

Michael Niebauer

Virtuous Persuasion: A Theology of Christian Mission. Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology

Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2022, 290 pp.

The author of the book *Virtuous Persuasion*, Dr. Michael Niebauer, is an experienced church planter currently serving as a pastor of an Anglican Incarnation Church in Pasadena. He has a Ph.D. from Duquesne University in systematic theology, with a particular emphasis on Christian ethics and missiology, and he is teaching at Trinity School for Ministry.

Niebauer's monograph points out that contemporary missiology wrestles with three problems: the questions of *distinction* (which acts belong to the mission, if the mission is to be differentiated from other Christian acts), *agency* (what is the relationship between the agency of missionary and the agency of the recipient toward God's mission) and *persuasion* (is the missionary allowed to persuade people to convert and where is the line between persuasion and coercion). He believes we can find answers to these questions if we root our missiology in moral theology, especially in the virtue theory (pp. 2–3). The book has two parts. The author addresses three of the most prominent mission models in the first part. He dedicates a chapter to each of them and valorizes them concerning questions of distinction, agency, and persuasion.

The first model, *missio Dei*, emerged with Karl Barth's emphasis on "the intrinsic missionary nature of the church" and was later predominantly developed by David Bosch. The mission for him was not so much an activity of the church as an attribute of God and a "movement of God toward the world" in which the church can participate. Still, at the same time, it is not limited to its activities. In a certain sense, *missio Dei* served as a corrective to an excessive emphasis of Western Christianity upon personal conversion and a paternalistic mixture of Western cultural values with the gospel (pp. 14–17). Nevertheless, although this model is not monolithic, in its purest form, it leads to the problem of distinction. The problem emerges because of a particular reading of Barth's theology (p. 18), which diminishes human agency with its implicit universalism, because of which the church does not accomplish but merely witnesses to Christ's presence and work.

This emphasis asks of the missionary merely to witness what Christ has already accomplished in the lives of recipients because he has already achieved the salvation of all humanity (p. 21). From a disciplinary perspective, this prevents us from differentiating between good and bad missionary acts and ethically valorizing missional practices (p. 27) and lacks rhetorical power because it offers little to

missional practice (p. 38). It also diminishes the recipient's agency because salvation is already accomplished, and God will, in the end, override a human will and save the person against her will, which turns God into a tyrant of sorts (p. 23).

The mission as a growth model commenced with Donald McGavran in the middle of the 20th century. It is trendy among evangelical churches in the West. McGavran has developed a church growth model focused on converting whole social groups. That meant it was necessary to maximize the potential of reaching unbelievers by concentrating on the development of monoethnic congregations to create a more receptive context for the gospel (pp. 42–43). His principles were later developed by Alan Hirsch, who introduced them into his church planting movement. He considered numeric growth to be the mission's goal, that it is possible to predict it, and that the social sciences are its most effective predictor (pp. 47–48). This understanding of mission is indeed the child of its time, as is evident from the fact that we need to utilize social sciences to unlock the mission code in the Bible. Also, supporters of this model consider these to be morally neutral, which Niebauer refutes using the work of the ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre and others. He also emphasizes that such social stratification in favor of church growth leads to the emergence of churches that “reinforce the *status quo*,” “downplay specific embedded cultural sins,” and, after all, lead to the conclusion that the most effective way to grow a church is not evangelism but reaching Christians that are dissatisfied with their present churches (pp. 50–55). They also hold to the ethically problematic belief that people should be manipulated into converting (pp. 60–64), which diminishes the recipient's agency. Yet, it also reduces the agency of the missionary, who is only expected to implement a particular paradigm. The author wonders about the need for dependence on the Holy Spirit, through whom the missionary can participate in God's mission and know that God will use his agency even when results are not visible (pp. 67–68).

