

Chapter 1

Missiology and the Perfections of God

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In the year 1961, A.W. Tozer published what would prove to be his final book, a reverent study on the perfections of God titled *The Knowledge of the Holy*. In his preface Tozer laments that the church of his day had forgotten who its God is. “The message of this book does not grow out of these times,” he wrote, “but it is appropriate to them. It is called forth by a condition which has existed in the Church for some years and is steadily growing worse. I refer to the loss of the concept of majesty from the popular religious mind. The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshiping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic.” He then makes the astute observation that “this loss of the concept of majesty has come just when the forces of religion are making dramatic gains and the churches are more prosperous than at any time within the past several hundred years. But the alarming thing is that our gains are mostly external and our losses wholly internal; and since is the *quality* of our religion that is affected by internal conditions, ***it may be that our supposed gains are but losses spread over a wider field.***” (emphasis added)¹

A sound understanding of who God has revealed Himself to be, as opposed to how idolatrous sinners imagine Him to be, is essential to our theology, our worship, and our morality. To again quote Tozer, “A right conception of God

1. A.W. Tozer, preface to *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper & Row, 1961), vii.

is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse.”² It is therefore most appropriate that we begin our survey of the theology of world missions by considering theology proper, the doctrine of God, for God Himself is *the source, the content, and the goal* of world missions.

Motivation: God is the Source of Missions

In the opening of his classic book, *A Vision for Missions*, Tom Wells (1933–2019) describes a conversation he once had with a veteran missionary to Thailand:

I asked her why she had stayed all these years. Without hesitation she said, “God’s command. If it wasn’t for God’s command I wouldn’t be there.” Some may think that that answer sounds cold and hard. The stars were gone from this woman’s eyes. She had not lost her ideals, only her idealism. Neither response to human need nor the “spirit of adventure” could have kept her at her post. Yet she had an answer. She fell back on God’s direction. She was under orders, so she stayed. God had commanded her. And she is not alone in this answer. Countless others would say the same thing. “Why am I a missionary? I am not my own. I belong to Another. I am under orders. I have God’s command!”³

Wells speaks of another missionary who said in a similar vein, “A need will not keep you on the mission field. People will rebuke and repel you.”⁴ Certainly love for lost sinners should compel us to labor in personal evangelism and to be actively involved in the cause of world missions. The apostle Paul said of himself, “I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:1–3).⁵ Paul knew that he could never be accursed from Christ, for in the previous verses he makes it clear that nothing can sever God’s people from His love (Rom. 8:38–39). But it seems that Paul is saying *if* it were possible for him to be severed from Christ and *if*

2. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 2.

3. Tom Wells, *A Vision for Missions* (Banner of Truth, 1985), 7–8.

4. Wells, *A Vision for Missions*, 7.

5. Unless otherwise noted, in this chapter all Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright ©1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

being severed from Christ would mean that God would graft some of his fellow countrymen into Christ in his place, he would wish it upon himself. Paul's love for his fellow Hebrews was so intense that he desired their eternal salvation even above his own. How convicting his example is to our own often apathetic hearts!

Yet, as powerful a motivation as love for our fellow man should be, there is a divine priority given to us in the first and second greatest commandments that must never be forgotten (Matt. 22:34–40). Our love for God Himself, which exists only because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), must far exceed even our compassion for lost sinners. We must be prepared to make the glories of His wonderful name known, even if men do not receive our message.

Serving in the gospel ministry, whether in a domestic or international context, requires a man to become a student of fallen human nature. Any pastor who has shepherded souls for any significant length of time can testify that he and his family have had deep and painful wounds inflicted upon their hearts not only by the world but, far too often, by professing Christians. Once-loyal friends will abandon you. At times you will be criticized mercilessly and betrayed. Well-intentioned sheep will place unbiblical and unrealistic expectations upon you and your use of time. Your reputation will suffer much abuse from slanderous tongues. Obedience to Christ's commandments will require you to do hard things that will put both your reputation and your livelihood at risk. And yet the faithful minister must continually die to his own sense of self-preservation,⁶ all the while guarding his heart against malice and bitterness, returning good for evil (Luke 6:27–36). But in our weaker moments, the temptation to quit is all too real. We cry out, "It just isn't worth it!" If we are being honest, we may even sometimes feel that God's people are not worth it, even though we know better (cf. 2 Tim. 2:10).

