

***Method in Theology* as a Theoretical and Practical Reflection upon the Great Commissions**

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## Introduction

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.  
(Matt 28:16-20 NRSV)

<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.  
(Luke 24:44-47 NRSV)

The Great Commissions have always been a source of mission, of purpose, for the Church. This mission in particular is the preaching and teaching of the gospel to all nations, to all people. With his book *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan has also taken inspiration from the Great Commissions and made a contribution to carrying out the mission of the Church; he has bequeathed to us a theoretical framework to accomplish the practical task of preaching the gospel to all people. My thesis in this paper is that the Great Commissions are the hermeneutical key for properly understanding and applying *Method in Theology*. In other words, the Great Commissions form the theological commitment, impetus, purpose, and goal for the writing of *Method in Theology*; everything in the book is directed toward and taken up in preaching the gospel to all nations. This hermeneutical key highlights the inherent practicality of *Method in Theology* towards the mission of the Church and brings together a unified reading of the work in three ways: it highlights 1) the bookend emphases upon mediation; 2) the overall structure and movement of the functional specialties for theology from particular, to universal, and finally to particular again in communicating the gospel to all nations and; 3) the importance of the first four background chapters of *Method in Theology* for the foreground section.

## My Method

This thesis will be articulated by focusing, in *Method in Theology*, on Lonergan's comments on preaching the Gospel to all people and his reflections for what this means for the task of theology within these contexts. I will then give an overview of how this hermeneutical key ties together a reading of *Method in Theology*.

## Investigating the Text

In *Method in Theology*, Lonergan writes that "Preaching to all the nations" is the mission of Christianity and the starting point for the categories of Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> The only commission text of the gospels that is referenced is Mt. 28.19 and it is cited one time. Despite this single explicit reference to the Christian Scriptures on the topic, in the book this brings emphasis; only fourteen Christian scriptures are referenced, causing the notation of Mt. 28.19 to have heightened relevance.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the idea of communicating the gospel to all people appears in similar expressions within all of the mediated foreground chapters:<sup>3</sup> 1) "preach the gospel to all men"<sup>4</sup>; 2) "preaching to all nations"<sup>5</sup>; 3) "preach the gospel to all nations"<sup>6</sup>; 4) "the outer communication of Christ's message"<sup>7</sup>; 5) "effective communication of Christ's message,"<sup>8</sup>; 6) "to communicate the Christian message,"<sup>9</sup> and; 7) "The Christian message is to be communicated to all nations."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 282.

<sup>2</sup> *Method in Theology*. Mk 12.30, Rom 5.5, 8.38ff (105); Gal 5.22 (106); Mt 7.20 (119); 1 Cor 13.12 (135); Lk 24.32, Acts 28.26 (162); Rom 5.5 (278); 1 Cor 15.3ff, Gal 1.6ff, Heb 1.2, Acts 15.28 (295); Mt 28.19 (300); Rom 5.5 (340); Jn 17.21 (367).

<sup>3</sup> Foundations, doctrines, systematic, and communications.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 293, 300, 328

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 361

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

## Foundations

The first reference to preaching the message of the Gospel occurs in the chapter on foundations, the first specialty of the mediated phase of theology. This half of the functional specialties has the goals: “to pronounce which doctrines were true, how they could be reconciled with one another and with the conclusions of science, philosophy, history, and *how they could be communicated appropriately to the members of each class in every culture.*”<sup>11</sup> Specifically foundations, writes Lonergan, “deliberately selects the frame-work in which doctrines have their meaning, in which systematic reconciles, *in which communications are effective.*”<sup>12</sup> It is concerned with setting up the ability to preach the gospel to all people, and it explicitly arises in the two major divisions of the chapter, what I am calling conversions and pluralism (sec. 1-4), and categories (sec. 5-7), with both aimed at grounding communication of the gospel in the human subject.

Only the converted subject can properly perform the mediated functional specialties.<sup>13</sup> The conversions<sup>14</sup> allow one to break from static modes of thought and authority to move to the methodical style of theology and the ability to understand other people.<sup>15</sup> From the level of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 267. Emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 268. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> Foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications.

