...
of mission, much like other theological disciplines, has until recently been largely dominated by the voices of Western Christianity. There are many understandable reasons for this. But today we are fortunate that voices from majority world churches can be heard, and many of these voices are speaking about mission and mission-related concerns.

These voices provide fresh and often challenging perspectives to more traditional approaches. To use Vanhoozer’s term, a “Pentecostal plurality,” that is, a plurality of voices from various cultural perspectives, is needed to help us overcome our cultural limitations and bring us closer to an accurate and true interpretation of scripture (1998, 419). Wilbert R. Shenk has argued that “a dynamic theology of mission develops where there is vigorous engagement of culture by the Gospel, accompanied by critical reflection on that process”; therefore, “we must look to the evolving Christian movement in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to discern defining themes” (2001, 98). Listening to such voices is all the more important because the majority of Christians today live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and these churches have become a growing and powerful missionary-sending force.

**Theology of Mission and Divine Drama**

Mission is about God’s sending activity in which the church participates. This redemptive and communicative action of God goes beyond mere propositions about God and, to use Vanhoozer’s (2005) metaphor, can be conceived of as *theodrama*. Theology of mission reflects on and informs the church’s role in this divine drama of salvation history with a particular view to the redemptive purposes of God in the world and among the nations. Scripture provides the script and the plot of the drama; history tells us how others have interpreted and enacted the drama in the past; social sciences describe the cultural stage upon which the drama is enacted; the voices of the global church are both the critics and the new actors (no longer playing bit parts) in the drama, giving diverse perspectives on its enactment.

God the Father is the playwright and producer; Jesus Christ and his redemptive work is the message of the story; and the Holy Spirit is both the inspiration and the director guiding the actors. The mission theologian—an academic, a pastor, or a layperson—serves as the dramaturge, who carefully studies the play and helps clarify its significance and interprets the script both for the players and for the audience. In this way the drama is enacted and understood as the playwright intended (Vanhoozer 2005, 243–46). This drama is specifically missional in nature because it is played on the stage of the world, not in the confines of the church or the academy. The drama will not be complete until those from every people, nation, tribe, and tongue have beheld its glory and been taken up in its story line.
A Brief Overview of Historical Developments in Theology of Mission

**Early Developments**

Though more formal theologies of mission would not be written until the Middle Ages, less formal theology of mission has always accompanied the church. As noted above, the missionaries of the New Testament, the apostles, and the authors of scripture were mission theologians. Whereas the earliest itinerant evangelists and missionary monastic movements had a theological rationale for their undertakings, they lacked an explicit, articulated theological reflection on mission (see Ohm 1962, 75–121). The early church fathers focused on apologetics and addressing the relationship between Christian faith and non-Christian philosophy.

After the sack of Rome in AD 410, Augustine developed in his later writings (e.g., Letter 199 to Hesychius, AD 418) the importance of mission beyond the boundaries of the empire and argued against the generally held view of Eusebius that the apostles had completed the Great Commission (*Hist. eccl.* 3.1). His writings on the nature of humankind, sin, and salvation were to have a great and lasting influence on theology in general and on mission in particular. By the late Middle Ages considerable thought was being given to mission; the most prolific medieval writer on mission was Raymond Lull (1235–1315), whose primary concern was the conversion of Muslims and training missionaries for that task.

The age of discovery lay to rest once and for all the view that the apostles had completed the Great Commission, and a considerable volume of literature addressing mission was produced during that period. In 1502 Christopher Columbus compiled biblical texts relating to mission in his *Libro de las Profecías*. Erasmus of Rotterdam appealed to the pope and princes to fulfill their missionary obligation by sending missionaries to save souls (*Ecclesiastae sive de ratione concionandi libri* IV, 1535). Joseph de Acosta (1540–1600), a Spanish Jesuit and missionary to the East Indies, was perhaps the most significant mission theologian of the period. In 1622 the Roman Catholic Church established the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to oversee the missionary efforts of the church. This organization produced the first manuals, strategies, and policies guiding mission work, making significant statements on the nature of mission and its relation to culture. However, various controversies and challenges from the mid-seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century (including the “rites controversy” in Asia, the Enlightenment, and secularization) hindered further missiological thought.

