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MISSION

IS THE

SHAPE

OF

WATER

LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO INFORM OUR
ROLE IN THE WORLD TODAY

PROLOGUE

The Shape Of Water

Every generation makes the mistake of assuming it lives at the most important time in history.

ANON.

What is the shape of water?

Yeah, yeah, I know it's a 2017 romantic fantasy film, directed by Guillermo del Toro, but I don't mean that. I mean, what is the *actual* shape of water?

Initially, you might think that water is formless, so the answer would be that water has no shape. But a water droplet is spherical. And a puddle has a form. And cartographers agree on the shape of the Caspian Sea. And the water in your drink bottle is shaped like, well, your drink bottle.

The shape of water is determined by whatever container it is in. The container doesn't change the inherent properties of water. Each of its molecules still contains two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. But, like all liquids, the shape of water is the same shape as its receptacle.

Which brings me to mission.

Its shape is also determined by its context.

The inherent nature of Christian mission, like the inherent nature of water, never changes. The mission of God's people has always been to alert others to the universal reign of God through Christ. In fact, even prior to the birth of Christ, God's people saw their mission as announcing his reign. That's why verses like Isaiah 52:7 declare, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring

good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” Written during Israel’s Babylonian captivity, the prophet celebrates how right it is that the Jews should declare, “Yahweh reigns” right under the noses of their captors. Whether they were slaves in Babylon or safely ensconced in Jerusalem, Yahweh reigned, even if all the observable evidence appeared to the contrary.

In fact, “Our God reigns” could be a short-hand version of the “gospel” of Israel.

Interestingly, the earliest Christians found great meaning in passages like the one in Isaiah. In fact, the New Testament use of the word *euangelizomai* (“to tell the good news”) comes directly from a Hebrew word used by Isaiah in this verse: *besar* (“bringer of good news”).¹ In both cases the “good news” was about God’s good and merciful reign. In the New Testament, that reign is embodied, revealed, and confirmed in the birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Our mission therefore is to alert everyone everywhere to God’s universal reign *through Christ*, by both speech and action, by explaining and demonstrating, by word and deed. We proclaim it with our mouths, through our joyful witness to our experience of God’s reign, by our testimony of coming *under* God’s reign, and through evangelistic preaching *about* God’s reign. And we show it with our actions, by demonstrating God’s reign through acts of kindness and hospitality, through healing and serving others, and by contributing to the flourishing of a just and equitable society.

These essential elements never change. Such mission is always rooted in a deep confidence in the beautiful, just, and healing reign of King Jesus. It is always focused on sharing the good news that God has revealed his kingdom and opened it up to all through the work of Jesus, who will one day return to overthrow evil and consummate that kingdom for eternity. Our message has always been, “Jesus is enthroned and is putting the world aright!” Or, as Jesus himself put it, “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mk 1:15). So, our calling is to demonstrate that truth in word and deed through seeking the redemption, reconciliation, and remediation of all. Indeed, Scripture resounds with the clarion call to “declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (Ps 96:3).

In his helpful article, *Evangelism in the City*, British theologian and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin said this of the mission of the church:

The congregation must be so deeply and intimately involved in the secular concerns of the neighborhood that it becomes clear to everyone that no one and nothing is outside the range of God's love in Jesus. Christ's message, the original gospel, was about the coming of the kingdom of God, that is to say God's kingly rule over the whole of his creation and the whole of humankind. That is the only authentic gospel. And that means that every part of human life is within the range of the gospel message; in respect of everything the gospel brings the necessity for choice between the rule of God and the negation of his rule. If the good news is to be authentically communicated, it must be clear that the church is concerned about the rule of God and not about itself. It must be clear, that is, that the local congregation cares for the well-being of the whole community and not just for itself.²

That is our mission, and it never changes. But the words we use, and how we demonstrate God's reign, are situation specific; the exact contours of the mission of God's people are fluid. Just like water. Mission is determined by the container into which it's poured. It will take different shapes, depending on the culture in which it is presented. And throughout history, our mission has been shaped differently, depending on the challenges and interests of people in each epoch.

CULTIVATING A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN MEMORY

I believe our imagination has been somewhat limited when it comes to thinking about the shape of mission. People tend to harken back to the early church—by which they mean the church described in the Acts of the Apostles—claiming that this is *the* shape that Christian mission should take today. “If only we could emulate the mission of the Jerusalem church,” they say. But that church was peculiarly shaped by its time and place. Sure, there is much we can learn from the Jerusalem church, as there is from the churches in Antioch or Corinth or Ephesus or Rome. But we aren't doing mission in the ancient Roman world. Indeed, the very fact that the mission and composition of the churches in Corinth or Rome were so different from that of the church in Jerusalem tells us the apostles knew that context shapes mission, just as a bottle shapes water.