<sup>14</sup> Intellectual, moral, and religious.

<sup>15</sup> “[I]f one desires foundations for an ongoing, developing process, one has to move out of the static, deductivist style—which admits no conclusions that are not implicit in premisses—and into the methodical style—which aims at decreasing darkness and increasing light and keeps adding discovery to discovery. Then, what is paramount is control of the process. It must be ensured that positions are accepted and counter-positions are rejected. But that can be ensured only if investigators have attained intellectual conversion to renounce the myriad of false philosophies, moral conversion to keep themselves free of individual, group, and general bias, and religious conversion so that in fact each loves the Lord his God with his whole heart and his whole soul and all his mind and all his strength.

The threefold conversion is, not a set of propositions that a theologian utters, but a fundamental and momentous change in the human reality that a theologian is. It operates, not by the simple process of drawing inferences from premisses, but by changing the reality (his own) that the interpreter has to understand if he is going **to understand others**, by changing the horizon within which the historian attempts to make the past intelligible, by changing the basic judgments of fact and of value that are found to be not positions but counter-positions.

interiority and differentiated consciousness, one is able to understand and move within the different levels of meaning and consciousness, and therefore address the issue of pluralism in expression.<sup>16</sup> Lonergan then spends a decent amount of time parsing this out. This allows him to meet what he considers the major difficulty of communicating the gospel, undifferentiated consciousness:

The most common type [of radical pluralism] by far is undifferentiated consciousness. To this type will always belong the vast majority of the faithful. . . . to preach to this majority and to teach it one must use its own language, its own procedures, its own resources. Unfortunately these are not uniform. There are as many brands of common sense as there are languages, social or cultural differences, almost differences of place and time. So it is that to preach the gospel to all men calls for at least as many preachers as there are differing places and times, and it requires each of them to get to know the people to whom he or she is sent, their ways of thought, their manners, their style of speech. There follows a manifold pluralism. Primarily it is a pluralism of communications rather than of doctrines. But within the limits of undifferentiated consciousness, there is no communication of doctrine except through the rituals, narrative forms, titles, parables, metaphors that are effective in the given milieu.<sup>17</sup>

Further, for doing theology based in interiorly and religiously differentiated consciousness, categories are needed to move from transcendental notions and make questions and answers determinate.<sup>18</sup> Lonergan then indicates that “The methodologist’s task is the preliminary one of indicating what categories are desirable in theological categories, what measure of validity is to be demanded of them, and how categories with the desired qualities and validity are to be obtained.” From here, he immediately moves to:

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...one’s interpretation of others is affected by one’s understanding of oneself, and the converted have a self to understand that is quite different from the self that the unconverted have to understand.” Ibid., 270-1. Emphasis mine.

<sup>16</sup> “Not only does the more differentiated consciousness master more realms but **also it understands the people that are at home in these realms**. Inversely, less differentiated consciousness finds more differentiated consciousness beyond its horizon and, in self-defense, may tend to regard the more differentiated with that pervasive, belittling hostility that Max Scheler named *ressentiment*.” Ibid., 273. Emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 283.

“First, then, Christianity...has the mission of preaching to all nations. Plainly, a theology that is to reflect on such a religion and that is to direct its efforts at universal communication must have a transcultural base.”<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, Christian categories are to be transcultural because it is necessary to have a transcultural basis to fulfill the Great Commissions. This mission takes primacy in Christian theology. The transcendental base required for this is outlined in chapter one. Secondly, Lonergan grounds categories in the transcultural gift of God’s love, outlined in chapter four. From these bases, the general and special categories emerge.