**Protestant Beginnings**

The Protestant Reformers were preoccupied with controversies related to the Reformation and faced extreme social instability (war, plague, etc.); thus...

Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss with Timothy C. Tennent,
they had little to say about mission. Many also continued to maintain that the Great Commission only applied to the original apostles. Several Dutch Reformers were among the earliest Protestant theologians who gave attention to mission. The most significant of these was Gisbertus Voetius (1588–1676), who formulated a theology of mission in his three-volume *Politica Ecclesiastica* (1663–76) and addressed mission in other writings. “Voetius attempted not only to sketch the outlines of a solid theology of missions, but he was also the first who attempted seriously to give missiology a legitimate scientific place in the whole of theology” (H. A. Van Andel, cited in Jongeneel 1991, 47). Justinian von Weltz (1621–68) pioneered German theology of mission, including vehement calls for a Protestant missionary movement. He himself eventually traveled as a missionary to South America, where he was killed by wild animals. The Reformation period, however, was in general not a fruitful period for Protestant missiological reflection.

Protestant mission efforts gradually developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the influence of the Puritans and the Pietists. Their theological understanding of missions is more evident in popular preaching and hymns than in academic treatises. One exception was Jonathan Edwards, who balanced scriptural discernment and personal experience in his writings during the Great Awakening revival. Bosch calls Edwards’s thought “the great intellectual and spiritual vein from which missionary theology in the period was mined” (1991, 277). William Carey’s eighty-seven-page *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792) is an outstanding example of an apologetic for Christian missions at a time when Christian leaders questioned the necessity of missions. Many of the earliest Protestant missionaries became experts in local religions and outstanding ethnographers, but few articulated a theology of mission per se.

**Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

As the Protestant missionary movement came into its own in the nineteenth century, leaders began to reflect more seriously on missionary practice. For example, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, leaders of mission-sending agencies, are credited with coining the “three-self” formula for the autonomy of mission churches: self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting. According to Princeton University’s 1811 original “Plan for a Theological Seminary,” the institution was to be “a nursery for missionaries to the heathen,” dedicated to training and qualifying youth for missionary work (Myklebust 1955, 1:146). But only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the value of the disciplined study of missions as part of missionary preparation become widely recognized. In 1849 Karl Graul, the first appointed Protestant lecturer for missions at the University of Erlangen, called for missions to be “raised out of the dimness of sentimental belief to the noon brightness of
believing science” (cited in Gensichen 1971, 250). Lecturers were called and professorships were established at universities, usually occupied by former directors of mission societies.

Nevertheless, it was Gustav Warneck (1834–1910), at the University of Halle in Germany, who pioneered the first systematic study of mission. In 1874 he cofounded the journal Allgemeine Missionszeitschrift (Common Journal of Mission), the first of its kind. Later, in 1897, he authored the first comprehensive missiological work, Evangelische Missionslehre (Protestant Doctrine of Mission) with three parts in five volumes. Warneck’s Roman Catholic counterpart was Joseph Schmidlin (1876–1944) of the University of Münster, who has been tagged the father of Catholic missiology. He authored Catholic Mission Theory (1931, German 1919) and Catholic Mission History (1933, German 1924), and edited the Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft (Journal for Missiology). He publicly opposed the Nazi regime, for which he was eventually executed.

The first half of the twentieth century saw remarkable progress in missiological and theological reflection as the Protestant missionary movement matured. Roland Allen (1868–1947) authored the provocative Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours? ([1912] 1962a) challenging mission practice to radically return to the example of the apostle Paul. In 1918 the German Society for Missiology was founded to promote Catholic missiological writing and academics. The various ecumenical missionary councils and reports stirred considerable controversy over subjects such as the value of non-Christian religions and church-mission relations.