The third model, mission as dialogue, emerged as a synergic emphasis of the Roman Catholic Church after the Vatican II and the protestant World Council of Churches. This model emphasizes the common humanity of all humans, which is certainly valid. Still, it also stresses that not only Christianity but all religions participate in realizing the Kingdom of God. Because of this, “competition through evangelization is rejected in favor of cooperation through dialogue” (pp. 71–78) and it is believed that the Christian sense of soteriological superiority is a direct derivative of Western colonialism. The model also assumes that persuasion is inherently manipulative and reinterprets conversion to “mean the growth of the individual through dialogue, and not as a change of religious affiliation.” Conversion also starts with a self-conversion of the missionary toward his beneficial transformation, leading him to realize that “Christianity may be in need of correction” as well (pp. 79–85). The author shows that this mission model ironically does not achieve its own goals and does not resist the critical evaluation of Scriptures

and moral theology. Namely, although its defenders restrain from making evaluative judgments of other religions, they merely redirect them in another direction since they only enter into dialogue with members of other faiths that hold to the same tolerant values of western liberal democracies. The model is also “a persuasive calling to limit persuasion” (pp. 85–89), radically differing from the Scriptures, where the apostles persuaded people to believe in the uniqueness of Christ and their need for conversion, the pluralism of the 1st-century culture notwithstanding (p. 92). The author then considers persuasion from a historical perspective, as with the Enlightenment, a new period of reflection on reasoning began so that moral issues are left to the will of the individual, and persuasion came to be seen as an imposition of one’s own will upon others. Despite that, people influence others in various unconscious ways, while those who do this consciously are opening themselves to the possibility of being persuaded. Niebauer adds that we can see this when the missionaries sometimes become critical of their own domicile culture (pp. 97–105).

The second part of the book develops Niebauer’s theology of mission, which he defines, “*Christian mission is best construed as specific activities (proclamation and gathering) that develop virtue in its practitioners, moving them toward their ultimate goal of partaking in the glory of God*” (pp. 109–110, italics in the original).

Chapter four, *Mission as Virtuous Practice*, established Niebauer’s model of mission first upon Scripture as God’s Word, utilizing patristic “mimetic exegesis” for the words, acts, and character of the apostles to serve as a model of exemplary conduct for missionaries today (pp. 112–114). The author then turns to Thomas Aquinas’s moral theology and Alasdair MacIntyre’s ethics. Aquinas’s distinction between the Creator and the creation resolves the problem of agency. Since God can “act in created things without displacing” them, there is no conflict between simultaneous God’s and human agency (p. 122). It also means that God did not create because of some need for creation but exclusively “because of the love of His own goodness.” Moreover, this goodness of God becomes the ultimate goal of human beings: the beatific vision of God whom people know and love (p. 123). Aquinas also believed that people need to progress toward this momentarily unattainable ultimate goal, which they strive to admire while making intentional, moral acts and creating habits that incline them toward it. These habits he calls virtues, and they enable us to make better decisions toward the ultimate goal (pp. 124–127). He differentiates between cardinal and theological virtues. Humans can develop the first without the infusion of God’s grace, but only Christians have theological virtues (faith, hope, and love), and God’s grace perfects their cardinal virtues. Aquinas states that “human beings are ordered by their very nature toward a supernatural end, the beatific vision, that can only be obtained through God’s grace.” The grace of God both originates and empowers human activities,

which affirms “the real exercise of agency by individuals while maintaining their reliance and dependence on God” (pp. 128–130).

The church’s mission results from Trinitarian missions, so the Son sends the church in the same way that the Father has sent him, and the church should therefore reflect the Trinitarian unity. God can send missionaries to work as God’s collaborators in mission, while their achievements are credited to God. Since God sends on the mission, he also determines its ultimate goal, so the missionaries are called to develop “virtues toward their final end.” Since the mission’s *telos* is God’s glory, this liberates the practitioner from the need to manipulate, and now they can focus on doing missional acts that promote virtue (pp. 132–136). The author uses in this context MacIntyre’s definition of virtuous practices, and this relates to those practices that are complex (“cannot be easily mastered”), coherent (“a discernable and unique activity with a beginning point and endpoint”), and possess “internally realized goods,” that is, goods that are not achievable by any other practice (pp. 138–139). The point of contact between these practices and virtues is that “the practitioner must develop and exercise the virtues... in order to master each practice.” Niebauer sets aside two practices, namely proclamation, and gathering, as both “contain unique internal goods that can only be obtained through their performance.” Moreover, these practices obtain internal goods even when external goods are missing, which is in line with the book of Acts, where apostles continued with these practices even in the contexts of persecution and negligible numerical success (pp. 141–144). At the end of the chapter, the author gives examples of how these practices develop particular virtues (pp. 147–154).

