Toward a Framework for a
Practical Theology of Institutions
for Faith-Based Organizations

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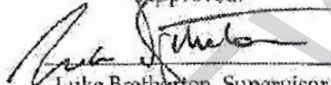
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Ministry in the Department of
Divinity in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2014

UMI Number: 3639372

UMI

Dissertation Publishing

UMI 3639372

ProQuest

Abstract

U.S. faith-based organizations (FBOs) founded by Christians have gained wide recognition and influence both nationally and internationally and have become, to a large extent, the de facto bearers of contemporary Christian mission in an increasingly post-denominational landscape. Yet the focus of this thesis is how FBOs suffer from a separation between missiology, ecclesiology, and theological reflection in ways that inhibit their participation in the mission of God, or *missio Dei.*

The thesis draws on history, sociology, and missiology to provide a critical framework for an inter-disciplinary analysis of FBOs that illuminates the problems they face and describes what is required for a recovery of faithful witness. The thesis begins with the emergence of FBOs as a uniquely Protestant story, locating their origins within the history of Protestant missions, the emergence of the voluntary society, and their evolution into humanitarianism and the problems which emerge out of that history. A move to sociological analysis situates contemporary FBOs within a wider social ecology of powerful forces that cause non-profits to behave like for-profit corporations, often giving themselves over to bureaucratic models shaped by a technological understanding of practice. The final move to missiology and ecclesiology makes the claim that the critical reference point for evaluation of the FBO is the flourishing of the practice of Christian missions.

This constructive missiology provides the basis for proposing marks of a faithful mission-type organization in the contemporary context which can sustain the practice of missions not primarily as activism, but as participation in the *missio Dei.* The thesis re-narrates

FBOs and the marks we should look for in FBOs by proposing several organizational disciplines that provide a response to the challenges facing the contemporary FBO. These marks are displayed through brief case studies from three FBOs: L'Arche International, the U.S. national organization InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and New Song Urban Ministries in Baltimore.

To my parents, in gratitude for your faithful life and witness through 16 years of missionary service with the Korean people

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PREVIEW

1. Introduction

Over the past five decades, hundreds of U.S. faith-based organizations (FBOs) founded by Christians have gained wide recognition and influence—from global organizations such as World Vision and Habitat for Humanity, to national organizations such as the Call to Renewal and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, to denominational initiatives such as the United Methodist Committee on Relief and Church World Service, to local food banks and community development corporations.[1]

Yet through 25 years of service in both FBOs and in the theological academy—from grassroots community development in Mississippi, to the Duke Divinity School Center for Reconciliation and engagements with both U.S. ministries and numerous global contexts—I have become increasingly concerned about a growing number of Christian organizations and institutions that appear to engage their work and evaluate their effectiveness little differently from secular organizations. I was alarmed by the comment of a friend who served in long-term service with a major international Christian organization. "I think half the staff around the world will leave in the next five years," he said. "It has become too much about business, too little about ministry." Yet over these same years I have also encountered many signs of hope—FBOs that have, over decades, sustained their mission in the world and organizational life, marked by a specialness and expansiveness in how they relate to neighbor, others in

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[1] Elizabeth Ferris writes: "According to the Yearbook of International Organizations, there were about 26,000 international NGOs by the year 2000, compared with 6,000 in 1990. The US alone has about 2 million NGOs, 70% of which are more than 30 years old. India has about 1 million grassroots groups, while more than 100,000 NGOs sprang up in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1995. 'As a group, NGOs now deliver more aid than the whole United Nations system.' Some observers estimate that the total funding channeled through NGOs worldwide is in excess of US\$ 8.5 billion per year" (2005: 312).

their organization, and both policy and Scripture. Not to mention their communal sense of joy.

In *After Virtue,* Alasdair Macintyre draws a distinction between practices and institutions. "Chess, physics, and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities, and hospitals are institutions."[2] The ultimate goal is the flourishing of the practices, with institutions being bearers of practices. By this description contemporary FBOs are institutions. If the FBO as a social institution is therefore a bearer of practices, and if the ultimate goal is the flourishing of the practice at stake (of chess, physics, medicine), what is the practice of which the institution of the faith-based organization is a steward and bearer? The argument of this thesis is this: the FBO did not drop from the sky, but emerged in a particular shape and time and social influence through the evolution of Protestant Christian missions, and it is the practice of *Christian missions* that is ultimately at stake in an analysis of the FBO.