**Late Twentieth Century**

The third quarter of the twentieth century saw what might be considered a golden era of mission theology, during which numerous missiologists produced significant and creative theological works that are still influential today. This development was precipitated by the demise of colonialism, the tragedy of World War II, the rise of global communism, and forces of secularization. Continental missiologists such as Hendrik Kraemer, Walter Freytag, and Thomas Ohm led the way in this era. It was also a period of considerable controversy and turmoil with developments such as liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez), the Church Growth Movement (Donald McGavran), and a growing rift between conciliar (groups associated with the WCC) and evangelical mission understandings.

During this era Pope John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which produced (among other documents) the constitution Lumen Gentium (LG, 1964) and the decree Ad Gentes (AG, 1965). Later, in 1975, Pope Paul VI authored the influential Evangelii Nuntiandi. These documents advocated fresh and foundational understandings of mission.
Evangelical missiology advanced significantly with the establishment of missiological faculties at seminaries such as Fuller Theological Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Evangelical theology of mission climaxed during this quarter century with the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974 and the formulation of the Lausanne Covenant, which was heavily influenced by John Stott. This document eloquently expressed a balanced understanding of mission, which has remained unsurpassed as a rallying point and basis of cooperation in mission among very diverse evangelical groups.

The last quarter of the twentieth century brought continued challenges and social change impacting missiology, among them social instability, anti-Westernism, and a radical return to traditional cultures including a resurgence of traditional religions. Nowhere was this more evident than in the overthrow of the shah and the establishment of a strongly anti-Western, fundamentalist Islamic state in Iran. Women’s issues, human rights abuses, concerns related to globalization, and environmental stewardship increasingly occupied missiological discourse. The term contextualization was coined to describe serious theological engagement with culture, and contextual theologies flourished. The social sciences, such as cultural anthropology, communications, and political theory, began playing a more significant role in missiology, threatening in some cases to eclipse the theological foundations of mission.

Conciliar theology of mission continued to wrestle with questions of social justice, religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, the environment, and the nature of salvation. Based on the work of Lesslie Newbigin and others, the “missional church” concept was developed, and The Gospel in Our Culture Network was formed, focusing on the need for the church’s missional engagement with Western culture. The combined forces of secularization, postmodernism, and the dramatic decline of Christianity (particularly in Europe) still present enormous challenges to the Western church.

Evangelical theology of mission was not unaffected by these concerns. Its focus was nevertheless more on the relationship of evangelism and social responsibility (holistic mission), the kingdom of God and mission, religious pluralism, and spiritual power in mission. A plethora of mission strategies called for theological assessment. Various international working groups related to the Lausanne Movement have been on the evangelical forefront of producing reports and occasional papers on a wide range of mission issues of theological importance. During this period numerous majority world theologians began publishing significant works that drew international attention and brought new perspectives into the missiological discussion.

**Entering the Third Millennium**

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the cold war in the early 1990s, additional dramatic impulses entered missiological thinking.
modern perspectives and the radical pluralism of thinkers such as Paul Knitter deeply impacted conciliar, Catholic, and some evangelical missiology. What David Barrett, Andrew Walls, and others had been predicting came to pass: the majority of Christians lived no longer in Europe and North America but in countries formerly considered “mission fields.” Majority world countries also became significant missionary-sending countries. The dramatic growth of the church under oppressive circumstances in China stimulated a more optimistic spirit. Global communications were revolutionized by the Internet and other electronic media. At the same time, the gap between rich and poor widened as forces of global capitalism seemed now to be unbridled. All these developments demand a rethinking and fresh articulation of mission.

In 1990 Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* further clarifying the Vatican’s position “on the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate” (the subtitle of *RM*), addressing, for example, the uniqueness of Christ, the kingdom of God, the importance of the church, and interreligious dialogue.

Several dictionaries, handbooks, and reference works appeared enlarging the missiological database, making information more readily accessible to students, and enriching theology of mission (see sidebar I.3). Biblical theology of mission experienced a revival with the appearance of numerous scholarly works. On the other hand, chairs for missiology at European universities, which produced much of the rich work of the “golden era” of mission theology, are gradually being phased out of existence.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and ensuing developments were interpreted by some as confirmation of predictions of a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1997). Heightened tensions between religious groups, war, and ethnic violence have continued into the twenty-first century and call more than ever for a reasoned biblical missiological response that will guide the church in its global witness and encounters with those of other faiths.