Chapters five and six elaborate on these two missional practices. Niebauer claims that proclamation has two goals, the ultimate *telos* of participation in God’s glory and the penultimate goal of conversion (pp. 159–160). Building on the thoughts of English Cardinal John Henry Newman, the author perceives that conversion is a profoundly personal matter. One does not convert by accepting irrefutable syllogisms but by assenting to “an accumulation of ‘antecedent probabilities’” and as a result of “the relationship established with God” (pp. 160–166). Therefore, the act of proclamation, which the author divides into several actions (prayer, preparation and communication, and the return to prayer), starts with prayer as its integral part. It is a dialogue with God in which we allow ourselves to be persuaded by God before we attempt to persuade others. Prayer opens us to his changing and molding us (pp. 168–169) and keeps us from hypocrisy (pp. 171–172). From dialogue with God, prayer then becomes a dialogue “about the self, others, and God.” In prayer, the missionary imagines his speeches and conversations with others, expecting the Holy Spirit to work and direct his cognitive faculties, sometimes even to “surprise with ideas and directives heretofore not considered.” The author refers to biblical examples of visions that missionaries received in the Book of Acts (for example, Ananias, Paul, and Peter). Through

prayer, the missionary also gains confidence and boldness that entices him to take action (pp. 173–175).

After prayer, the missionary prepares for interaction by seeking knowledge of his listeners and how to influence them, seeking the best ways to present Christian truth. Along with helping him in finding good arguments, rhetoric reveals persuasive but unethical arguments he must reject (pp. 176–179). After he has prepared, the missionary engages in persuasive communication, which has as its goal for the interlocutor to become the co-participant in salvation. He needs to adjust his message to the audience, which requires developing special skills and virtues. In all of that, the missionary needs to be aware that he is not speaking only to his listeners but also to God, to whom his speech must be acceptable since God authorizes proclamatory discourse. The results of this discourse can vary from conversion to rejection, and the missionary needs to affirm and validate the personal agency of the recipient. When conversion does occur, this is certainly not the end of mission activity since “the Christian act of assent is simultaneously an assent to a life lived in the body of Christ, the church” (pp. 180–190). After the communication has ended, the missionary goes back to prayer. Through it, he cultivates the virtue of humility and dependence on God but also cherishes “a moment of rest and delight” in God’s beauty. Moreover, this ultimate goal of proclamation prepares us to “experience God’s beauty,” creates “in us a greater capacity to experience the fullness of life in Christ,” and prompts us to continue sharing the gospel (pp. 190–193). Thus, proclamation contributes to the ultimate goal of partaking in God’s glory (p. 199).

The sociability of human beings and the biblical emphasis on the social aspect of faith make “the entrance into a community that embodies” salvation a natural goal. The gathering is essential to the task of the mission, and without it, the mission task is incomplete (pp. 200–203). The missionary needs to accomplish three things regarding gathering converts. First, he needs to establish a place to encounter the Living God since Christians are still embodied beings and need such sites. These emerge when Christians sanctify these ordinary places through ritual and liturgical acts related to baptism and the eucharist. Due care needs to be taken so that liturgy would neither be too lofty and rigid nor too trivialized – but everything needs to contribute “to the creation of symbolic distance and sacred space” (pp. 208–213). Second, he needs to establish the language, in other words, establish the converts into “a linguistic community” that is grounded upon the Holy Scriptures as “the language of the Christian faith and the *lingua franca* of the church” through public reading and explanation of Holy Scriptures, which is divine communication through which God acts. This translation of the Scriptures means he needs to “render it intelligible amidst the cultural peculiarities of their audience of new converts” so they can “inhabit the world of Scripture and successfully live within the linguistic community of the church” (pp. 214–222). Finally,

the missionary needs to establish authority in the gathering and should do it from the beginning, as he includes converts into the church's life, conveys faith to them, and delegates ministries to them in the community. The reason for this is that the authority that the missionary received from Christ is such that it continually descends on others. Establishing local church ministers is a natural consequence of this descent of authority, culminating in the formal ordination of presbyters who now receive oversight over the community.

