

MISSIONS AND THE DOING OF THEOLOGY

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Christian missions challenge the complacency of the church. They call it to look out to a lost and needy world and challenge its tendency to become ingrown and self-satisfied. They call it to admit sinners and challenge its tendency to become a club of the holy. They call it to relate to others and otherness and deal with cultural and religious differences. It should not surprise us that much of the vitality and disturbance in the church today comes from the frontiers of mission.

Unfortunately, as Harvie Conn pointed out, the issues raised by missions are only now appearing in the Christian academy, and there they have led to an academic apartheid.¹ When theology students ask another student what he is doing and he says he is studying missions, there is dead silence or a comment about "showing slides." When mission students ask someone what he is doing and he says he is studying theology, there is an awkward pause or a comment about academic cemeteries. For the sake of the Christian academy, it is important that theologians and missiologists work together, for its existence and that of the church depend on both of them.

Research Traditions

Before we can relate theology to missiology, we need to understand the nature of both. Larry Laudin calls academic disciplines

“research traditions”—bodies of knowledge shared by communities of scholars seeking to understand the truth in their fields.² Each research tradition is determined by (1) the critical questions it seeks to answer, (2) the assumptions it makes about reality, (3) the body of data it examines, and (4) the methods it accepts as valid means of discovering answers. Different answers or “theories” are offered to key questions, and competing ones are debated until one or the other emerges as accepted doctrine, until it is further questioned. For example, physics, as a research tradition, is the study of the building blocks of the material world, which it assumes is real. It examines material objects using experiments, electron microscopes, ion chambers, and other means to find answers to such questions as What are the basic components of matter? What are the major physical forces? and How do these relate?

Theology is a research tradition. It is a body of knowledge debated by a community of scholars seeking to answer certain critical questions. Because theology is a research tradition, it is an “open inquiry,” and it must “treat its sources with *integrity*; it must *integrate* the findings of other disciplines, and it must also require *imagination*.”³ These factors help us understand the debates among theologians. For instance, in evangelical theology, on the level of theories there is debate between Calvinism and Arminianism, and between premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial eschatologies. These are genuine debates because the different proponents are asking the same questions and using the same methods. In other words, theology is a research tradition, not because it has arrived at one universally agreed-upon set of answers, but because those in the field are seeking to answer the same questions by using accepted methods of inquiry and examining the same data.

Missiology, too, is a research tradition. It seeks to answer questions related to God’s mission in creation and redemption and the church’s role in that mission to the world. It ministers to people, and therefore must deal with social and cultural differences. It debates whether churches should be homogeneous or integrated, whether evangelism should include concern for human needs, and whether Christians should dialogue with people of other faiths.

Ways of Doing Theology

How does missiology relate to theology? Before answering this question, we need to clarify what we mean by “theology.” We are assuming here that Scripture is divine revelation given to us by God, not our human search for God. Theologies, then, are our attempts to understand divine revelation in our particular historical and cultural contexts. As Millard Erickson points out, it is a second-level activity.⁴ It is important, therefore, that we distinguish between revelation and theology, and that we study Scripture carefully, so that our theologies are biblically based. We must keep in mind, however, that our theologies are shaped by the times and contexts in which we live and the questions and methods we use.

There are several ways to do theology, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses. We will examine some of these briefly.

Philosophical Theology

One important research tradition is systematic theology, which uses the assumptions, questions, and methods of modern philosophy.⁵ This emerged in the West during the twelfth century, when Greek logic was reintroduced from the universities of the Middle East and Spain.⁶ At first, it was seen as “the queen of the sciences,” but over time it became one discipline among others in theological education—alongside biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, history, missions, and other disciplines.⁷

The central question that systematic theology seeks to answer is What are the unchanging universals of reality? It assumes that there are basic, unchanging facts, and that if these are known, we can understand the nature of reality. It also assumes that ultimate truth is ahistorical and acultural, and can be fully known. It uses the rules of abstract, algorithmic logic and rhetoric from Greek philosophy, which are propositional in nature, and rejects all internal contradictions and fuzziness in categories and thought.⁸ Its goal is to construct a single, systematic understanding of ultimate truth that is comprehensive, logically consistent, and conceptually coherent.⁹ In order to arrive at objective truth, it, like the modern sciences, separates cog-

nition from feelings and values, because the latter are thought to introduce subjectivity into the process.