More distinctions follow in the chapter, but overall, Lonergan is concerned to develop the categories in foundations to establish the understanding, communicating, and preaching of the gospel to all nations, closing the chapter: “[T]he functional specialty, foundations, will be concerned largely with the origins, the genesis, the present state, the possible developments and adaptations of the categories in which Christians understand themselves, communicate with one another, and *preach the gospel to all nations.*”<sup>20</sup>

## Doctrines

The chapter on Doctrines is also concerned with preaching to all nations. Lonergan approaches doctrines as universal and common meaning with an aim toward communications, Christian witness.<sup>21</sup> The first real issue Lonergan approaches in the chapter is variations in doctrines. Studies in history and culture have highlighted variations in “the historicity of Christian witness, the diversity of human cultures, [and] the differentiations of human consciousness.”<sup>22</sup> These variations broach preaching to all nations, and this is because with an

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 293. Emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup> To “fulfill the communicative, effective, constitutive, and cognitive functions of meaning.” “[T]he function of church doctrines lies within **the function of Christian witness.**” Ibid., 300, 327. Emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 297.

empirical notion of culture, variation of expression is expected, as form does not equal content.

Loneragan writes,

Anthropological and historical research has made us aware of the enormous variety of human social arrangements, cultures, mentalities. It follows that we, far more than many of our predecessors, are in a position to understand the variations that have taken place in the expression of Christian doctrines. *For if the gospel is to be preached to all nations (Mt. 28, 19), still it is not to be preached in the same manner to all.* If one is to communicate with persons of another culture, one must use the resources of their culture. To use simply the resources of one's own culture is not to communicate with the other but to remain locked up in one's own. At the same time, it is not enough simply to employ the resources of the other culture. One must do so creatively. One has to discover the manner in which the Christian message can be expressed effectively and accurately in the other culture.<sup>23</sup>

The mission of preaching the gospel to all nations is the transcultural basis that gives reason for the diversity in a positive fashion, as opposed to negatively in classicism. These developments and variations should be expected when this mission is successfully carried out. This mission, then, gives Lonergan a basis for addressing how developments are possible and to develop this with the notions of the differentiations of consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

Near the end of the chapter, Lonergan comes back to the same issues of pluralism and the unity of the faith. Again, the mission of preaching the gospel to all nations is positively invoked to address the fall of the classicist notion of culture and the emergence of an empirical notion of culture.

In the past, then, there has existed a notable pluralism of expression. Currently in the church there is quietly disappearing the old classicist insistence on worldwide uniformity, and there is emerging a pluralism of manners in which Christian meaning and Christian values are communicated. *To preach the gospel to all nations is to preach it to every class in every culture in the manner that accords with the assimilative powers of that class and culture.*

For the most part such preaching will be to a consciousness that is little differentiated. So it will have to be as multiform as are the diverse brands of common sense generated by the many languages, social forms, and cultural meanings and values

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 300. Emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 302.

of mankind. In each case the preacher will have to know the brand of common sense to which he speaks . . .<sup>25</sup>

*Preaching the gospel to all* means preaching it in the manner appropriate to each of the varieties of partial attainment and, no less, to full attainment. . . . The church, then, following the example of St. Paul, becomes all things to all men. *It communicates what God has revealed* both in the manner appropriate to the various differentiations of consciousness and, above all, in the manner appropriate to each of the almost endless brands of common sense.<sup>26</sup>

[B]ecause *the gospel is to be preached to all*, there must be sought the modes of representation and of expression appropriate to communicating revealed truth both to every brand of common sense and to every differentiation of consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

## Systematics

Systematics advocates an understanding of church confessions “on the level of one’s times”<sup>28</sup> Development of this understanding is acknowledged when “the Gospel is preached effectively to a different culture or to a different class in the same culture.”<sup>29</sup> Systematics’

ultimate aim is in the functional specialty communications, as Lonergan writes,

*systematic theology is irrelevant, if it does not provide the basis for the eighth functional specialty, communications.* But to communicate one must understand what one has to communicate. No repetition of formulas can take the place of understanding. For it is understanding alone that can say what it grasps in any of the manners demanded by the almost endless series of different audiences.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 329. Emphasis mine.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 330. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> “The level of understanding to be reached is to be on the level of one’s times. In the medieval period it was static system. In the contemporary world it has to be at home in modern science, modern scholarship, and modern philosophy. . . . The systematic theology we advocate is really a homely affair. It aims at an understanding of the truths of faith, a *Glaubensverständnis*. The truths of faith envisioned are church confessions. . . . If one does not attain, on the level of one’s age, an understanding of the religious realities in which one believes, one will be simply at the mercy of the psychologists, the sociologists, the philosophers, that will not hesitate to tell believers what it really is in which they believe.” Ibid., 350.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 351. Emphasis mine.