If this claim has validity, then what is the redemptive form needed for the FBO to sustain the practice of Christian missions? One argument of this thesis is that a critical ability required for redeeming the form of the FBO for Christian missions is learning a peculiar kind of "institutional imagination." Jewish rabbi and theologian Abraham Heschel gets to the heart of this challenge in a distinction between "content" and "container":

> Why do so many of the great religions which had their origins in the mystery come ultimately to be social service agencies, or in their religious life to be preoccupied with form and concerned more with the container than the content?[3]

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[2] Macintyre (1984: 194).
[3] Quoted in Greenleaf (1977: 254).

Heschel identifies a predicament at the heart of institutionalization: the loss of transcendence as growth occurs and the quest for longevity and even permanence is pursued.   In reference to container and form, I take Heschel's key words to be "ultimately" and "preoccupied." The warning is to not "ultimately" lose a clear sense of mission and *telos*, to keep the vitality of religious content at the heart as growth is engaged. Yet to pay faithful attention to containers is not the same as being "preoccupied" with them. If containers without content can become durable bottles containing bitter wine, then content without containers can become only a brief taste of succulence without the wineskin to ferment into its best possible taste.[4] A kind of failure will happen when we become preoccupied with *either* content *or* container.

1.1 Overview of the Arguments and Movements

The movements of my argument in this thesis attempt to illuminate this critical relationship between mission and means, or imagination and organizational form. I begin with the history of Protestant missions, and tell a story about problems that emerge out of that history. From the outset, missions became separated from ecclesiology, and institutional modes of pragmatism developed that were in some respects antithetical to the gospel. Secondly I engage the contemporary context of missions to see how these problems are being re-capitulated.   Here I examine the contemporary FBO through the categories of sociology and what is called "institutional isomorphism," that is, the tendency for non-profits to

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[4] Greenleaf once argued that healthy institutions and structures are not only necessary but indispensable. Thriving institutions can "lift people up to nobler stature and greater effectiveness than they are likely to achieve on their own or with a less demanding discipline." Ibid.

eventually behave like for-profits. We see a FBO in contemporary times shaped out of the

unfortunate trajectories of the history and often giving itself over to bureaucratic models

shaped by a technological understanding of practice. The third movement asks, how do we

think rightly about the FBO? Missiology and ecclesiology is engaged here. Finally, I seek to

provide marks of a faithful mission-type organization in the contemporary context. In terms

of methodology, I start with history, because the problems emerging for the FBO are inherent

in their particular history; move to sociology in order to broaden the landscape of the FBO

beyond organizations themselves to the wider social ecology in which they both act and are

acted upon; and finally move to missiology and ecclesiology to extend my claim that it is the

flourishing of the practice of Christian missions that is at stake in the faithful FBO.

1.2 Scope and Limits of the Thesis

The thesis engages three areas of research that are critical to analysis of the FBO—

history, sociology, and missiology. Each area is limited to one chapter and a focus on broad

trends and categories (for example, the first chapter on history focuses on five key

developments, one in each century from the seventeenth century through the twenty-first).

Outside the scope of this thesis, it is important to name other critical areas of research for a

wider and deeper analysis of the FBO. One is an exploration of the different trajectories of

Roman Catholic missions, which provides a critical place of comparison and contrast.

Another area not engaged is the field of business knowledge. Given my argument about the

prevailing bureaucratic and technological institutional models, an analysis of the

assumptions that drive this model both in terms of imagination and form is needed, but will

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not be provided here. Given such limits, this thesis seeks to provide some critical analysis

and categories toward developing a framework for a practical theology of institutions to

assist faith-based Christian organizations for faithful and effective reasoning, judgment,

action, and witness.

1.3 Overview of Chapters

The thesis has four chapters, moving from history, to sociology, to missiology, to a

constructive approach and integrative analysis.

Chapter one focuses on the history of FBOs as a uniquely Protestant story, locating

the origins of the FBO within the history of Protestant missions and their evolution into

humanitarianism (a brief comparison is drawn to the Catholic trajectory, a very different

story). It raises questions about the problems that have emerged out of this history in terms

of understanding the relationship of FBOs to ecclesial forms, to mission, and to the

professional service organization, and examines how these different understandings

influenced what FBOs look like today. This history reveals a critical interrelationship

between mission and polity, that is, how mission is imagined, and how it is formed and

carried out via organizational and ecclesial means.

Chapter two focuses on assessing FBOs through the lens of sociological analysis. The

use of concepts such as "sectors," "organizational field," and "institutional isomorphism"

offers an account of FBOs within a multi-dimensional social ecology of social powers, forces,

and captivities. I describe how FBOs are both acting and acted upon within a complex

landscape of institutions and the dominant sectors of market, state, and other forces. Two

prevailing organizational models on the contemporary landscape are engaged: the bureaucratic model and the aid model. I then move to engage sociological typologies of the FBO to seek to recover the special nature of the "faith" in the FBO. At the end of the chapter I introduce the concept of "institutional imagination" with respect to understanding FBOs and the consequences when that is missing.