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental categories and order in Scripture. In other words, it helps us understand the biblical worldview.¹⁰ [It gives us a standard against which to judge our own culturally shaped understandings. In missions, systematic theology is important because it provides the biblical basis for missions and for a sound Christian apologetics that helps us deal with other religions at the philosophical level.]

Systematic theology has its limitations. First, because systematic theology seeks to understand reality in universal terms, it faces a difficulty in applying universal truths to particular situations. Universals do not deal with the diversity of human existence. This problem is compounded by the fact that truth must be stated in particular sociocultural contexts. How can the Bible be translated into different languages, each of which views the world differently? How can the church be contextualized in societies that organize groups differently? What is the gospel's answer to problems having to do with the many different beliefs in ancestors, earthly spirits, invisible powers, and divination? In short, how can the one gospel be expressed in different cultures, languages, times, and contexts and remain one gospel?

The search for universals can lead us to overlook the fact that the gospel itself was given to particular people in particular situations. Eugene Peterson writes:

This is the gospel focus: *you* are the man; *you* are the woman. The gospel is never about everybody else; it is always about you, about me. The gospel is never truth in general; it's always a truth in specific. The gospel is never a commentary on ideas or culture or conditions; it's always about actual persons, actual pains, actual troubles, actual sin; you, me; who you are and what you've done; who I am and what I've done.¹¹

Christianity does not exist in an abstract form. It has always been incarnated in particular milieus. Age, nationality, gender, church affil-

iation, and theological bent have a decisive impact on the way in which the gospel is understood and transmitted.

Systematic theology must also deal with the explosion of local theologies that are emerging around the world, as committed Christians formulate their own understandings of Scripture, asking different questions and using different logics.¹² How should we respond to the fact that different theologies are emerging in vital young churches around the world?

The focus on universals has also led theologians to ignore their own particular perspectives in doing theology. All theologies are embedded in worldviews that shape the way theologians see things. This does not mean that we can know no truth. It does mean that we must not equate our theology with Scripture, and must examine the cultural and historical contexts in which we do theology to discern the biases that these introduce into our understanding of Scripture. We must also work in hermeneutical communities in which we help one another check our personal and cultural biases.¹³ We must also join in the emerging global hermeneutical community in which theologians from around the world seek to discern God's word for us today. Finally, the stress on universal truth has also led to a divorce between "pure" and "applied" knowledge. This distinction has led to the divorce of theology from missiology and ministry, and a weak sense of mission in systematic theology. As Thomas Finger notes, "Systematic theology arose as a branch of academic study pursued in universities and not primarily as a task of the church involved in the world at large."¹⁴ Missiology is not a division of systematic theology, and systematic theology is not the driving force behind missiology. On the other hand, missions have often appealed to pragmatism to justify their strategies. Both systematic theology and missiology have suffered from this divorce. J. I. Packer writes:

Evangelism and theology, for the most part, go separate ways, and the result is great loss for both. When theology is not held on course by the demands of evangelistic communication it grows abstract and speculative, wayward in method, theoretical in interest and irresponsible in stance. When evangelism is not fertilized, fed and controlled by theology, it becomes a styl-

ized performance seeking its effect through manipulative skills rather than the power of vision and the force of truth. Both theology and evangelism are then, in one important sense, *unreal*, false to their own God-given nature; for all true theology has an evangelistic thrust, and all true evangelism is theology in action.¹⁵

A second limitation of systematic theology is its difficulty in dealing with history and change. Because it seeks to understand reality in synchronic structural terms, diachronic understandings of change are out of focus. The cosmic drama or plot in Scripture, and the place of events in that drama, are not a part of its agenda. Changes in God's attitudes are often treated as surface phenomena, and not as intrinsic to his essential nature.

