THEOLOGY OF MISSIONS

THREE ESSENTIAL SOCIETIES ONE GREAT PURPOSE:
GOD, THE CHURCH, THE NATIONS
SOLI DEO GLORIA

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INTRODUCTION

To construct a theology of missions there are three societies that are essential to the construct: the society of God, the society of the Church, and the society of the nations. First, the society of God is indispensable for there can be no theology of mission without Theos in the center (Col. 1:17). Second, the society of the Church demands attention, for it is what Theos is saving out of the world (John 15:19) and sending into the world (John 20:21). Third, the society of the nations or the society at enmity with the society of God (Rom. 5:10), and subsequently the society of the Church (John 15:20) is vital to the construct for it is this society that the aforementioned are at present directing their efforts. Once the societies have been named, the work begins, for now what must be decided is the place of and interconnection of the three. Fortunately, we are not left in dark; the Spirit of God has communicated the heart and plan of God to all people in the written word. Our task, then, is to build according the blueprint, to see the whole and pay attention to the smallest detail. There is no need to rewrite and rework the design; it is here and here only where integrity demands plagiarism. Therefore this epitome of the Biblical blueprint will look at the three societies in turn, noting along the way the interconnectedness and will conclude briefly with how the interconnectedness practically impacts each individual in the society of the Church to the praise of God’s glory from the rising of the sun to its setting (Mal.1:11).

1 A fourth Society could be included in this: The Society of Spiritual Forces. This would include both demonology and angelology and the reality of the unseen battle that rages and impacts the Society of the Church and the Society of the Nations, while being used and governed by the Society of God. However, this is not the intention of this present paper to address the relationship of this Society to the others.

2 See Appendix 1: A Visual Construct of the Three Societies for a picture of how this looks and works.
THE SOCIETY OF GOD

This first society, and the preeminent one, is the society of God. This society is at the pulsating center of mission, for the God of the Testaments is a God who must reveal Himself, who has revealed Himself generally in creation (Ps. 19:1-6) and specifically in the Scriptures (Ps. 19:7-11) and continues to unfold His mind and heart to His creatures today through the word alive (Heb. 4:12-14). It is the Triune God who gives rise to all we know about mission for it is out the Triune God that mission has been birthed (Rom. 11:36). This understanding is what many have rightly called the Missio Dei. The term is used to highlight “the fact that mission is truly a God-centered enterprise in which the church is privileged to participate.” However, before venturing outward to see the effects of this revelation, we must see the essence of this revelation. What does the heart of this society beat for? How has God chiefly revealed Himself and why? The answer to these questions affects every other in relation to mission.

The simplest answer is that the heart of the society of God pulsates for God. God’s utmost affection and chief delight is in Himself. In Micah 1:11-12 we see God’s commitment to Himself when He says, “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord.” There is no option, no alternative; the Lord’s name will be great among the nations. What comes out of God’s passion for His name is the drama of redemption; the biblical story

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4 All scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2007).
from Genesis to Revelation. John Piper notes the connection between God’s passion for His own name and how it impacts missions writing, “The most passionate heart for God in all the universe is God’s heart…Missions is the overflow of our delight in God because missions is the overflow of God’s delight in being God.”⁵ Piper like many others are not pulling this idea from a theological vacuum of abstract ideas disconnected from reality. No, this is at the very core of not only mission theology, but biblical theology as well. A.H. Strong goes even further writing, “His own glory is an end which comprehends and secures…every interest in the universe.”⁶ The Story of God is in fact His story, and it is a story chiefly about God’s passion for God’s glory.⁷

Now we are closer to center, but at the center there is a pinnacle, rising up out of the center of God’s revelation is the radiance of His glory seen in His Son, Jesus (Heb. 1:1-3). The putting forward of the Son in all His glory is the design of the Architect in the society of God, the Father (Eph.1:9-10), and is the Spirit’s work (John 16:14). Ware comments on this, “He [Father] purposed that Christ would be the focal person, the one at center stage, who brings all of His plan to fruition.”⁸ Further still, the apex of the pinnacle of the pulsating center is the cross of Christ, and it is this pinnacle that casts its shadow over the theology of mission. It is here, in Christ, where we see how God has chiefly made Himself and His glorious grace known.


⁶ Quoted from by Culver, Robert Duncan. Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical. (Great Britain: Mentor Imprint, 2005) 161.

⁷ For further treatment of this subject see Steven C. Hawthorne’s article entitled, “The Story of His Glory” in Perspectives On the World Christian Movement, 4th Edition.