How much more intensely are these pressures felt on the mission field! Missionaries must make great sacrifices to leave behind everything they have ever known. The man, his wife, and their children are functionally severed from their extended families and lifelong friends as well as from the sweet fellowship of their sending church. They have left their own familiar culture to live in one that is completely alien to them, one to which they do not belong. The trauma of culture shock must be endured, as Michael Griffiths (1928–2022) summarizes: "All missionaries are subjected to initial culture shock: unfamiliar food and customs, a strange language, and no friends generate a sense of alienation and

6. I am indebted to a sermon preached by Paul Washer for this observation.

isolation. People may crack under pressure unless they have emotional resilience and adaptability. Fear of being alone, fear of strangers, fear of illness, and other fears, namable and nameless, may become magnified out of all proportion overseas.”⁷ Countless man-hours must be spent over the course of many years enduring the boring tedium of Culture and Language Acquisition (CLA) until the missionary has gained worldview-level fluency. These sacrifices, and so many more, are made to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to a people who have never heard of Him before. And yet most of the indigenous people the missionaries have suffered so much to reach couldn’t care less! They are quite content to go on living in their sins and have no desire to be reconciled to this God whom they naturally hate and whose law they have habitually despised from birth. They are offended by the exclusive truth claims of the Christian faith and prefer the empty cisterns of their own man-made religions. Despite all the sacrifices the missionaries have made, they are frequently received with indifference at best or, at worst, with open hostility. It is in these very moments that we must remember that God’s unchangeable, immutable love for us and our corresponding love for the Lord in return are the principal motivations of laboring for kingdom advancement.

Helen Roseveare (1925–2016) was a medical missionary to the African Republic of Congo. During her tenure she experienced firsthand the sufferings of what became known as the Simba Rebellion. On a Saturday evening in August of 1964, military soldiers invaded the African village where she lived. Two soldiers burst into her home, threw her onto the floor, and Roseveare lost some of her back teeth when one of the soldiers kicked her in the jaw. She was then brutally raped by the two men. After they had violated her, the men further humiliated Roseveare by tying her bruised and swollen body to a tree. They found a handwritten manuscript among her belongings that she had been working on for eleven long years, a journal detailing God’s work among the Congolese people. The soldiers threw the irreplaceable pages upon the ground in front of her and lit them on fire. In that moment intense anger coursed through Helen’s soul. Ever since she was a little girl, she had been careful to count the cost of any given course of action. Whenever she wrestled with a major decision, she would ask herself the question, “Is it worth it?” Now she was bound to a tree, humiliated beyond measure, watching as the flames turned her precious journal into ash. She angrily asked herself again, “Is it worth it? Is it really worth it? Eleven years of my life poured out in selfless service for the African people, and

7. Michael C. Griffiths, *You and God’s Work Overseas* (InterVarsity Press, 1967), 12.

now this!” But she would later testify it was at this moment that she realized that for all her life she had been asking the wrong question. The question was not, “Is it worth it?” but “Is *He* worth it?”⁸ And to ask the question, “Is the Lord Jesus worth it?” is to answer it. All the many sacrifices and hardships we must endure in this present age as we seek to know Christ and to make Him known are not worthy to be compared with the sufferings He endured on the cross to redeem our souls. The author of Hebrews had this in view when he wrote, “For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (Heb. 12:3).

In March 2007 at the Shepherd’s Conference, Dr. John MacArthur told the story of a teenage girl who was at that time a sophomore at The Master’s University. She had been converted to Christ out of an Islamic background and though her father was a devout Muslim, he loved his daughter. She returned to her homeland during Christmas break. When she walked into her parents’ home, her father was not there, but her Islamic uncle was waiting for her inside. He asked her if it was true that she had converted to Christianity, and when she responded in the affirmative, he began to beat her, first with his fists and then with the leg of a chair. Thankfully, as she was beginning to lose consciousness, her father arrived and rescued her. He saw to it that she received medical attention and then put her on a plane back to California, warning her to never return home again because his extended family would kill her. When she arrived back in the States, Dr. MacArthur met with her, and he asked her, “What were you thinking while your uncle was doing this to you?” She responded without hesitation, “I was thinking, ‘My uncle has a religion he will kill for, and I have a Savior that I will die for.’”⁹ This young woman, like Helen Roseveare before her, recognized that Jesus Christ is a treasure of immeasurable worth, even more valuable than life itself.