More recently, many have pointed to the Chinese underground church as *the* defining shape of mission. And there are certainly lessons to be learned from Chinese church leaders who took the unchanging nature of mission and

shaped it to the extreme challenges of their context under the oppression and persecution of the Maoist regime. It is another *one* of the ways that context has shaped mission.

But if our only points of reference are the early church under Roman persecution and the Chinese church under Communist persecution, are we really going to be able to discern what Christian mission in a post-Christendom West looks like? Don't we need our imagination enlarged somewhat?

I'm sure you've heard people (usually old-timers) say we need God to raise up another Billy Graham or D. L. Moody or some other great heroic figure of the past. I always have two reactions to comments like that.

First, if you could miraculously plonk Billy Graham or D. L. Moody into twenty-first-century America, they would almost certainly *not* have the effect they had in their day. They were shaped by their contexts and responded brilliantly to the needs and interests of their times; but even those great figures—who had very lengthy ministries—saw their influence waning as they grew older. Culture was changing around them.

My second reaction to those who wish the great men of history were ministering today, has to do with the people they choose. For a start, they're nearly always *men*. I don't hear anyone crying out to God to raise up another Junia or Perpetua or St. Brigid. I can't recall anyone saying we need another Mary Slessor or Aimee Semple McPherson or Mother Teresa. But even the men who *are* proposed as being apparently so necessary for our time are from such a limited range. Why yearn for another C. H. Spurgeon but not one of the greatest evangelists of all time, Francis Xavier? Why hanker after another William Carey but not the real founder of the modern missions movement, Count Nicolas von Zinzendorf? And why not Simon Kimbangu or Hélder Câmara or St. Boniface? I think I know the reason. Many of us only know a little bit of history—the bit we like the best.

And if the bit we like the best is all we know, we will be forever trapped in that particular historical container. You probably know Abraham Maslow's famous expression, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail." Well, it's applicable here too. If we only have one historical container in our imaginations, every mission initiative we think of will fit that container. We don't need another C. H. Spurgeon or Francis Xavier or any other historical figure. We need Christians to be sensitive to the cultural and philosophical landscape in

which they find themselves and to develop missional responses specific to that context.

One of the ways to free our imaginations and discover more “containers” is to study history. Yeah, I just said, “study history” and “free your imagination” in the same sentence! Maybe your days in history class at high school killed that possibility for you, but I’m going to try to revive it.

An excessive focus on the present leads to historical and spiritual myopia. We need Christian history to expand our horizons. For some conservative Protestants it’s as if the history of the church begins with Paul, jumps fifteen hundred years to Martin Luther and John Calvin, then another two hundred years to Jonathan Edwards and then yet another two hundred years to Billy Graham. But plenty of awesome stuff happened in those big gaps in the timeline.

As historian Lord Acton wrote, “History must be our deliverer not only from the undue influence of other times, but from the undue influence of our own—from the tyranny of environment and the pressures of the air we breathe.”³

If we’re going to understand what the shape of mission looks like in our contexts, we need to understand the container into which it is being poured. To be sure, developing a deep understanding of our environment and our times is essential. But a rich awareness of our history can shed light on present trends and circumstances, helping to explain why things are the way they are today. As Edward Smither says, “Grasping the history of Christianity shapes the global church’s consciousness and contributes to a healthy Christian memory.”⁴

Cicero put it more bluntly: “To know nothing of what happened before you were born, is to forever remain a child.”⁵

THE MANY FACES OF MISSION

Back to water again: Did you know that Plato claimed that water takes the shape of the icosahedron, one of the five so-called platonic solids? It turns out that the ancients believed the physical world could be represented by these interlocking polygons—the tetrahedron (four faces), cube (six faces), octahedron (eight faces), dodecahedron (twelve faces), and the icosahedron (twenty faces). Plato took it upon himself to ascribe each shape to an element. So, fire is shaped like a tetrahedron; earth like a hexahedron; air like the octahedron; ether like the dodecahedron; and water like the twenty-faced icosahedron.

I guess the idea was to illustrate the interdependence and confluence of the

elements. But I like the idea of water being shaped like a twenty-faced polygon. It could mean that water has many different faces and many different meanings. If water really is shaped like an icosahedron and has twenty faces, I wonder whether we should think about Christian mission as having many faces too. I'm not suggesting Christian mission is a kind of choose-your-own-adventure. Water is water, as mission is mission. But it has taken myriad shapes throughout history and will continue to do so into the future, no doubt.