Chapter three engages a theological and missiological critique, taking into account the historical and sociological analysis. I re-narrate "faith" and "organization" in FBOs by providing an analysis of FBOs located in what the Christian tradition has called "missions" and the logic and nature of Christian mission. This analysis describes a wider institutional, cosmic, and eschatological ecology required by a Christian account of FBOs. This includes drawing on accounts of institutions, practices, social imaginaries, cultural liturgies, and principalities and powers.

In the final chapter I offer my recommendation for re-imagining FBOs in light of my constructive missiology. Drawing on this constructive missiology, I re-name and re-narrate FBOs and the marks we should look for in FBOs by proposing several organizational disciplines that provide a response to the challenges facing the contemporary FBO. Brief case studies are offered of three FBOs: L'Arche International, the U.S. national organization InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and New Song Urban Ministries in Baltimore.

1.4 *The Special Nature and* **Charism** *of the Faith-Based Organization*

From the Salvation Army and its outreach of mercy, to World Vision and its $3 billion annual budget directed to relief and development, to Habitat for Humanity and its widely-

admired public service in the name of homeownership for the marginalized, to the myriad of organizations and ministries in local communities, FBOs have become to a large extent the de facto bearers of contemporary Christian mission in an increasingly post-denominational landscape. Their vitality is therefore of great consequence.

The ground this thesis seeks to open is five-fold. First, I seek to show that the practice of Christian missions is the critical reference point for evaluation of the FBO historically, sociologically, and theologically. This means that the redemptive form needed from the FBO is one that can sustain the practice of missions not primarily as activism, but as participation in the *missio Dei.*

Secondly, that redemption cannot occur without understanding the historical, social, institutional, and cosmic pressures that deform the FBO. The story of Scripture from creation to fall to redemption is in part a story of the navigation of particular polities and powers: Garden, Egypt, Wilderness, Monarchy, Exile, Empire and Occupation, the New Jerusalem. A theological account of this wider landscape of powers is critical for analyzing the challenges facing the FBO.

Third, the redemption of the FBO thus requires thinking about both mission and means, for the challenges facing FBOs are *institutional* problems that concern a historical dichotomy between mission and ecclesiology. This is why I propose a missiological account of institutional imagination as the framework for analyzing the FBO in terms of how Christian mission is *imagined* (its guiding mission), how Christian mission is *formed* (use of means), and how Christian mission is *proclaimed* (the work of theological reflection and language).

Fourth, by moving the thesis toward engaging organizational disciplines I seek to show redemptive forms of power that can resist and provide a positive response to the pressures on the social landscape that impoverish Christian mission.

Finally, if there is such a thing as exemplary lives of personal holiness (people whose lives, in a special way, participate with and bear witness to God's good news), I raise the question whether there is such a thing as *institutional* holiness.

2. The Historical Evolution of Protestant Missions into the Faith-Based Organization

What are commonly known today as "faith-based organizations" are a Protestant phenomenon and have emerged out of a uniquely Protestant history. In this chapter I trace their emergence out of the history of Protestant missions. In doing so, I show certain confusions facing FBOs regarding their purpose and identity that are inherent in this history. For this is a story of the evolution of Protestant missions alongside the evolution of humanitarianism, and the resulting tensions. The history indentifies several broad transformations in Protestant mission from Pietism and the great Evangelical Revival in the eighteenth century, to the nineteenth century voluntary society, to the twentieth century parachurch organization and (later) faith-based organization, and to the twenty-first century Christian humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO). At the heart of these transformations were changes not only in how the world and church was imagined, but in organizational forms and polity. This history thus reveals a critical interrelationship between mission and polity, that is, how mission is imagined, and how it is formed and carried out via organizational and ecclesial means. Indeed, as innovators sought to adapt to new crises and situations in the name of the internal renewal of Christianity and external outreach to the world, significant organizational transformations led to reformulations of Christianity itself. The history suggests that alongside the extensive and even astounding global influence these innovations have released, they have intensified an unfortunate dichotomy between church and mission. At the end of the chapter I identify several problems arising out of this story of

Protestant missions that pose significant challenges to the FBO and its place in the *missio Dei* and the Christian community's participation in that mission.