Therefore, systematics serves as the pivot for moving from understanding the common meaning of doctrine and moving to an expression of that meaning in various ways as demanded by the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

## Communications

Communications is the final stage, where, writes Lonergan, “theological reflection bears fruit. Without the first seven stages, of course, there is no fruit to be borne. But without the last the first seven are in vain, for they fail to mature.”<sup>31</sup> Overall, this chapter deals with “the

effective communication of Christ’s message” to bring about the kingdom of God.<sup>32</sup> The

communication of the gospel is part of the “redemptive action of the church in the modern world” that Lonergan envisions.<sup>33</sup> Joined with the inner gift of God’s love, the message of the gospel results in “Christian witness, Christian fellowship, and Christian service to mankind.”<sup>34</sup>

As has been stressed by Lonergan, communication is historically situated.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, this chapter builds on what has previously been included in the book and gives a solution the problem of preaching the gospel with an empirical notion of culture.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>35</sup> “One must not conclude that the outward word is something incidental. For it has a constitutive role...one needs the word—the word of tradition that has accumulated religious wisdom, the word of fellowship that unites those that share the gift of God’s love, the word of the gospel that announces that God has loved us first and, in the fulness of time, has revealed that love in Christ crucified, dead, and risen. The word, then, is personal. *Cor ad cor loquitur*: love speaks to love, and its speech is powerful. The religious leader, the prophet, the Christ, the apostle, the priest, the preacher announces in signs and symbols what is congruent with the gift of love that God works within us. The word, too, is social: it brings into a single fold the scattered sheep that belong together because at the depth of their hearts they respond to the same mystery of love and awe. The word, finally, is historical. It is meaning outwardly expressed. It has to find its place in the context of other, non-religious meanings. It has to borrow and adapt a language that more easily speaks of this world than of transcendence. But such languages and contexts vary with time and place to give words changing meanings and statements changing implications. It follows that religious expression will move through the stages of meaning and speak in its different realms. When the realms of common sense, of theory, of interiority, and of transcendence are distinguished and related, one easily understands the diversity of religious utterance. For its source and core is in the experience of the mystery of love and awe, and that pertains to the realm of transcendence. Its foundations, its basic terms and relationships, its method are derived from the realm of interiority. Its technical unfolding is in the realm of theory. Its preaching and teaching are in the realm of common sense.” Ibid., 112-14.

The Christian message is to be communicated to all nations. Such communication presupposes that preachers and teachers enlarge their horizons to include an accurate and intimate understanding of the culture and the language of the people they address. They must grasp the virtual resources of that culture and that language, and they must use those virtual resources creatively so that the Christian message becomes, not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within the culture.

Here the basic distinction is between preaching the gospel and, on the other hand, preaching the gospel as it has been developed within one's own culture. In so far as one preaches the gospel as it has been developed within one's own culture, one is preaching not only the gospel but also one's own culture. In so far as one is preaching one's own culture, one is asking others not only to accept the gospel but also renounce their own culture and accept one's own.

Now a classicist would feel it was perfectly legitimate for him to impose his culture on others. For he conceives culture normatively, and he conceives his own to be the norm. Accordingly, for him to preach both the gospel and his own culture, is for him to confer the double benefit of both the true religion and the true culture. In contrast, the pluralist acknowledges a multiplicity of cultural traditions. In any tradition he envisages the possibility of diverse differentiations of consciousness. But he does not consider it his task either to promote the differentiation of consciousness or to ask people to renounce their own culture. Rather he would proceed from within their culture and he would seek ways and means for making it into a vehicle for communicating the Christian message.<sup>36</sup>

### A Unified Reading

The hermeneutical key of preaching to all nations brings together a unified reading of *Method in Theology*, and I will address three of them: bookends, movement of the functional specialties, and the foreground chapters.