Finally, the search for objective truth can lead to a theology that is divorced from the affective and evaluative dimensions of life—from feelings and morality. The result, in education, is a strong emphasis on truth and a weak stress on moral and aesthetic character.¹⁶

Historical Theology

A second theological tradition to emerge in the West was biblical theology. Reacting to the Scholasticism of post-Reformation theologians, Johann Gabler advocated a new way of doing theology. Spener and the Pietists emphasized theology as a practical science, with a stress on experience and the illumination of the Spirit.¹⁷ In so doing, they advocated a return to the Bible. This gave rise to biblical theology. Their central question was What did the biblical passages mean at the time and to those writing them? In other words, they sought to understand Scripture in its historical context. This led to an emphasis on the unfolding of cosmic history. It assumed that revelation is historical in character—that there is a real world with a real history of change over time that is “going somewhere” and has meaning because it has a plot and culminates in God's eternal reign.¹⁸ This view of theology was fundamental to the Hebrew worldview. To describe ultimate reality, the Jews told and reenacted in rituals the acts of God in their community history.

Biblical theology is “theology that sorts out how the parts of the Bible hang together.”¹⁹ It uses the questions, methods, and assumptions of historiography. It draws on the logic of antecedent and consequent causality and accepts teleological explanations. In other words, it views God and humans as acting on the basis of intentions. It is important because it helps us see the big cosmic story in which human history and our biographies are embedded. In doing so, it helps us see God's acts in the confusion of our lives.

Biblical theology has its limits. Because it focuses on diachronic meaning, the fundamental structure of reality remains out of focus—in peripheral vision. Moreover, if we are not careful, it can become a study unto itself, with little application to us today. We focus on the cosmic story, but need to remember that God speaks to us in the concrete settings of human and personal history. Moreover, biblical theology does not always help us discern what in Scripture is historically bound and what are divine principles that need to be applied today.

Tropological Theology

Western Christians, particularly those in academic pursuits, have been deeply influenced by Greek and Hebrew thought. They find it hard to understand Eastern Orthodox theology, which is done in the context of worship and stresses the mystical, sacramental, and iconic nature of truth. The key question that Eastern Orthodoxy addresses is How can we comprehend complex, transcendent truths about God and reality that lie beyond words, logic, and human reason? It assumes that there are mysteries that no theology can unveil. To speak of mysteries that cannot be reduced to words, it uses tropes, such as metaphors, types, myths, parables, and icons, which point to transcendent realities by way of analogy, allegory, type, narrative, and ritual.

One value of tropological theologies is their generative nature. Underlying tropes is the use of analogy between a known reality and one that is being explored. In such analogies, it is clear that (1) there are certain similarities that are the basis for the analogy, (2) there are certain respects in which the analogy clearly does not hold, and to force a fit is to misrepresent the analogy, and (3) there are areas in

which it is not clear whether the analogy fits or not. It is this third area that generates a great deal of creative thought and exploration.

A second value of tropological theologies is their integration of ideas, feelings, and response into a living whole. They assume that we must use all our senses—sight, touch, hearing, and smell—to experience truth. They call for emotional and moral involvement with truth that leads to godly character in the theologian. For example, among the Russian Orthodox, the spiritual leader must be “knowledgeable in the Holy Scriptures, just, capable of teaching his pupils, full of truly unhypocritical love for all, meek, humble, patient and free from anger and all other passions—greed, vainglory, gluttony . . .”²⁰ Theology here is not a cognitive exercise, but a way of living.