2.1 Eighteenth Century Pietism, the Protestant Evangelical Revival, and the Renewal of Christendom

The origins of Protestant missions lie in revivalist impulses in seventeenth and eighteenth century post-Reformation Europe. Across church polities, the landscape at the time was dominated by a structural link between church and state within the shared assumption that Christianity required Christendom. The concept of a Christian *nation* was a given.[1] Yet some were not satisfied with the establishment arrangement. Two movements were crucial forces in planting seeds for a new understanding of Christian mission, Pietism and the Evangelical Revival.

As a eighteenth century renewal movement in Germany in which Moravians were prominent, Pietism set its renewal against what was viewed as a complacent church-state establishment. Three marks of what David Bosch terms the "Pietist Breakthrough" are critical in his account, and each has great significance in the subsequent story of Protestant missions. One mark of Pietist missions was the focus on personal decisions, a radical break from the church-state based assumption that all people within their territory are Christian.[2] Secondly, in Pietism this deeply personal experience of salvation was accompanied by what Bosch terms "an almost unbearable impatience to go to the ends of the earth."[3] The missionary impulse combined with the emphasis on personal decisions for salvation

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[1] Walls (1996: 81).
[2] Bosch (1991: 254).
[3] Ibid., 252.

formulated mission not as a church activity but of Christ through the Holy Spirit, yet using people as the vessels. The result was a radical new understanding that expanded the means of and responsibility for mission: "Pietism thus introduced the principle of 'voluntarism' in mission."[4] The Church as such was seen as lifeless and was not the bearer of mission, but rather the "*ecclesiola in ecclesiae"* (community inside the church). Bosch names the significance of this church-mission divide: "From here it was only one step toward mission becoming the hobby of special-interest groups, a practice that militated against the idea of the priesthood of all believers."[5] A third mark of Pietist missions was organizing service to both soul and body, both preaching and starting schools for the poor, homes for widows, and hospitals.[6] These three marks combined to shift mission from the responsibility of the establishment to the "total dedication" of the *ecclesiola in ecclesiae.* "Now ordinary men and women," states Bosch, "most of them simple artisans, went literally to the ends of the earth,"[7] a Moravian commitment previously assumed to be found only in Roman Catholic monasticism.   Although Pietism was not able to withstand the forces of Enlightenment, remained at the margins of Lutheran orthodoxy, and never penetrated the mainstream,[8] Pietist understandings of personal decision, voluntarism, and missional fervor planted seeds that would have continuing influence in Protestant missions.

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[4] Bosch (1991: 253).
[5] Ibid., 253.
[6] Ibid., 254.
[7] Ibid., 255.
[8] Ibid.

The second reform movement emerged from British soil and was grounded in historic evangelicalism. According to historian Andrew Walls, the resulting eighteenth-century protest was far more than an event or a movement:[9]

> The Evangelical Revival was perhaps the most successful of all the reformulations of Christianity in the context of changing western culture … [it] extended and clarified the Reformation idea … of a life of holy obedience in the secular world and the family … It helped to make evangelical religion a critical force in Western culture, a version of Christianity thoroughly authentic and indigenous there. To use the appalling current missiological jargon, the Evangelical Revival contextualized the gospel for the northern protestant world.[10]

Four trajectories can be traced from Wall's analysis of the Evangelical Revival that will become critical in the ensuing story of Protestant missions, with some striking similarities to the Pietist vision. First, for the British revivalists the "spiritual parity of the unregenerate of Christendom and the heathen abroad had important missionary consequences."[11] The revivalist impulse emerged out of an understanding of a two-fold crisis and challenge—the renewal of the Christian church of which they were members, and the conversion of the non-Christian pagan.[12] The revivalist imagination and action reached both inward to the church and outward to the world.

A second forceful trajectory of the Evangelical Revival was to challenge a fundamental assumption underlying the church-state establishment, namely, that "[I]ndividual choice could hardly exist, even in concept."[13] Just as the unprecedented

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[9] Walls describes historic evangelicalism as "a paradigm of conversion [that] begins with the personal knowledge of sin, moves to personal trust in Christ's finished work, and issues in godly personal life," (1996: 83). Noll names the four key marks of evangelicalism as biblicism, conversionism and new birth, activism ("an energetic, individualistic approach to religious duties and self-involvement"), and crucicentrism (2009: 46).

[10] Walls (1996: 84).

[11] Ibid., 79.

[12] Ibid., 81, 83.

[13] Ibid., 82.

relocation of third-century Christian ascetics into desert desolation gave rise to radical new formulations of Christianity, the new concept of individual choice and personal decision would birth new forms of Christianity never before envisioned.