Ask a bunch of people what Christian mission looks like. They might say it looks like evangelistic preaching or church planting or hosting a feeding center. They might mention running a crisis accommodation facility or providing emergency relief after a hurricane or furnishing medical care in a poor country or advocating against sex trafficking or teaching in a Christian school.

But would they mention desecrating religious idols or establishing a city in Africa for freed slaves or starting an ashram or making beer or photographing mass murder or adopting children offered as human sacrifices or hauling a printing press through the jungle? Would they imagine that being a missionary could look like becoming an explorer or a governor or a prisoner or a student activist? All those shapes of mission are described in this book. Each shape was used by God to achieve his purposes in that time and place. Each of them is told here, not so you can emulate them, but so you can broaden your imagination on what shape God is calling you to take hold of.

Although I am not a professional historian, I am a missiologist and have taught a subject on the history of mission for the past ten years. So, even though I can't offer a comprehensive history of Christian mission, I can help us examine the various "containers" into which mission has been poured throughout the ages, from the perspective of a keen student of mission studies. Not twenty faces, as Plato suggests—but enough, I hope, to stimulate your vision for what mission could look like in your time and place.

It is also worth noting that mission rarely takes just one shape per era. We often think of the post-apostolic era of the early church being all about fierce Christians evangelizing boldly across the Roman Empire and being thrown to the lions in the Coliseum for their trouble. But there are many examples of Christians living quiet, peaceful lives in the empire, practicing hospitality, feeding the hungry, holding weekly love feasts, and sharing their faith with their neighbors. Similarly, in the colonial era of the late 1800s, we tend to imagine missionaries joining European colonizers to destroy Indigenous cultures by

Westernizing them. Yet there were many examples of missionaries standing with Indigenous people, opposing colonial governments by calling out their injustices, and embedding themselves deeply in community to serve those to whom God had sent them. And the twentieth century threw up such wildly differing missionary strategies that it can make your head spin. It still astonishes me to think that Albert Schweitzer, Óscar Romero, and Billy Graham were all ministering at the same time. One was a French-German polymath—a liberal theologian, musicologist, philosopher, and physician—who gave his life to serve as a medical missionary in Africa; another was an El Salvadorian Catholic archbishop whose teachings on liberation and a preferential option for the poor saw him assassinated by right-wing forces; and the third was a conservative evangelical Baptist whose large-scale evangelistic rallies were conducted in nearly two hundred countries, attracting more than 215 million people over his lifetime. In a single era, each of them contributed to the shape of mission.

That's not to say everything done in the name of Christian mission should be affirmed or celebrated. As you'll see, many of the people mentioned in this volume made mistakes. Many other missionaries inadvertently contributed to the suffering of Indigenous people and those around them, while still others knowingly contributed to great injustices and atrocities. But, as historian Stephen Neill once wrote, "Christian missionary work is the most difficult thing in the world. It is surprising that it should ever have been attempted. It is surprising that it should have been attended by such a measure of success. And it is not at all surprising that an immense number of mistakes should have been made."⁶

Since I believe we are empowered by having an accurate understanding of history, we will examine the mistakes as well as the triumphs in our past so that we can develop a "healthy Christian memory" and find the courage to engage in mission in our own time and place. If we indiscriminately lionize old heroic figures, portraying them as flawless in their character and unparalleled in their work, we only paralyze ourselves into inaction.

In the second volume of *Church History* by John Woodbridge and Frank James, the authors sound this encouraging note:

The history of the church reminds us that Christians can be culprits of foolishness as well as bold titans for truth. They can be egoistic and self-serving; they can be humble and generous. A single individual can embody

conflicting traits. We may find it disconcerting to discover that our heroes are sometimes flawed ... [But] God works through sinners to accomplish his good purposes.⁷

“BE WATER!”

There’s yet another aspect to my mission-as-water analogy. It comes from the pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong who adopted the mantra of local movie star Bruce Lee: “Be water.”⁸ This refers to the movement’s commitment to a highly mobile, agile style of protest. Rallies turned into marches. Marches dispersed into side streets. Mass protests divided quickly into multiple protests around the city. As one well-known protest sign read, “We are formless, we are shapeless, we can flow, we can crash, we are like water, we are Hongkongers.”⁹

Water flows over hard surfaces and seeps into dry land. It diffuses into cracks and crevices. It can appear like a gentle mist, or rage like a mighty torrent. In the same way, the mission of God’s people has always been like water. In some contexts and eras, it has crashed on the shore and swept away what was there before. At other times, it has risen slowly but inexorably. At other points, it has had to bleed into small fissures, almost unnoticed. In yet others, it has flowed like a babbling stream. It moves differently in contexts of persecution and violence, poverty and fear, wealth and pride. As Bruce Lee put it, “Water can flow or crash!” So can God’s missional people.