#### Bookends

“A theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.”<sup>37</sup> And so, *Method in Theology* begins with an emphasis on communication. It also ends with a chapter on the functional specialty of communications. Therefore, the book opens and ends, and is therefore encapsulated, with an emphasis upon

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 362-3.

<sup>37</sup> Lonergan, M/T. xi.

communications, which for Christianity, as Lonergan describes, is the concern for effectively preaching the gospel to all nations. The content within these bookends indicates this trajectory.

### **Movement of the Functional Specialties**

Historical consciousness and awareness of an empirical notion of culture<sup>38</sup> present problems for moving from an ancient text, such as the Bible, and communicating its message today to effectively carry out the goal of preaching to all nations.<sup>39</sup> *Method in Theology* addresses these issues by almost exclusively focusing on the retrieval of data and understanding it in the present through the eight functional specialties.<sup>40</sup> Lonergan writes for this task of theology that “One must...ask what one is doing when one is doing theology, and one’s answer must envisage not only the Christian encounter with God but also the historicity of Christian witness, the diversity of human cultures, the differentiations of human consciousness.”<sup>41</sup> The beginning to answering these questions is a reflection upon the Great Commissions. One should ask: How should a theology reflect on a religion with a mission of preaching to all nations? This is because, for Lonergan, the functional specialties arise from a commitment to the mission of preaching the gospel to all nations. He is predisposed to a transcendental communication of the

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<sup>38</sup> Looking back upon his work in 1980, Lonergan wrote that “All my work has been introducing history into theology.” See Frederick E. Crowe, “All my work has been introducing history into Catholic theology, (Lonergan, 28 March 1980),” Lonergan Workshop 10 (1994) 49-81. Reprinted in Frederick E. Crowe, *Developing the Lonergan Legacy: Historical, Theoretical, and Existential Themes*, ed. Michael Vertin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989) 127-44.

<sup>39</sup> “To identify theology with religion, with liturgy, with prayer, with preaching, no doubt is to revert to the earliest period of Christianity. But it is also to overlook the fact that the conditions of the earliest period have long since ceased to exist. There are real theological problems, real issues that, if burked, threaten the very existence of Christianity. There are real problems of communication in the twentieth century, and they are not solved by preaching to ancient Antioch, Corinth, or Rome. *Method in Theology*, 139-40.

<sup>40</sup> “...Lonergan’s *Method in Theology*, until the last chapter, is concerned almost exclusively with the methods for the retrieval of the data provided by the tradition and with methods for contemporary efforts to interpret, narrate, develop, transpose, hand on, and add to what one has retrieved, in the final chapter Lonergan indicates briefly how the theological method he proposes allows the situation that a theologian addresses to join the texts of the tradition as a theological source.” Robert Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: Toronto University Press), 1990.

<sup>41</sup> *Method in Theology*, 297.

gospel and from that commitment, from which reflection on the four levels of conscious intentionality emerges, and therefore from this structure the eight functional specialties are born to deal with the task of theology. The functional specialties allow one to retrieve and communicate the message by moving from a particular to a common understanding of it and then finally, and always with an eye towards, a movement to communicating this common meaning in a particular way in a particular context.

### **Background Chapters**

Reading the background chapters of *Method in Theology* within the matrix of preaching to all nations highlights their importance and the inability to understand the foreground of the book apart from their contribution. As has been described from texts referencing preaching to all nations, the focuses on transcendental method, God's gift of his love, realms of meaning, and the human good are used to support communication of the gospel to all nations. Transcendental method (Ch 1) and God's gift of his love (Ch 4) give a transcendental ground for communicating to all people, realms of meaning (Ch 3) allows communication to people in each realm, and the human good (Ch 2) is taken up in the community that communicates the gospel.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, for *Method in Theology*, the Great Commission is the foundation and informs the structure and movements for methodical theology. The book, as a whole, is designed to better equip people to carry out the practical mission of the Great Commissions.