A third critical trajectory for the story of Protestant missions out of the Evangelical Revival was how *imagining* the potential of the individual in a new time in Western culture was supported by powerful new means and innovations of *doing* Christianity differently. "Above all," writes Walls "[the Evangelical Revival] combined the traditional framework of the Christian nation and the established church … with serious recognition of individual selfhood and personal decision."[14] This synthesis gave rise to innovations in pursuing change via new means of organizing, logistics, and networking. It was the marriage of the new imagination (personal choice) with a new organizational means that gave power to the two-fold impulse for church renewal and world conversion.

A fourth trajectory of the Evangelical Revival shaping the stream of subsequent Protestant missions emerges from Mark Noll's contention that "as eager as evangelicals were to carry out reform, their reforms were inevitably shaped by the main cultural currents of early-modern Europe."[15] These included using the "techniques of entrepreneurial market capitalism for spreading the gospel," defending the faith by "scientific rationality," and creating a gospel "relevant for an Enlightenment sense of the self."[16] If on one side the Protestant Reformation was losing its connection to lay-led vitality and was in dire need of reform, the activist tendencies of reform were subject to great tensions between "sacred" and

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[14] Ibid., 84.
[15] Noll (2010: 43).
[16] Ibid., 43-44.

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"secular." Indeed, Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield locate the origins of humanitarianism

in eighteenth-century Britain and its subsequent evolution alongside that of Protestant

missions.[17] While they contend the philosophical roots of humanitarianism have "long

intertwined with specifically religious conceptions of giving," if such humanitarianism is (as

they contend) "inherently presentist" in temporal terms, this differs from an orthodox

Christian eschatology. From the beginning, Protestant missions was not a strictly religious

story. Christian ideals constantly negotiated notions of presentism, pity, altruistic feeling,

empathy for humanity and the misfortune of others inspired by Enlightenment

humanitarianism.[18]

In no small terms, Walls contends that the "modern missionary movement is an

autumnal child of the Evangelical Revival."[19] In the subsequent story of Protestant missions,

the four trajectories of the Evangelical Revival mattered greatly for eventual transformations:

the two-fold revivalist impulse inward and outward, the powers and perils of individual

choice, the indispensability of innovative new forms and polities, and the messy negotiation

and relationship between Christian and secular impulses. And if the Evangelical Revival

was nothing less than a "reformulation" of Christianity (Walls' term), further reformulations

were to come.

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[17] Bornstein and Redfield (2007: 25).

[18] For Bornstein and Redfield, the "fundamental problem which humanitarianism seeks to confront is suffering, usually understood as bodily or psychological anguish. In temporal terms humanitarianism is inherently presentist; the lives and welfare of those now living fundamentally matter and cannot be conscionably sacrificed in the pursuit of other goals" (2007: 5). The authors name three "marks of distinction": compassion across boundaries (a "vow to help strangers in distant lands"); transcendental significance ("the belief that there is something larger than us," which should not be restricted to religious belief); and the belief it is possible to engineer progress. "Although humanitarianism has this other-worldly quality, it also is very much of this world. Humanitarianism is imprinted by modernity, the Enlightenment, and the belief that it is possible to engineer progress" (2007: 12).

[19] Walls (1996: 79, 144).

2.2 The Nineteenth-Century Voluntary Society and "The Use of Means"

Kevin Scott Latourette once described the two marks of the nineteenth century as "the Great Century of Missions" and "preeminently the Protestant century."[20] The century began with vigorous public revivals based in British evangelicalism, saw wide and deep church growth on the North American continent, and culminated with the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, whose tone was set by the John R. Mott book, *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation.*[21]

Yet the bold proposal of vision and method for the century's astounding growth in missions did not come from the center but from the margins, in a 1792 publication titled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens.* The English author William Carey was not a member of the elite. He was a cobbler, not a clergyman, and he did not attend Oxford or Cambridge or any college. But behind his ambitious vision Carey did have something like a business plan. He married a powerful new idea grounded in the call of the individual (an obligation on the part of every Christian "for the conversion of the heathen") to a powerful new instrument (a "use of means") that has come to be called "the Voluntary Society."[22]

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[20]Latourette (1941).

[21] Mott's book included a chapter titled "The Possibilities of Evangelizing the World in This Generation in View of the Opportunities, Facilities, and Resources of the Church" (Bosch, 1991: 337).

[22] Walls notes the significance of the voluntary society being overlooked in scholarship: "It is surprising how little attention the voluntary society has attracted in studies of the nineteenth-century Church, considering the immense impact on Western Christianity and the transformation of world Christianity which (through its special form in the missionary society) it helped to effect" (1996: 241). With regard to Carey, Bosch contends there were similar innovators at the time and that Carey is "as much a product as a shaper of the spirit of the time. Church renewal and mission were simply in the air" (Bosch: 1991, 280).