I think mission is like water.

The key to understanding the Hongkongers’ analogy of water is to know the size of the protests they held. At one march in June 2019, it is estimated that 1.03 million people filled the streets of the city. It became common for protests of several hundred thousand people to suddenly cram one street, only to retreat when the Communist regime’s police arrived. Then they would reemerge elsewhere. A mobile app was designed to allow the crowdsourcing of the location of each action. In the streets, the protesters developed a series of hand gestures for nonverbal communication that rippled across the crowd, allowing them to be fluid and agile enough to confound the police. They ferried supplies by hand through human chains. Some protesters acted as scouts, sharing updates on police movements. As well as mass rallies and marches, the Hongkongers engaged in hunger strikes, human chains, labor strikes, and boycotts. They displayed protest art, set up pop-up stores to sell protest

gadgets, and they provided undercover medical clinics for those activists in need of assistance.

It is true that some of the Hong Kong protests turned violent and that some of the protesters took a more radical stance than others. But my point in using them as an illustration is that their water analogy works because there were so many peaceful protesters—close to one million people—who committed to being part of the “flow” of anti-Communist protest.

The study of Christian history reveals that mission is the same. The world is rarely changed by single heroic figures. The shape of mission is never epitomized by the life of one famous missionary, no matter how impressive their ministry was. Mission is like water in that it flows most effectively when hundreds or thousands of nameless, faceless Christians humbly submit to the task of contributing their bucket to the torrent.

I remember having this idea surprisingly reinforced for me in a park in the American northeast. Tucked into the northwest corner of Massachusetts in the stunning Berkshires lies Williamstown, a small college town best known for being the home of the exclusive Williams College. I was passing through the area when my host told me Williams was famous in the world of American missions because it was where the 1806 “Haystack Prayer Meeting” had occurred. I was embarrassed to admit that I was unaware of what that was, so he took the opportunity to turn off the freeway and detour through the town. There, on the fringe of the Williams College campus, in a rather unimpressive park, is one of those metal historical markers that you find across the US. This one read: “On this site in the shelter of a haystack during a summer storm in 1806 five Williams College students dedicated their lives to the service of the church around the globe. Out of their decision grew the American Foreign Mission movement.”

I had questions. First, how do you take shelter in a haystack? Aren't they just big round balls of cut grass? Well, it turns out that back in the nineteenth century, farmers used wooden frames, like a teepee, to stack newly harvested hay into a cone-shaped mound. They would leave the inside hollow to prevent it from fermenting and catching fire. The five Williams students had been meeting in a nearby grove of trees to discuss William Carey's book on foreign missions when a wild summer thunderstorm whipped up. Seeing the hollowed-out haystack in the nearby field, they made a break for it.

Makes sense. But how could something as prosaic as five young men

waiting out a rainstorm in a haystack create the American foreign mission movement? In their hiding place, the five men continued their conversation and then prayed, asking God to reveal his will for them regarding overseas mission. Afterward, they sang a hymn. It was then that one of them, Samuel J. Mills, the twenty-three-year-old son of a Connecticut clergyman, announced loudly over the wind and rain, “We can do this, if we will!” The moment must have sent chills through the students. In his history of Williams College, Arthur Latham Perry wrote, “The brevity of the shower, the strangeness of the place of refuge, and the peculiarity of their topic of prayer and conference all took hold of their imaginations and their memories.”¹⁰

Flushed with enthusiasm, they decided to form a permanent prayer group on campus and called it the Haystack Prayer Meeting. I assume they chose a bigger venue than the cramped haystack because within a couple of years it had become a large student group called “The Brethren” (Williams was an all-male school at the time), whose purpose was to promote and mobilize students to foreign mission service. Two years later, The Brethren morphed into the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). In 1812, they sent their first missionaries to India.

I share that story because that nondescript park in Williamstown felt to me like the site of a modest fissure from which leaked a small spring, which would eventually turn into a torrent of mission. The names of those five devoted students, who met together near the Hoosic River in Sloan’s Meadow, were recorded, but they are largely forgotten today.¹¹ But from that small spring flowed a river of mission work. On the 150th anniversary of its formation, the ABCFM announced that they had sent out nearly five thousand missionaries to thirty-four different countries.

Some of us will be called by God to be at the headwaters of a new flow. Others of us will be called, like droplets in a mighty river, to play our small part in contributing to the surge of love and grace throughout the world. If only we are willing.