Tropological theology is also doxological.²¹ It is not an abstract reflection on the nature of truth for the sake of truth itself. It sees theological reflection as an essential element of worship. Christopher Hall writes:

For the [early church] fathers, the Bible was to be studied, pondered and exegeted within the context of prayer, worship, reverence and holiness. The Fathers considered the Bible a holy book that opened its riches to those who themselves were progressing in holiness through the grace and power of the Spirit. The character of the exegete would determine in many ways what was seen or heard in the text itself. Character and exegesis were intimately related.²²

Thinking of God must lead to worship and to reflection on life as a daily offering of oneself in service to God.

One of the limits of tropological theologies is their lack of a sense of mission to the world. Another is the difficulty of moving from tropological theologies to the particularities of everyday life and to the contextualization of the gospel in different human settings.

Missiological Theology

Missionaries, by the very nature of their task, must become theologians. Martin Kähler wrote almost a century ago that mission is “the mother of theology.”²³ David Bosch notes, “Paul was the first

Christian theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary.”²⁴

Missiological theology is doing theology in everyday life. It reflects on what the Word is saying to our world. Its central question is What is God’s Word to humans in their particular situations? Mission theologians assume that mission is the central theme in God’s acts on earth, and that all Christians are to be a part of this mission. They also assume that all people live in different historical and sociocultural settings, and that the gospel must be made known to them in the particularity of these contexts. The task of the mission theologian is to translate and communicate the gospel in the language and culture of real people in the particularity of their lives, so that it may transform them and their cultures into what God intends for them to be. Missiological theology deals with matters of God and idols, salvation and damnation, life and death, and disease, hunger, injustice, and oppression. Missiologists begin with questions emerging either out of Scripture or out of human contexts. Reading Scripture raises awareness of sin in lives and societies, and it calls for a response. Encountering human dilemmas raises questions that call for biblical answers.

Missiologists begin by examining the specific human problem at hand in its particular historical and sociocultural context, using empirical analysis and reason to organize their findings. This provides them with an inside or “emic” understanding of the problem, in which they seek to understand the world as the people whom they serve understand it. In the process, they must discover the categories and logic that the people involved use to construct their world.

Emic analyses help us see the world as others see it, but they provide neither a comprehensive understanding of human realities nor a bridge for intercultural communication. Missiological theologians must take a second step and compare different cultures in order to provide a metacultural “etic” grid that enables them to translate between cultures. Here the methods of the human sciences and history, among others, enable missiologists to develop broader generalizations and theories about people and their cultures and histories, based on careful comparisons.

In the second step, missiologists turn to Scripture to throw light on the problems they face in specific human settings. They do so by examining Scripture using the questions, categories, assumptions, and logic that they bring with them. In the process, they must take another critical step, namely, to examine and change their questions, categories, assumptions, and logic in the light of biblical revelation.

The third step is to evaluate the human situation in the light of biblical truth. The logic is that of British and American law, which uses precedent to judge current cases. For the missiologist, the Bible is an accurate record of definitive historical cases of how God worked in particular situations.²⁵ Much in any culture can be affirmed, for humans are created in the image of God and can create good things. But because all humans are fallen, all cultures and societies are full of sin and stand under the judgment of God.

The final step is missiological. It is to help people move from where they are to where God wants them to be. This process of transformation includes individuals and corporate social and cultural systems. We cannot expect people simply to abandon their old ways and adopt new ones. They can only move from where they are by an ongoing process of discipling and transformation.

One strength of missiological theology is its focus on mission. It takes people seriously, in the particularity of their histories, societies, and cultures. It integrates cognition, affectivity, and evaluation in their response to biblical truth, and defines faith not simply as mental affirmations of truth, nor as positive experiences of God, but as beliefs and feelings that lead to response and obedience to the call of God. It rejects the division between pure and applied knowledge, and sees ministry as a way of doing theology and as a form of worship.