Two theologies of mission published in the post–cold war era are particularly worthy of mention. Both take a strongly historical approach and deeply reflect on these developments. Bosch’s landmark *Transforming Mission* (1991) set a new standard in missiological scholarship. He examined the development of the theology of mission in terms of six historical and conceptual epochs involving paradigm shifts whereby understandings of theology and missiology have evolved. Though Bosch gave little attention to majority world theologians, women in mission, or the global growth of Pentecostalism, this work was unparalleled in its scope and scholarship. As one reviewer put it, *Transforming Mission* quickly became “the *summa missiologica* of the late 20th century. Bosch had succeeded in providing a comprehensive theoretical framework for missiology that rose above the polarities of his generation” (Roxborough 2001).

Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, both Roman Catholics, produced a similarly massive work titled *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission*.
Introduction

**Sidebar 1.3
Significant Dictionaries and Reference Works on Mission and Theology**

Over the past two decades numerous reference works have appeared that help us better understand mission in all its facets. Each of the following works has a distinctive orientation and content focus, and for the serious student of mission all are worth owning:

- *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives* (K. Müller 1997a)
- *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Moreau 2000a)
- *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (Corrie 2007)

Mission for Today (2004). They too take a strongly historical perspective but with a more nuanced approach than Bosch, with greater attention devoted to Roman Catholic mission and avoiding some of Bosch’s weaknesses. They trace the development of mission thinking and practice of six historical eras in terms of how six theological themes are understood: Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, salvation, anthropology, and culture. They examine these “constants” historically as evidence of three recurring types of theology based on the work of Justo L. González and Dorothee Sölle. The types are mission as saving souls and extending the church, mission as discovery of the truth, and mission as commitment to liberation and transformation (32–72). They then propose a model of mission as “prophetic dialogue,” synthesizing and giving the former models new depth and direction.

Just as historical theology traces the development of various doctrines through the ages, both Bosch and Bevans and Schroeder provide us with two versions of historical theology of mission tracing the development of missiological thought and practice through the ages. Although their insights are keen and their research voluminous, they ultimately conclude with rather tenuous understandings of mission. They have rightly helped us see how understandings of mission evolve and are influenced by history, culture, tradition, and context. But they also assume that we are prisoners of our culture and context and that there is little real hope of approaching a true understanding of mission. Bosch begins with the following assumption: “Ultimately, mission is undefinable; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections. The most we can hope for is to formulate some approximations of what mission is all about” (D. J. Bosch 1991, 9). Bosch himself
only tentatively suggests what the next mission paradigm might be that will resolve the current crisis in mission. Bevans and Schroeder see the “constants” of mission not in how these questions have been answered but in the fact that similar questions have been continually asked (2004, 34). They affirm Bosch’s warning to “beware of any attempt at delineating mission too sharply” (2004, 9; cf. D. J. Bosch 1991, 512).

In contrast, our view of scripture described above, our epistemological assumptions, and our methodological approach lead us to pursue with greater confidence a biblical understanding of God’s purposes for mission. Because our knowledge remains limited and imperfect, this is a pursuit in humility. But we needn’t abandon hope that we can grow in clearer biblical understanding and in more faithful practice. Such a critical realist approach allows us to progress in our understanding of God’s will for mission as revealed in scripture. Though we see through a glass dimly, we do see (1 Cor. 13:12). Though we know in part and prophesy in part, we can know and can speak truly (1 Cor. 13:9).

We, as those before us, are influenced by our history, culture, and tradition, but we needn’t remain prisoners of them. By learning from history and from the human sciences, we can come to a more complete understanding of how mission is to be lived out by the church in our time. By listening to a wide range of voices that honor Christ and his Word, we are able to see more clearly and move beyond our cultural blind spots and hermeneutical myopia. The task of this volume is to examine the various understandings, developments, and challenges of mission with scripture as our guiding authority and with history, human sciences, and multicultural perspectives as our aids, in hope of bringing us closer to a biblically faithful and practically relevant theology of mission.