LEARNING TO BE LESS AMBITIOUS

Recently, a pastor named Joey Cochrane wrote a *Christianity Today* story about how studying church history made him less ambitious.¹² He examined the personal lives of some of his favorite evangelical leaders from history—people like the seventeenth-century pietist August Hermann Francke and the early

twentieth-century Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper. And he discovered that their family lives were a mess. They were often so overworked, or in Kuyper's case wracked by depression, that they neglected their wives and children.

We could easily compile a lengthy list of the famous Christian men throughout history who were disinterested husbands and fathers, some of whom were out-and-out delinquent in their responsibilities. My wife, Caz, says she wishes church history, dominated as it is by men, was written by the wives of famous men rather than their male biographers. But Cochrane's point isn't that we necessarily need more exposés; instead he says we need to celebrate the less impressive achievements of women and men who prioritized their families as part of their commitment to mission.

Cochrane wrote, "I think what evangelicals actually need is *less* fascination with the dark sides of our fallen heroes and more appreciation for the quiet, daily faithfulness of pastors, professors, revivalists, and activists who managed to swim against the powerful social and cultural currents of their times that often placed an unrealistic demand on their output and performance."¹³

Maybe our fascination with the heroic figures of the past comes down to our lack of faith that God can accomplish great things by a torrent of unnamed, faceless everybodies. We think God needs heroes. But the stories you'll read about in this book—while dotted with some impressive women and men—are the narrative of mission being shaped like water, flowing inexorably toward the end God intended from the beginning. It is the story of the "less ambitious" souls who submitted themselves to God's purposes and quietly went about that work in every corner of the globe.

After young Sam Mills zealously exclaimed, "We can do it, if we will," his haystack companions took the line as their motto. It's a somewhat ambiguous sentence. It suggests that, although they felt they had the capacity to do what God was calling them to, up to that point they lacked the *will*. It sounds like he was saying, "If we set our minds to this, we can do it!" There's nothing like the naivety of youth, is there? But God in his grace can work with our overconfidence as much as he can with our lack of confidence. However, God chooses not to work contrary to our wills.

My purpose in this book is to expand your imagination, to help you develop a healthier Christian memory, and to inspire you to action; to lessen your ambition to become a hero and increase your belief that God wants to

partner with you in his mission. God won't necessarily make you famous or do extraordinary things through you, but God will marshal your contribution to his unstoppable mission—whether it is large or small, decisive, or insignificant—to rescue, restore, and reconcile all things through his son, Jesus.

We only need to be willing to explore what questions God is asking of us in our time and to ask what we can draw from the historical examples we'll look at to help us discern what our shape of mission should be.

So, let us start at the beginning ...

NOTES

PROLOGUE: THE SHAPE OF WATER

- 1 The word *besar* is also used in Is 40:9, 41:27, 61:1.
- 2 Lesslie Newbiggin, “Evangelism in the City,” *Reformed Review* 41, Autumn 1987, 5.
- 3 E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1964), 44.
- 4 Edward Smither, *Christian Mission: A Concise Global History* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), xvi.
- 5 Cicero, *Orator ad M. Brutum* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2009), chapter XXXIV, section 120 (46 BC).
- 6 Stephen Neill, *Call to Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 24.
- 7 John Woodbridge and Frank James III, *Church History, Volume 2: The Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), excerpted in Jeremy Bouma, “What’s the Value of Studying Church History? An Excerpt from ‘Church History, vol 2’ Explains,” *Zondervan Academic*, August 15, 2013, <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/whats-the-value-of-studying-church-history-an-excerpt-from-church-history-vol-2-from-pre-reformation>.
- 8 Peter Burns, “How To Be Like Water,” *Mind Café*, February 1, 2022, <https://medium.com/mind-cafe/how-to-be-like-water-208e849698e0>.
- 9 “Bruce Lee, a symbol of Hong Kong revolt,” *The Business Standard*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.tbsnews.net/international/bruce-lee-symbol-hong-kong-revolt>.
- 10 Arthur Latham Perry, *Williamstown and Williams College: A History* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2011), 359.
- 11 For the record, they were Samuel J. Mills, James Richards, Francis LeBaron Robbins, Harvey Loomis, and Byram Green.
- 12 Joey Cochrane, “Studying Great Evangelicals’ Lives Made Me Less Ambitious,” *Christianity Today*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/february-web-only/evangelical-controversy-abuse-scandal-less-ambitious.html>.
- 13 Ibid.

1. THE FIRST SHAPE: GOD SLAYING

- 1 Christos Tsiolkas, *Damascus* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2019), 87–88.