In John 12:27-28a Jesus eyeing the cross with troubled soul prays to the Father, “...for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.” When Jesus speaks of His purpose on earth we should stop and listen closely, for when He came to earth He came as the Premier Missionary, and it is in His steps that He sends us out (John 20:21). This “hour” is what His mission was about, and will in turn be what our mission is about for our mission is not ours, but the extension of His. Moving on, the Father affirms that He has glorified His name and will do this again, and then Jesus turns and speaks to the crowd that heard the ‘thunder’ and says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32) Here we know He is not talking about His exaltation to the Father’s right hand, the next verse tells us specifically what this was about: “He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die (John 12:33).”

The weight of what Jesus says is upon the word ‘lifted up’ and the dual meaning that it carries. The first meaning refers to the brutal reality of Jesus substitutionary suspension between heaven and earth upon an object of torture. His death at the cross was the means for making His name great. The second meaning, goes higher and speaks of the way in which the Son will chiefly bring glory to the Father and the way in which the Father will chiefly glorify the Son: the Son will be ‘lifted up’ which is the Greek verb ‘hupsoo’ meaning to highly exalt, to lift up to the highest degree, to magnify, honor or glorify. From the society of God’s perspective then, Jesus’ cross, His obedience to death (Phi. 2:8-11), His humiliation, and His slaughter is the apex of His glory and therefore

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9 In no way is it this author’s intention to suggest that we all have an “hour” that involves crucifixion and dying on behalf of others. The uniqueness of Christ’s sacrifice is not to be imitated but rather adored. However, we should experience suffering like He did if we are going where He is (Heb. 13:12-13).
what becomes the pinnacle of God’s pulsating center of revelation. It is the work of the Lamb slain that takes center stage in God’s story, and thus in the theology of mission. Why God has chosen to reveal Himself this way is because it is the Lamb slain who will be the very center of the worship of the nations when the society of the nations becomes the society of the Church (Matt. 24:14) and they sing forever, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb (Rev. 7:9-10).”

**The Society of the Church**

The second society, and the one with the most direct connectedness with the society of God is the society of the Church. This society has come to life by the shedding of the Son’s blood (Acts 20:28) and now exists as the spouse of Christ for the vindication of God’s great name. It is through this society, not apart from, that the Lord secures the glory of the nations. In Ezekiel 36:23, God in His concern for His holy name (Ezek.36:21) that has been profaned, has risen to action and this is His plan: “And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.” The way in which He does this work through them is by the promise and fulfillment of the New Covenant (Lk. 22:20) in which He will cleanse His people from their uncleannesses (Ezek. 36:25) and transform His sheep from the inside out by a complete heart-replacement (Ezek. 36:26-28). The result of this transformative betrothal for mission is that the zeal of the first society then becomes the zeal of the second.

Therefore, not only is God passionate about God, but also when God saves a people for His glory who are made new creatures after the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18; 2
Cor. 5:17-18a), those new creatures share the passion of the One who has made them new (Titus 2:11-13). What happens in the society of the Church is that it becomes an incarnational image of the society of God, where the glory of the Lamb slain is at the center and the worship and proclamation of the glorious Son becomes her life and mission.

The clearest text on the existence and purpose of the society of the Church in the New Testament comes from 1 Peter 2:9, which is fitting considering that Jesus said that upon Peter He would build His church (Matt. 16:17-18). The “Rock” writes:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

Part of the importance of what Peter says here is his use of the Old Testament imagery that he is drawing from (Ex. 19:4-6; Deut. 7:6-8). Here he is connecting physical Israel with spiritual Israel, and transferring Israel’s position and purpose to the society of the Church. This text is important, first, because it opens up the whole of the Old Testament as a mission text, not just the New. Second, this text is a crucial mission text because it gives the purpose for the Church’s existence at present. The purpose clause “so that” connects the Church’s position in Christ to its purpose for Christ; this society exists for a

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10 The good works that Jesus has redeemed us and purified us for are not for our own glory; they are for the Father’s glory. In Matthew 5:16 we see that our passion to do “good works” are so that others will see those good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. A people passionate for good works is evidence of the saving work of God, and thus glorifies the power and effectiveness of the cross.