Missiology recognizes that as humans we all live in, and are shaped by, particular cultural and historical contexts, and we can begin only with our existing systems of thought. Recognizing this, missiological theologians consciously reflect on and alter their questions, assumptions, methods, and theories in the light of revelation.

There are limitations to missiological theology. It is easy, in seeking to apply Scripture to human situations, to pick and choose texts with little thought to the underlying theological unity of divine revelation. The result is an easy pragmatism that undermines truth.

Moreover, it is easy to let the methods of human exegesis shape our interpretation of the Bible, and not to examine these categories, logic, and methods in the light of biblical truth. Missiological theology needs both philosophical and historical theology to help it understand the underlying coherence of Scripture.

Complementarity

How do these theologies relate to one another? The Enlightenment sought to build one Grand Unified Theory which integrated all knowledge into one comprehensive system. Today we know that that is not possible. Our human minds are finite and cannot comprehend the full measure of truth even about nature, let alone an infinite God. There is a growing awareness that the "theory of complementarity" offers a way of integrating different, but overlapping understandings of reality into a single, comprehensive understanding of reality.²⁶ Just as architects make different blueprints for the same building (structural, electrical, plumbing, and so on), and as planners use different maps to map a city (roads, population density, zoning, and so on), so we as humans need to look at reality from different perspectives and through different lenses. Different theologies throw different light on the nature of God, his works, and his revelation.

We need systematic theology to help us understand the questions, assumptions, categories, and logic found in Scripture regarding the structure of reality, knowing that we bring to the task the methods of Greek thought. Gerhard Hasel writes:

Systematic theology is not made superfluous through biblical [and, we might add, missiological] theology. . . . Systematic theology which takes the Bible as its authoritative source has the function of engaging in a constructive presentation of the meaning of biblical and Christian faith with full usage of information available beyond Scriptural revelation such as history, psychology, sociology, and so forth, as long as such information is subject to the norms of biblical revelation and its truth claims.²⁷

We need biblical theology to help us understand the cosmic story unfolding in Scripture, the “mystery” now revealed to us. We need iconic theology in order to transform our theologizing into worship. Here, too, we must put mission at the center of our theologizing.

We need missiology to communicate the transforming gospel into the particular contexts in which humans find themselves, but this needs to build on theological reflections rooted in systematic and biblical theologies, or it will lose its course and its reason to exist.

Finally, we need to make theology—the overall narrative that emerges out of the dialogue between complementary theologies—the center of our Christian life together in the church.²⁸ Rodger Bassham writes:

Theology has the task of criticizing and clarifying the church’s witness to faith to help it be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ and responsive to the context in which the gospel is to be communicated. Finally, a theology of mission must be embodied in the living obedience of faith of individuals and churches as they share in God’s plan to unite all things in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

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NEW PATTERNS FOR INTERDEPENDENCE IN MISSION

SAMUEL ESCOBAR

Harvie Conn’s missiology was clearly marked by a dogged commitment to take seriously *the facts* of Christian mission, even when by so doing he would be questioning well-rounded theories that had become the accepted wisdom of evangelical missiology. In the preface to one of his most popular books, he wrote: “This book is an effort at evangelical demythologizing about the city. It looks for grains of truth in the generalizations and tries to shovel away the accumulated snowdrifts.”¹ When I moved to Philadelphia, Harvie insisted that I had to see the flourishing ministry of Deliverance Church, an African-American megachurch in the heart of the city, before accepting easy assumptions about the failure of Christianity in urban America. He also put me in touch with Viv Grigg, the New Zealander who went as the typical middle-class missionary to Manila, but immersed himself in the misery of Tatalon and gave us a new way of reading Scripture as a *Companion to the Poor*.² Harvie was aware that missiologists had to pay attention to facts even when they were puzzling or paradoxical. He chose a lifestyle that was consistent with his conviction that God has a bias toward the poor, that the present shift of Christianity to the Southern Hemisphere seems to prove the point, and that missiologists had better take notice of this if they are going to remain relevant.