Moreover, the praxis has shown that waiting too long to delegate this final authority hurts the mission. Such delegation of oversight ends the missionary's ministry at that location, although he should continue to nurture contact with that local church. We can witness this with the Apostle Paul, who continued to communicate with the churches he planted, encouraging, warning, and rebuking them without imposing his authority (pp. 223–236). Niebauer concludes the chapter by reminding us that gathering is a virtuous practice, which addresses the problems of distinction and agency but also reminds us that the goal of mission does not actualize in the growth of the church, but in communion with God and the increase in virtue through gathering (pp. 237–243).

The last, seventh chapter of the book counsels potential missionaries (professionals and amateurs) on how they can develop the necessary knowledge and skills and fit them into the context of living a good life. Above all, a potential missionary needs to find one who has already mastered missionary practices, and then he needs to follow this person, imitate and learn from her (pp. 244–248). Professionals and amateurs strengthen each other in their missionary work, and professionals should serve as role models and teachers to the latter (pp. 248–252). Niebauer's mission model also encourages participating in virtuous practices by which we glorify God and progress toward the ultimate goal of participation in his glory. This achieves his growth in sanctification while the missionary thinks about his mistakes and ways to improve his practice and thanks God for working through him despite his weakness (pp. 252–258). In the end, missionary life should be what philosophers call a good life, during which, through growth in virtues, a person progresses toward the ultimate goal of God and his glory. Since mission is only one of a person's practices, a particular tragedy is interwoven in a good life, a tragedy of our limitedness with space and time. Therefore we often live in conflict between two goods, which is why we need to bring the best possible decision in wisdom and prayer and then trust that we will continue to grow in virtue, although we will not achieve everything we want. It is possible because our ultimate goal is eschatological, so these tragedies will not define us because we know that they will all be swallowed up in glory to be revealed (pp. 258–264).

In his conclusion, the author gives an overview of three biblical passages that summarize the main postulates of his mission model. First, Psalm 96 shows that a virtuous practice of proclamation aims to glorify God in the very act of proclama-

tion. Second, Luke 10:17-20 shows that a missionary's joy should be in the mere fact that God has chosen to work through him. Third, Acts 7:51-60 point out the example of Stephen the Martyr, who exemplified the virtues of fortitude, hope, and love and has received the most glorious gift: the vision of Jesus at the right hand of the Father. The author invites the missionary to imitate Stephen, promising that those who aim to glorify God will themselves reflect such virtues and receive the same reward.

American theologian John Piper said that mission exists because worship doesn't. Niebauer adds to this sentiment that mission can and should be an act of worship as the missionary strives toward the ultimate goal, the beatific vision of God. This remarkable book shines the light of moral theology and ethics upon the mission in many ways. Chapters four and five are specially engraved into my conscience, as are many other book parts. I will gladly return to the book and re-read it. I recommend Niebauer's book to others who think about mission, evangelism, preaching, and witnessing. I do not doubt that it will open new horizons and stimulate fresh thinking in many, just as it has done to me.

Nevertheless, I am faced with the first critique when recommending this monograph. Reading this book itself requires the virtue of persistence because of its technical language, and to Christians not used to reading moral theology, the author should not resent if they give up. In a sense, this is not a criticism but an encouragement to the author to write a somewhat more approachable work for those mission amateurs who might be more interested in its practical application than its theoretical basis. Besides that, I think the conclusion should have been a part of the fourth chapter so that the Scriptures could serve as a foundation for presenting his mission model. The book also lacked a better fitting of Aquinas's moral theology into a protestant understanding of justification and sanctification.

Despite this mild criticism, I want to say again that Niebauer's monograph is a precious and helpful contribution to the mission and moral theology. Therefore, the book should be mandatory for every (potential) theologian, professional or amateur missionary, and pastor.

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