11 It is in Christ’s covenant fulfilling life and relationship with the Church that all of the covenant promises find their goal. Kostenberger and O’Brien write, “…Jesus the Messiah fulfilled Israel’s destiny as the representative, paradigmatic Son of God, with the result that God’s blessings to the nations, promised to Abraham, are to come through Jesus in the mission of his followers.” (255)

12 There are several Old Testament texts that speak of Israel’s privileged position as a means for God’s purposes of making His glory known to the nations: Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-5; 17:4-8; 22:15-18; 26:4; 35:9-12; 1 Kings 8:41-43; Ps. 67.
reason and the reason is astonishingly the same as their Founder’s: this society exists so that the society of the nations may know the excellencies of Christ. It is through this chosen race and royal priesthood that God continues to reveal Himself to the society of the nations. These priests are His possession, with His presence (Matt. 28:20) for His mission purposes, and to whom this society directs their efforts we now turn.

**The Society of the Nations**

The third society, that at present exists, though will not forever, is the society of the Nations. The society of the Nations is not a political distinction, rather it is a purposeful distinction that the Risen Christ has made and directs His disciples towards to carry out His disciple-making mission (Matt.28:18-20; Acts 1:8). The society of the Nations then is the “*panta ta ethne,*” the various peoples found within the geo-political barriers of the world. This society is characterized by their lostness (Rom. 3:10-18; Eph. 2:1-3), ignorance (Rom. 10:14), alienation (Eph. 2:11-12) and blindness to the glory that is in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 4:3-4) and the life (Rom. 6:1-11) therein that exists only in the society of God.

The society of God through the society of the Church is aiming His efforts upon this society. In fact, Jesus says this is the only reason for the present turning of the globe: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matt. 24:14).” This gospel, of the glory of the Son of God sent by the Father, slain for sinners, rescuing rebels from the kingdom of darkness and transferring them into the kingdom of light, which is being

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13 The understanding of *panta ta ethne* in this paper is as a people group. For the best treatment of this subject see John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad* chapter five entitled “The Supremacy of God Among All the Nations.”
manifested in the society of the Church is what is being carried forward as God’s possession proclaim the excellencies of Christ.

The society of the nations will not exist forever, and the society of the Church will not continue in this mission for long. There is a glorious end in sight, and it is this end that the society of the Church has in mind as they move into the society of the nations as ambassadors for the kingdom of God. Kostenberger and O’Brien note this well writing:

The mission of God’s people within the world is to be understood within an eschatological perspective, that is grounded in the saving events of the gospel and keeps an eye on the final goal—the gathering of men and women from every nation, tribe, people and language before the throne of God and the Lamb.14

CONCLUSION

This tri-societal understanding of mission with the wide array of centripetal and centrifugal implications is not meant to entertain the armchair theologian, this is meant to equip each soldier for the war that exists for the cause and glory of God. This construct is not just for vocational missionaries, and this summary of the theology of mission is not simply one branch on the theological tree. This understanding of mission theology puts all the other theological branches into motion; it gives reason for their existence, and realness to their precepts. Therefore, this understanding should impact every single member of the society of the Church in a way that sends them out in the purpose of their position.

What should happen then, is that the macro-construct of the pulsating center of God’s revelation with the glory of Christ in His death at the pinnacle, the new people of God living in joyful worship around this center, and going out with the appointed task of

making disciples of all nations should become the micro-construct of every single member of the society of the Church. It is this society for which the understanding of mission theology exists. God needs no education and the society of the nations are in ignorance, therefore we must go with the stench of Hell in our nostrils, the sweetness and power of God’s Word on our lips, the Spirit of God inflaming a passion for the fame of Jesus in our hearts and the glory of Christ weighing down upon us, so that our Lamb and our Lord might receive the due reward of His suffering.
APPENDIX 1: A VISUAL CONSTRUCT OF THE THREE SOCIETIES

[Bold Line] The Society of God: God is a God who must reveal Himself if we are to know Him and He has. God’s revelation of Himself is the story of Redemption, in which He is reconciling to Himself His rebel creatures, thus making new creatures by the blood of His Son Jesus. All of history is the unfolding of this drama “to the praise of His glorious grace.” (Ephesians 1:3-11) And where we see most clearly the heart of God, and learn what mission is all about is at the cross of Christ, which is the Pinnacle of the Pulsating Center, and it is the cross that casts its shadow over the New People and empowers the Society of the Church in the Appointed Task to the Society of the Nations.

[Dotted Line] The Society of the Church: The line is dotted to highlight the nature of the Church’s task on earth, in that, at present they are not a finished society. The Society of the Church is constantly going out to the Society of the Nations. In other words, there is a fluidity here that is bringing in the full number of Christ’s sheep, and once His fold is full then the mission will be over, and the end will have come (Matthew 24:14).
The Society of the Nations: The line is gray to highlight the temporary nature of this Society and the Church’s responsibility to this Society in this present age. The Church, by Christ, has been given an Appointed Task (Matthew 28:18) to bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God to all nations.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


