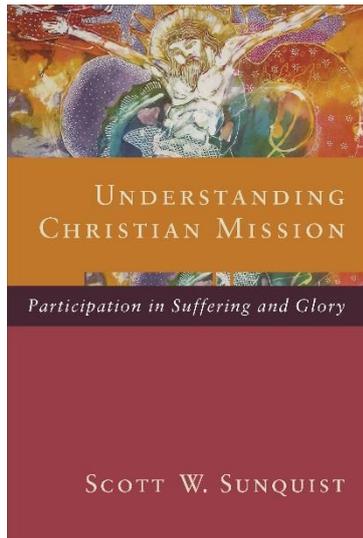


Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 448pp.

The tapestry of life is thick and weighty, woven by the Creator God who utilizes the threads of time and history, coloured by both sin and obedience, to create a backdrop for His glory. For most observers, the front side of the tapestry is tidier and less cluttered than the back, which is replete with knots and tangles resembling nothing but confusion. In order to truly understand how God's mission is carried out in the world, however, one must courageously turn it over and embrace the messiness and perceived disorder. The brave few who do, like author Scott Sunquist, find that both suffering and glory are essential threads that must interlace in order to give the tapestry its shape, dimension and beauty.



Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory is a well-balanced promotion of a solid theology of mission and an important call to action that is enhanced by personal illustrations stemming from his experiences as a cross-cultural minister and educator in Asia and Africa. The text functions as three comprehensive volumes that give voice to the role of suffering and glory in mission by addressing the following motifs: the history of the mission movement, Trinitarian mission in scripture, and the Church in mission today. The Introduction and 13 chapters are seamlessly interwoven to argue the thesis that, “God’s mission is enacted through temporary suffering and humiliation for God’s eternal glory and . . . the key to redemption of the world is in the liberation of individuals, within specific cultures, called into communities of the King” (396).

Sunquist accomplishes this by addressing lesser-known themes that expose the pitfalls and successes of how the Church has interpreted God’s mission in each generation, rediscovering and redefining what it means to participate in the *missio Dei*. According to Sunquist, this is necessary in order to develop a missiology that is Trinitarian, catholic (inclusive and wide reaching) and evangelical. Missiology must centre on the *missio Dei*. Great attention to theological shifts in history and the world events that caused them (i.e. The Enlightenment, the World Wars, etc.) help to set the stage for later study on how God continued to use the broken vessel of the Church to reveal His glory and faithfulness, despite societal changes. In-depth discussion on the various World Missionary Conferences and Ecumenical Councils is also helpful. These topics of interest form the bulk of the content in the first volume of his book.

The second section is devoted to developing a Trinitarian understanding of mission and addresses the role of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in manifesting and executing the mission of God since before creation. The work of the Holy Spirit is discussed with more fervour and frequency than that of the other two members of the Trinity, and much of the author’s concentration is on the Spirit’s work to recover the *imago Dei* in each human and subsequently, each culture. Though this is understandable, since we are currently living in the age of the Spirit, it would have been helpful for the author to spend more time addressing Jesus as our ultimate missionary model and charging readers to emulate Him in word and deed. Very little is said about God the Father.

The third and final volume gives attention to what it means for the local church to be a community of worship and witness and addresses issues that include, but are not limited to: urban mission, lay ministry, global partnerships, and the personal spiritual care of the missionary. In this way, the third portion of the book could almost be used exclusively as a handbook for ecclesiology.

Each chapter includes helpful discussion on history, theology and practise, making this an excellent and comprehensive resource for any student of missiology or minister wishing to take seriously Christ’s command to be a herald, effectively proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Unashamedly, Sunquist’s ideas

are influenced by the writings and experiences of notable missiologists such as David Bosch, Leslie Newbigin, Andrew Kirk, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, with frequent references to ancient church fathers, pioneer missionaries, and non-Western theologians and anthropologists. These voices add richness to his dialogue and prevent it from becoming imbalanced or excessive in any one area.

The thesis is generally well supported and he is thorough in his retelling of the Church's "family story," involving the evolution of mission methodology and contextualization throughout the ages and its subsequent impact on our contemporary understanding of how the mission of God is carried out in a broken world. As Sunquist so aptly notes, "The Church does not have a mission. God's mission has a church" (273). Appropriately, he pays serious attention to the role of women and university students in mission, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, and gives credence to indigenous expressions of worship and witness around the globe. This is especially relevant for Western readers living in our post-WW II, post-modern, and what some might refer to as "post-Christian" religious climate, where the centre for missionary sending and church growth is primarily occurring outside the West.

Though the author explicitly states that he has served within the Presbyterian denomination, an essential and balanced evaluation is made regarding the differences and similarities among Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox mission theology and praxis. Interestingly enough, Protestant pioneer missionaries to Asia in the 1700s set a template for almost all Protestant missions today. Strong emphasis on incarnational ministry by understanding culture, learning the local language, offering religious and secular education, and prioritizing locally-led churches are principles that still shape current mission practice in all corners of the planet. Most obviously, the Church has applied these principles more or less effectively at different times in history and in various contexts; nonetheless they are still valued and acted upon.

The text is brimming with good information and sound research. It is, however, slightly anaemic in addressing the glory of God as the chief goal and end of mission. In order to apply a proper theology of mission that manifests itself in both the gathered and scattered life of the Church, it is imperative to first clarify the purpose of mission. Mission must be rooted in the *missio Dei*, which I submit is "doxology", or the glory and worship of God among the nations, as described in Daniel's prophetic forecast in Daniel 7 and John's vision recorded in Revelation 7. These passages present us with a final consummative vision of shalom, indeed a portrait of the reign of God.

Disappointingly, only one short chapter at the end of Sunquist's text is devoted to this subject, when I believe it ought to be the loom on which the rest of the tapestry of mission is woven, and the dye that colours all of its threads. The meta-narrative of the Bible tells the story of a jealous God who "will not give [his] glory to another or [his] praise to idols" (Isaiah 42:8). Flowing through the Old Testament history of Israel is the theme that God's purpose in all of creation is his self-revelation for the glory and honour of His name among the nations. He is a missionary God, sending himself to His creation as the Triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If this is God's purpose in mission, then the Church's identity and mission must flow from it as well. The *missio Dei* and the *missio ecclesiae* must not be separated, which unfortunately has been done all too often in historic Christendom. Sunquist loudly affirms this truth and does an adequate job of gleaning lessons from the Church's chequered past so that this dichotomy does not continue to hinder the efforts of mission in our current global climate. That being said, in a text of this nature and magnitude, more space ought to be allowed for discussion on the glory of God.

Despite this, Sunquist's notions are well thought-out and clearly articulated. As a pastor and missionary serving in a cross-cultural context, I found myself personally challenged and provided with a broader view of God's redemptive work in the world. Due to the comprehensive and educational nature of this text, nary an idea was neglected, which is why I would happily recommend the book for students and fellow ministers.

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