It is worth noting that in the pages of Holy Scripture, God frequently gave an exalted vision of Himself to His servants before calling them into the gospel ministry. Think of Moses (Ex. 3:1–4:17), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1–10), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1–3:27), Peter (Luke 5:1–11), and the greatest missionary of them all, Paul (Acts 9:1–19). In Paul’s case, the appearance of the risen, glorified Christ was a prelude to further revelations of the many things he would have to suffer for

8. Anita Mathias, “Helen Roseveare’s Great Questions—Is it worth it? Is Jesus Christ worth it?” *Anita Mathias, Dreaming Beneath the Spires* (blog), May 17, 2010, <https://anitamathias.com/2010/05/17/helen-roseveare-is-it-worth-it/>.

9. Ligon Duncan, “The Greatness of God in the Exaltation of Christ in Our Worship,” May 1, 2007, First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/the-greatness-of-god-in-the-exaltation-of-christ-in-our-worship/>.

His sake (Acts 9:15–16). The Holy Spirit seared these visions of the majesty of God deep into the souls of His messengers to equip them to endure hardship, *for He is a God worth suffering for, and if necessary, to die for*. This is why Paul could write many years later,

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:7–11)

We discover the same mindset in the original apostles. Before the betrayal and death of Jesus, they pledged to a man that they would sooner die than ever abandon Him, and yet when the moment of testing came, each one of them forsook Him and fled like cowards (Matt. 26:31–35, 56). Peter came to the very edge of apostasy by vehemently denying that he even knew the Lord (Matt. 26:69–75). But what a blessed change we observe in them after Jesus was raised from the dead and the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost! After being beaten by the Jewish religious leaders for preaching in the name of Jesus, we find them “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41).

The Lord no longer reveals Himself in dreams and visions as He did to the prophets and apostles (2LCF 1.1). With the completion of the canon of Holy Scripture, God has said all He intends to say until His Son returns to this earth. But through the Spirit’s illumination of His Holy written Word, you and I can, by faith, apprehend this same lofty view of God high and lifted up.

Before I leave the subject of motivation, I want to touch upon a specific perfection of God and its relationship to missions. The attribute I am referring to is *the self-sufficiency of God*. God is the self-existent One who does not depend upon anyone in heaven or on earth for anything. Paul expounded this truth on the top of Mars Hill when he said, “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, *as though He*

needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.” (Acts 17:24–25, emphasis added). The Lord does not need us for anything, but we need Him for everything! And while He is pleased to use His people to advance His kingdom, He does not *need* any of us. This fallen world needs us and our gospel, but God does not. Jesus was building His church long before we were born, and He will continue building it long after we are gone.

This truth is often overlooked by zealous ministers as they call for volunteers to engage in fervent missionary activity. Too frequently these passionate charges seem motivated not only by the legitimate spiritual needs of unreached people groups but also by the needs of a frustrated and apparently impotent god. A.W. Tozer expresses the problem this way:

We commonly represent [God] as a busy, eager, somewhat frustrated Father hurrying about seeking help to carry out His benevolent plan to bring peace and salvation to the world. . . . Too many missionary appeals are based upon this fancied frustration of Almighty God. An effective speaker can easily excite pity in his hearers, not only for the heathen but for the God who has tried so hard and so long to save them and has failed for want of support. I fear that thousands of younger persons enter Christian service from no higher motive than to deliver God from the embarrassing situation His love has gotten Him into and His limited abilities seem unable to get Him out of. Add to this a certain degree of commendable idealism and a fair amount of compassion for the underprivileged and you have the true drive behind much Christian activity today.¹⁰

To speak of God as needing anything is to grossly misrepresent Him. The Almighty God of Holy Scripture is omnipotent; nothing is too difficult for Him (Gen. 18:14; Matt. 19:25–26). He does all that pleases Him, and no one can restrain His hand nor thwart His sovereign purposes (Ps. 115:3; Rom. 9:6–24). Rather than stifle our diligent labors for kingdom advancement, faith in God’s self-sufficiency should fuel it. To again quote Tozer:

Let us not imagine that the truth of the divine self-sufficiency will paralyze Christian activity. Rather it will stimulate all holy endeavor. This truth, while a needed rebuke to human self-confidence, will when viewed in its Biblical perspective lift from our minds the exhausting

10. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Harper & Row, 1961), 34.